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In Search of European Liberalisms

Concepts, Languages, Ideologies



Edited by

Michael Freeden, Javier Fernández-Sebastián
and Jörn Leonhard



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Chapter 2

Formulating and
Reformulating 'Liberalism'

Germany in European Comparison

Jörn Leonhard**Introduction: Liberalism as an Exhausted Concept?**

Speaking to a conference of German liberals in December 1948, Theodor Heuss, later the President of the Federal Republic, asked his audience whether the label 'liberal' could still be used to identify a political party that regarded itself as part of political liberalism's tradition in Germany. The fact that the conference voted in favour of 'Free Democratic Party' instead of 'Liberal Democratic Party' as its official party name indicated a widespread scepticism: the very concept of 'liberalism', representing the ambivalent experiences of the nineteenth century, seemed too much associated with the German liberals' *Kulturkampf* of the 1870s and capitalism, which, in the eyes of so many, had prevented liberals from a more progressive social policy that could have bridged the gap between bourgeois liberalism and social democracy before 1914 and especially after 1918.¹

In 1950, Thomas Mann, one of the most prominent representatives of the German educated bourgeoisie and its political culture, went even further. Reflecting upon the fate of liberalism after the experience of European fascism from American exile, Mann pointed out that the concept 'liberal' seemed exhausted and had become void and meaningless. Against the background of the fascist challenge and European liberals' inability to prevent its rise, Mann demanded a redefinition of how liberty and equality could be reconciled. In contrast to what he regarded as the liberal primacy of liberty, Mann pointed to equality as the 'leading idea of the current epoch'. What all postwar societies needed was, in Mann's eyes, a social emancipation distinct

from the totalitarian model. While liberalism seemed to represent political emancipation, constitutions and political institutions as the legacy of the nineteenth century, 'social emancipation' could no longer be defined by a simple reference to a concept that seemed semantically exhausted. Mann pointed to the necessity to transform the paradigm of bourgeois revolution into 'social democracy'. If Goethe, at the end of his life, had declared that every reasonable individual was actually a 'liberal', Mann underlined that at present every reasonable human being was to be a socialist.²

Was there really a crisis of liberalism, reflecting the exhaustion of liberal political agendas after 1945?³ Was it a particularly German response to the experience of liberals' electoral decline after 1918 and their failure to prevent the rise of fascism? Or was it a general European and transatlantic trend that needs careful explanation? Any attempt to approach these questions will have to take into account the semantic transformations of 'liberal' and 'liberalism' in the long nineteenth century from the perspective of a European comparison. The starting point of such an operation is the apparent triumph of liberalism in nearly all European societies of the 1870s and the perception of 'liberal' and 'liberalism' as both a universal trend of progressivism and a national narrative. Thus, Matthew Arnold in his 'Culture and Anarchy' of 1869 defined the success of the English liberal idea as 'the legislation of middle-class parliaments ... the local self-government of middle-class vestries ... the unrestricted competition of middle-class industrialists ... the dissidence of middle-class Dissent and the Protestantism of middle-class Protestant religion'.⁴ Towards the end of the century, Gladstonian liberalism seemed to have become not just a personalized style of politics, but also a symbol of the British nation as the most progressive power in the world. Benjamin Jowett, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, commented on Gladstone's role in the Irish Home Rule debate by pointing to the triumph of an evolutionary reform strategy by which liberals seemed to have stimulated even their conservative counterpart for the good of the country: 'Liberals have, to a great extent, removed the impression they had created in England that they were the friends of disorder. Do you know, I cannot help feeling that I have more of the Liberal element in me than of the Conservative? This rivalry between the parties, each surprising the other by their liberality, has done a great deal of good to the people of England.'⁵

What seemed to be a natural progression towards 'liberalism' as an accepted key concept of the later nineteenth century becomes much more complicated and ambivalent if we focus on the actual diachronic varieties of 'liberal' and 'liberalism' and the historical change of meaning attached to these concepts in European comparison. In the late 1960s, the German historian Reinhart Koselleck developed a model of semantic change that he applied to key

concepts of modern political and social vocabularies. According to him, these developed in a particular 'saddle epoch' (*Sattelzeit*) between 1750 and 1850.⁶ However, this model primarily focused on German sources and left out particular semantic changes and impulses, differences and exchanges among European cases. More recent approaches have tried to develop the German tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* into a transnational comparative analysis.⁷ The following is an attempt to illustrate the potential for such an operation by looking at the comparative semantics of 'liberal' and 'liberalism' with a special focus on Germany.⁸

From Prepolitical Meanings to the Multifaceted European Semantics of 'Liberal' after 1800

For the history of this key concept, one can discern four subsequent processes as ideal types that characterise the semantic transformation from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century.⁹ The first is the prepolitical stage of semantics: in the case of 'liberal', this is the period dominated by the pre-1789 uses of 'liberal' or 'liberality' in different contexts. In a society that, in comparison to Germany or France, was much less characterized by formal criteria, the English phrase 'as a gentleman be liberal' signified a social distance defined by cultural criteria.¹⁰ Munificence and tolerance presupposed economic independence and a classical education. The persistence of this aristocratic meaning of 'liberal' cannot be overestimated; it dominated the prepolitical meaning of the concept 'liberal' for a long time, and even when a new political semantic was imported from the continent in response to the consequences of the French Revolution, the traditional prepolitical connotation of 'liberal' as a social attribute of an educated gentleman was never totally eliminated. Even in 1818 a contemporary dictionary attributed 'liberal habits' to 'persons of good birth'. The expression 'liberal attitude' indicated an individual, not a political programme. It depended on tolerance, an open and unprejudiced state of mind, and the will to take responsibility for one's own opinion in public. Whereas 'liberal' in England had either a more aristocratic connotation in expressions like 'liberal gentleman' or 'liberal education', or was used in the religious sphere, 'liberal' in Germany indicated, at least since the late 1750s, an individual quality of an advanced enlightened *Gesinnung*, which not only meant a cast of mind or a basic conviction, but also denoted a moral quality. *Liberale Gesinnung* pointed to the fundamental idea of the responsible individual who was of higher moral and ethical value on account of his unprejudiced state of mind. This meaning persisted in the later history of the political concept 'liberal' in Germany. The moral quality of the *liberale Gesinnung* or *Liberalität* went far beyond mere political

denominations. Immanuel Kant's distinction between 'liberalitas sumptuosa', mere munificence in the tradition of the Roman emperors' 'liberalitas', and 'liberalitas moralis' as an unprejudiced state of mind and independence of one's own opinion, deeply influenced the later history of *liberale Gesinnung*.¹¹ As in the case of Kant's 'Liberalität der Denkart'¹² or Sieyès' 'éducation libérale'¹³ of the Third Estate in France, the concepts reflected an enlightened educational ideal without a fixed political or social meaning.

This was followed by a second type: a fermentation of traditional and new semantic elements, caused by new political, social and cultural experiences, newly articulated interests and new expectations against the background of the French Revolution. Prepolitical and politicized meanings began to overlap, starting with the invention of the *idées libérales* in France in 1799 and their subsequent translation into *liberale Ideen* in Germany and *idee liberali* in Italy,¹⁴ but also with the emergence of *liberales* and *serviles* as party names in Spain and the export of this nomenclature to other European countries. The third period was characterized by the politicization of concepts as controversial through changing connotations of traditional concepts and the development of new concepts. In this phase, speakers attempted to structure the semantic field using canonical definitions and semantic clarity. At this point, the import of concepts such as the French *idées libérales* created a framework for the articulation of new experiences and stimulated conceptual debates, thereby testing the semantic field. Finally, an ideological polarization developed, with bipolar or multipolar semantic structures resulting in a wider field of political and social nomenclatures and their use in arguments. In the case of 'liberal', the semantic field became defined by symmetric counterconcepts such as 'radical', 'conservative' or later 'socialist'.

For the politicization of 'liberal' in continental European societies, the confrontation with the French Revolution and Napoleon played a fundamental role. French expansionism led to a direct confrontation with the French *idées libérales* as Bonaparte's programmatic formula of the results of 1789.¹⁵ In his Proclamation of the 18th Brumaire 1799, justifying the coup d'état, Bonaparte's *idées libérales* stood for a defensive strategy to safeguard the revolution's legacy by ending both political instability and social anarchy: 'Les idées conservatrices, tutélaires, libérales, sont rentrées dans leurs droits par la dispersion des factieux qui opprimaient les conseils.' ('The conservative, protective, liberal ideas have been brought back to their rights by dispersing the political factions which oppressed the councils.').¹⁶ Napoleon's invention of the *idées libérales* became part of his short-lived but influential imperial ideology. As the 'héros des idées libérales', he proclaimed himself to be both the only legitimate heir of 1789 and the only 'garant' of the Revolution's positive achievements, as incarnated by the Civil Code and the idea of the

nation's sovereignty.¹⁷ By referring to the imperial understanding of the *idées libérales*, Napoleon claimed to fulfil the Revolution's original and legitimate objects. On the other hand, turning the transpersonal principle of the *idées libérales* against Napoleon's military despotism after 1810 integrated the opposition of the new political movement of the anti-Napoleonic *libéraux* around Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël.¹⁸ This explained why the *idées libérales* survived the Emperor's defeat in 1815. As a result, the *idées libérales* had by 1815 become a universal concept for continental authors. In Germany and Italy, it was possible to distance them from their Napoleonic origin and use the expression to articulate new constitutional, social and national expectations.

Whereas the English denomination of parties had originated in the seventeenth century and immunized the country's political discourse against continental imports, which meant that 'liberal' was only slowly and reluctantly integrated into an already-existing political nomenclature, the semantic import of 'liberal' coined by the French Revolution and Napoleon was essential for German contemporaries.¹⁹ In the member states of the Confederation of the Rhine, a new language policy was directed by the French authorities, by which the *idées libérales* and the *constitution libérale* found their way into German journals and newspapers. The *idées libérales*, after 1815 translated into *liberale Ideen* as a semantic basis for 'liberalism' after 1820, indicated the overall demand for both national unity and constitutional progress in Germany. When German authors looked at French debates, their translation changed from a mere imitation of the concept to its application to a particular situation outside France. An excellent example for the importance of interpretative adaptation was Johann Christoph von Aretin's translation of a contemporary French article on 'Les idées libérales' published in 1814.²⁰ In his translation, Aretin applied the French concept to his own German background and the political and national situation of the German states at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.²¹ He paid particular attention to the idea of a constitution as the incarnation of a new balance between monarchy and people. Where the French text spoke of *civilisation* as the main criterion behind liberty, Aretin used the German *Bildung*, which had a much more socially exclusive meaning. In the same way, the concept of 'nation' had very different connotations in France and Germany at that time. Whereas French semantics oscillated between the nation's revolutionary sovereignty and the nation as represented by a constitutional monarch, the German expectation was to establish a constitutional nation-state that by 1815 already existed in France.²² Similarly different connotations lie behind the concept of *gouvernement*. Whereas the French author explicitly acknowledged the existence of an institutionalized opposition in a national parliament, Aretin could only

focus on public opinion as a source of political legitimacy and an instrument with which to counterbalance the dangers of despotic rule, since a German parliament did not exist in 1814/15.²³

France was not the only birthplace of the new concept; again, it was through a complex process of translations that Spanish *liberales* influenced the modernization of other European vocabularies. The political meaning of 'liberal' as a party denomination originated from the first Spanish Constitution of 1812. The adherents of this new constitution called themselves *liberales* and spoke of their opponents who supported the principles of absolute monarchy as *serviles*.²⁴ It was with regard to the political situation in Spain that the new political adjective found its way into the English political vocabulary. The British example illustrated the limits of translations and the factors that sheltered one political discourse against conceptual imports from outside, because the British import of the Spanish concept was a negative semantic adaptation. In 1816, Lord Castlereagh thought of a purely revolutionary party in the tradition of the French Jacobins when he spoke of the Spanish *liberales*, although their origin had been the fight against French occupation during Napoleon's reign.²⁵ Until 1818/19, English authors made use of the new political concept – often in the foreign spelling – to describe the domestic political situation of continental countries, thereby underlining its un-English origin. When speaking of British politics, authors continued to refer to the historical party names 'Whig' and 'Tory' or 'radical'. The reluctant import of the new concept 'liberal' pointed back to the experiences of the seventeenth century and the existence of premodern party names, at least until the early 1830s. Only then, the semantic transformation was defined by the complex translation from 'Whig' to 'liberal'.²⁶ In that way, the history of 'liberal' signified distinct *ancien régimes*.

The British example illustrated an imitating, not an adapting, translation.²⁷ The continental context dominated the meaning of 'liberal' when used in English political texts well after 1815. Only very reluctantly did the concept appear after 1815, indicating a different tone in British politics. In 1816, Robert Southey spoke of the 'British "liberales"', mixing the Spanish spelling of the party name with an application to the English political scene and stigmatizing the political opponent by the use of the continental adjective.²⁸ For many Tory authors, 'liberal' served as a negative label with which they could relate their opponents to the revolutionary experiments in France, Spain, Italy or Greece. For them, 'liberal' represented Jacobin terror and Napoleonic despotism under the guise of an apparently progressive label. The import of *libéral* or *liberales* in the British case for a long time indicated a confrontation with continental revolutionary experiences and provoked political resistance.

Only reluctantly was the concept's un-English connotation overcome, making the semantic application of 'liberal' to English politics possible. An important catalyst for the integration of 'liberal' into the English political vocabulary was the founding of Leigh Hunt's *The Liberal, or Verse and Prose from the South* journal in 1822, the short-lived but influential literary journal of the Byron circle that contained articles by Byron and Shelley, often in a critical tone, not only focusing on political developments in the South of Europe but also criticizing the politics of George III and Lord Castlereagh. The title already anticipated the programme: the South of Europe with its revolutionary movements for national independence and political liberty, such as in Italy, Greece and Spain, constituted the background, but Leigh Hunt in his preface of the first edition also pointed to the traditional meaning of 'liberal' in the context of classical education, relating the political implications to the ideal of Roman and Greek literature as the framework of humanity and political liberty.²⁹ In the course of the public controversy about the new journal, its opponents reacted to the title by publishing a satirical antidote: *The Illiberal! Verse and Prose from the North!*³⁰

The blockade of public debate about reform in British politics, defended until 1815 because of the necessary concentration of national forces in the fight against France, was gradually lifted in 1815. The shift of political attention from foreign affairs to domestic problems provided a fertile ground for the semantic transformation of 'liberal' from an apparently un-English adjective with revolutionary and continental implications into an integral concept of Britain's political language, especially for the reform-oriented Whigs inside and outside Parliament. This included a new context in which the foreign concept's translation helped to develop a new framework for political reforms. The changing atmosphere of public opinion, now considered an important factor in the nation's political life, was reflected in the slow adaptation of 'liberal'. In a letter to John Wilson Croker in 1820, Robert Peel observed:

Do not you think that the tone of England – of that great compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy, and newspaper paragraphs, which is called public opinion – is more liberal – to use an odious but intelligible phrase, than the policy of the Government? Do not you think that there is a feeling, becoming daily more general and more confined – that is independent of the pressure of taxation, or any immediate cause – in favour of some undefined change in the mode of governing the country?³¹

In 1827, Henry Brougham, a leading member of the moderate Whigs among the Edinburgh Reviewers, reflected on the 'State of parties' since the beginning of the 1820s. He made extensive use of 'liberal' to denote a new principle

in British politics. Behind the progress of 'liberal opinions' he identified a new concept of foreign policy, advocating national independence abroad and opposing the restorative objects of the Holy Alliance. Already before the transformation of the traditional party names 'Whig' and 'Tory' into 'Liberal' and 'Conservative', a long-term semantic process that was not completed before the 1840s, Brougham concluded that the main ideological antagonism in British politics could no longer be expressed by traditional political labels. These party names had either originated from the seventeenth century, reflecting the factions of the Civil War ('Court' versus 'Country'), the political antagonists of the Glorious Revolution ('Whig' versus 'Tory') or indicating the aspirations of the Stuarts ('Loyalist' versus 'Jacobin') during the eighteenth century or, pointing to the continent, the new party names coined in the course of the French Revolution: 'A new casting also of political sects has taken place; the distinctions, and almost the names, of Loyalist and Jacobin, Whig and Tory, Court and Country Faction, are fast wearing away. Two great divisions of the community will, in all likelihood, soon be far more generally known; the Liberal and the Illiberal, who will divide, but we may be sure most unequally, the suffrages of the Nation.'³² Unlike most continental party names that had originated from the post-1789 period, 'liberal' as a postrevolutionary concept in Britain must be interpreted with regard to the ideological polarization since the absolutist experiments of the seventeenth century, pointing to a distinct British saddle epoch. This was reproduced in the subsequent premodern party names that did not have an equivalent in continental discourses.

The post-1815 period in continental societies showed a different history of 'liberal' in political vocabularies. Following the Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire, French contemporaries observed an inflation of political party names, reflecting different layers of experiences and polarization with regard to the legacies of the past. Following the establishment of a constitutional monarchy under Louis XVIII in 1814/15, 'liberal' became a tool used to structure the political landscape's complexity. But already in 1819, the distinctive quality of 'liberal' was indirectly questioned when compared to the meaning of 'democratic ideas'. One observer distinguished between two political extremes: those 'known under the name of ultra-royalist' and those under the name of *libéraux*. But since this denomination seemed more 'of an accolade than a qualification ... because there can nonetheless be liberality in the doctrines', the author referred to the concept *démocratique* to highlight the ideological antagonism between what he regarded as the two main political parties of France: 'I would prefer to call democratic the party whose views are opposed to those of the first; because from liberalism – as it is understood – to democracy there is a gentle slope and a quite slippery

track.³³ In France, this semantic connection between 'liberal' and 'democratic' mirrored the consequences of a polarizing revolutionary legacy, which would influence French political culture well after 1815. Identifying with or distancing from the restored monarchy served as a dividing line and allowed the political camps to be structured by a clear antagonism that put 'liberal' close to 'democratic ideas':

Here we have the two parties that exist and will exist in France like in England: the royalist party, which supports the monarchical ideas and the aristocratic ideas which are inseparable from them; the liberal party, that supports the democratic ideas ... We counted four parties in France, or rather in parliament; the two liberal varieties composed of the more or less pronounced partisans of the democratic ideas, and which are designated under the name of the left and the centre-left; the two royalist varieties, composed of the more or less pronounced partisans of the monarchical and aristocratic ideas, that is to say the right and the centre-right.³⁴

This relation between 'liberal' and 'democratic' continued to be of fundamental importance for the future meaning of 'liberalism'. While 'liberal' in France became identified with the constitutional opposition and bourgeois values against a restorative monarchy in the course of the 1820s, it also became increasingly identified with political institutions and not paying enough attention to the meaning of social processes. Towards the end of Napoleon III's Second Empire, Émile Ollivier, the key figure in the transformation from the *empire autoritaire* into the *empire libéral*, used *democratie et liberté* as a programmatic motto to describe the change in the regime's political course during the 1860s.³⁵ A few months before the empire's collapse, he advocated the strength of a government based on the will of the people as proven in plebiscites: 'Who would rise against such a democratic, liberal, progressive government?'³⁶ However, being a truly democratic voter could still mean opposing the focus on the social question, which many identified with a democratic party: 'The liberal party confines itself a little too much to the study of pure politics, while the democratic party confines itself to the study of a false social economics.'³⁷

The Semantics of 'Liberal' and the Relationship between State and Society in Germany after 1815

In Germany, the import of the new concept 'liberal' provoked resistance after 1815, reflecting the change from politicization to ideological polarization. For Metternich and the German Confederation, 'liberal' denoted a revolutionary direction. Public confidence in the *Liberalität der Regierung*,

the 'government's liberality', for instance during the Prussian reform era or in the South German constitutional states of Baden, Württemberg and Bavaria, became increasingly disillusioned after the reactionary change in the political atmosphere following the murder of August von Kotzebue and the Carlsbad Decrees in 1819/20.³⁸ When it became clear that there would be no further constitutional progress and no more parliaments in the German states, 'liberal' changed into an opposition-label that defined the progressive forces in society. Now the use of the term reflected the widening gap between state and society. At the end of the 1820s, 'liberalism' in Germany signified an uncontested belief in the progress of reason, while the restorative governments represented backwardness and anachronistic forces in history. The 'liberal party' stood for a 'movement party' (*Bewegungspartei*), representing natural progress in history.³⁹

Translations from French into German in that period meant an ongoing, implicit confrontation with France. In contrast to the optimistic self-estimation of what 'liberal' should stand for, early definitions of the concept in Germany also reflected a specific uncertainty about the political and social implications of a concrete programme. According to most contemporaries, *wahrer Liberalismus*, 'true liberalism', had to be defended against radical forces in the tradition of the French revolutionary terror.⁴⁰ At least until the French July Revolution of 1830, the history of 'liberal' in Germany was a history of interpreting the French Revolution and its consequences in the German states.

When the original connection with a 'liberal government' came under increasing pressure after 1815, the debate within the political opposition intensified. When 'liberal ideas' changed into 'liberalism', the new concept was associated with an ideal of constitutional reform, if possible in cooperation with reform-oriented and enlightened governments. But at the same time, other divisions became visible.⁴¹ The early signs of conflicts between Roman Catholics and liberals anticipated many of the conflict lines of the later Kulturkampf of the 1870s. Although 'Catholicism' and 'liberalism' were not yet deadly antagonistic concepts, ultramontane and Protestant liberals began to oppose each other. Many liberals strongly attacked the traditional alliance between throne and altar and the clergy's antiliberal influence on the people, and increasingly supported a strong anticlericalism.⁴² As Paul Pfizer put it in the *Staats-Lexikon*, which was the most important encyclopaedia of South German liberalism prior to the Revolution of 1848:

Indeed liberalism has no need of religion in order to give legally untenable arrogance a false justification. Against the so-called rights of God – a misused term – it has to set a right of truly divine origin, that is the right of reason,

in whose claims God will as certainly announce himself as in the positive revelations, which can gain their final justification for a thinking being only by their correspondence with the laws of his reason.⁴³

In contrast to Britain, 'liberalism' in Germany neither represented religious minorities, except the Jews, though with significant modifications, nor did it fight for political rights of those groups.

Many of the liberal premises of the second half of the nineteenth century developed between 1820 and 1848. German liberals believed that the future involved a somewhat natural ascent towards liberty and progress.⁴⁴ Accordingly, in 1840, Paul Pfizer defined liberalism as 'nothing ... but the transition from the state of nature to the state founded on the rule of law which becomes necessary at a certain stage in human development'.⁴⁵ Liberalism would direct 'the state back to what the whole nation in its rational interest wants or must want'.⁴⁶ Even if 'institutions and laws might temporarily step backwards ... the ideas of the law of reason will always awake again ... For liberty has now become a necessity and no human power can hope to suffocate these world-shaking ideas, which will find their way through all impediments and barriers until they have passed through all the stages which have been determined by a higher hand'.⁴⁷ Sitting in regional parliaments but excluded from political practice and forming governments, early liberals often regarded their movement as the promoter of ideas and not of practical agendas: 'There is in the movements of our time a predominately spiritual quality, a battle of ideas.'⁴⁸

On the other hand, a key element in definitions of 'liberalism' in Germany was the idea of the concrete *Rechtsstaat*, a state founded on the rule of law. In terms of practical reforms, it was identified with constitutional monarchy and not with a republic, a crucial fact that after 1830 distinguished constitutional liberals from democratic radicals.⁴⁹ Paul Pfizer placed constitutional monarchy in the middle between radical concepts and mere conservatism, opposing both the 'most horrible radicalism' and the 'untrue and misunderstood liberalism', and at the same time rejecting the 'affected idolatry of the status quo or of things which have already died out'.⁵⁰ In a constitutional monarchy, liberals hoped to find a compromise between the 'law of reason and historical law' in order to realize the 'most perfect form of the state according to our historical conditions'. Consequently, 'liberalism' was identified with a written constitution as the basis of the 'idea of the true state', which should exclude 'all arbitrary use of power from above' and below and would found 'the civic relationships on the stable and unchangeable law of morality'.⁵¹ Hence, many observers in Germany did not identify 'liberalism' with the aim to minimize the power of the state, but to establish liberty within the state

and through its support. Consequently, the constitution became the centre of all strategies of political reform. According to Carl Rotteck, a people without a constitution was 'in the noble sense of the word no people ... but a sum of subjects'.⁵² He argued that 'the constitutional system establishes ... the equal participation in all civic welfare, the equal (legal and juridical) distribution of individual liberty and of legal property and acquisition for all, the equal claim of all who are capable of position and authority and finally the equal obligation to obey the law'.⁵³ The idea of the state founded on the rule of law implied both political change and the preservation of traditional elements, but no revolutionary concept.

However, this self-positioning of 'liberalism' came under pressure during the 1830s when fierce controversies over the concept's meaning developed against the background of the July Revolution in France and the Hambach Festival in 1832, which demonstrated the split between liberals in regional parliaments and democrats outside parliaments. Despite its territorial fragmentation, the 1830s and 1840s witnessed the evolution of distinct party names in German political discourse, reflecting a broadening spectrum of ideological camps and competing visions of political and social order. In 1843, Karl Rosenkranz pointed to the fact that these new names no longer marked personal or corporatist positions, but different political agendas that allowed mobilization and identification in a changing society. Now 'liberals' formed only one group within this spectrum:

It is only with such an awareness that the dependence of the individual on the nepotism of the party or family, on the egoism of the guild, the corporation or the estate disappears. The designations of the parties themselves are generalized. Instead of the accidental names of their founders, designations expressing a concept emerge. One speaks of democrats and oligarchs, of republicans and royalists, of liberals and serviles, of radicals and conservatives.⁵⁴

Against this background of ideological polarization and political pluralization during the 1840s, 'liberalism' provoked systematic criticism from the left, coupled with a positive connotation of a 'democratic party' and *Demokratismus*. Arnold Ruge developed one of the most influential critiques of 'liberalism' in 1843.⁵⁵ For him, the German people's fight against Napoleonic occupation and military repression before 1815 was the real birthplace of a democratic party in Germany, the predecessor of the 'radicals' in Ruge's own days: 'In the Wars of Liberation a nucleus of the new Germany was present: the radical democrats, whose great effectiveness is evident in the regeneration of Prussia and the whole popular uprising against Napoleon.'⁵⁶ Following the course of polemic against constitutional liberals around 1830, especially on the occasion

of the Hambach Festival in 1832, Ruge defined 'liberalism' as a bourgeois movement, oriented towards constitutions and political compromises, still hoping for a reform-oriented state to prevent a social revolution, a repetition of violent events as in France, but too narrow to understand the dynamics of the growing proletariat and to respond adequately to the challenges of pauperism as the social question of the day. According to Ruge, 'liberalism' was outdated and had no future if it was not prepared to accept the new ideal of free man and free people.⁵⁷ If liberals of the 1840s still insisted on an integrative understanding of liberalism, a movement and a habitus that would embrace all reasonable political trends, avoiding extremes and a revolutionary conflict with existing governments, Ruge demanded liberalism's transformation into a primarily democratic ideology, 'in one word the dissolution of liberalism into democratism [*Demokratismus*]'.⁵⁸

Prior to 1848, the very term 'liberal party' in Germany represented a far-reaching community of ideas and values. Early liberals wanted to maintain their individual independence from any closer organizational structures, which was one major reason for the variety of individual definitions of 'liberalism'. In 1833, Heinrich Laube wrote: 'I am a liberal, but I do not ever want to belong to those who call themselves liberal.'⁵⁹ These self-images and the definitions of what 'liberalism' stood for were challenged by the experience of 1848/49. In Germany, the revolution failed to achieve its main aims – constitutional government and national unity – because of a complex interaction of factors, but in the long term, the revolutionary experience intensified a substantial process of progressive politicization, which had a fundamental impact on the meaning of 'liberalism'. The heterogeneity of interests and strategies in different parts of society led to a disintegration and fragmentation of the temporary homogeneity of an oppositional movement in the spring of 1848, resulting in the split between moderate and constitutional 'liberalism' and democratic 'radicalism', and weakening the forces against counterrevolutionary actions. The dual object of achieving political liberty and national unity, of state- and nation-building under increasing time pressures and against the background of Austrian and Prussian moves to open counterrevolution, proved to be a highly important cause for the reduction of political freedom of action after September 1848. But it also included an important political lesson: the gap between constitutional and national intentions on the one hand and the lack of executive power that would have made the Frankfurt Assembly more independent from cooperation with the state governments on the other hand demonstrated, at least in the eyes of many liberals, the widening gap between political ideals and a need to overcome mere opposition policy. Thus, *Realpolitik* could become such a key concept when defining 'liberals' and 'liberalism' in the postrevolutionary decades.⁶⁰

Revolution and *Realpolitik*: The German Experience of 1848 and beyond

In 1848, most moderate and constitutional liberals did not regard themselves as revolutionaries. They halted a movement, which had started on the streets, by legalizing and channelling it through a national parliament. Their temporary freedom of action was based on revolutionary legitimacy in March 1848, but their political strategy rather pointed back to the pre-March experience. Many constitutional liberals focused on the state as motor and guarantee of gradualist reform. Given the experience of 1848, the move towards *Realpolitik* was not inevitable, but, given Otto von Bismarck's successes in overcoming the framework of the German Confederation in 1864 and 1866, it became an ever more attractive option. The promise to overcome mere opposition politics was fundamental in the context of Prussian political successes in the 1860s, based on military victories. But to reduce the semantics of 'liberalism' to the split between 'National Liberals' and 'Progressive Liberals' following the Prussian victory of Sadowa in 1866 would be simplistic. Already in 1865, the *National-Zeitung*, the major Berlin liberal newspaper, argued that the party's way had to be from unity to freedom. It was not a simple sacrifice of freedom, but a different priority of political objects that distinguished the 'liberalism' of 1848 from that of 1866. Those who felt that it was necessary to compromise with Bismarck's government in order to achieve the nation-state first and then reform it according to liberal principles referred to *Regierungsfähigkeit*, the ability to take part in a government, as Hermann Baumgarten explained in 1866.⁶¹ *Realpolitik* expressed the need to accept that ideals bereft of the power to control the executive forces, the government, the bureaucracy and the military, were senseless. The National Liberals, who finally supported Bismarck's Indemnity Bill with which the constitutional crisis over the Prussian military reforms of the 1860s ended, did not act from a position of weakness. They regarded themselves, and indeed were regarded, as the strongest popular force in favour of the national unification which took place in 1871.

The most important and long-term consequence of the Revolution of 1848/49 in Germany points to an intensified semantic antagonism between 'liberalism' and 'democracy', between liberal variations of constitutional monarchy and connotations of social democracy.⁶² The dividing line between liberals and democratic radicals was a leitmotif inside and outside parliaments. 'Liberalism' was defined as the only movement capable of finding the middle ground between the extremes of absolutism and democratic self-government.⁶³ In Heinrich Laube's description of the German National Assembly of 1848, the antagonism between liberals and democratic radicals

was the most profound aspect: 'For at least a year the liberals of Germany, the liberals of education and patriotism, were not only internally, but also externally separated from the radicals, to whom an abstract concept called democracy, republic or whatever else had priority.'⁶⁴ *Radikale* or *Demokraten* became associated with ideals such as popular sovereignty, solidarity among European peoples, national unity, universal suffrage and social rights. *Demokraten* changed into a positive self-description after 1848/49. In that way, Lorenz von Stein referred to social equality symbolized by universal suffrage as the most relevant trend in politics and society, a process most advanced in France. For Stein, 'social democracy' was a fact transcending the difference between constitution and administration as he saw it in the French Second Republic.⁶⁵

What made the semantic gulf between 'liberal' and 'democratic' still wider had to do with the influence of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. For them, real democracy could be found only in communism, and the Revolution of 1848/49 signified a merely temporary alliance between workers and petty bourgeois democrats, as demonstrated in France. In their eyes, the concept of 'democracy' also allowed self-positioning in the historical process; hence, 'pure democracy' would be transformed into 'social democracy' and later into the dictatorship of the proletariat, which would then embody democracy in a communist society.⁶⁶ This interpretation proved to be influential for the concept's perception among the workers' movement. In 1863, Ferdinand Lassalle wrote about the separation between 'democracy' and 'liberalism': 'Democracy was the unifying bond between the bourgeoisie and the working class. By shaking off and renouncing this name, this unifying bond was cut from this side, and the banner was no longer planted in a democratic, but in a liberal bourgeois, movement.'⁶⁷ After this separation from liberalism, the working class could be the sole basis of democracy.

In contrast to this understanding of 'democracy' on the political left, National Liberals and Progressive Liberals maintained a negative connotation of 'democracy' after 1848/49. The concept became increasingly identified with Socialists and Social Democrats after the foundation of the Second German Empire in 1871. The supposed internationalist orientation of Social Democrats and Roman Catholics seemed to challenge the new nation-state's existence. For liberals who regarded themselves as the natural political force behind the emergence of the German nation-state of 1871, the *Kulturkampf* as well as the antisocialist stereotype influenced their understanding of the concept. A strong indication of this negative perception was the fact that neither 'democracy' nor 'democratic' was used for the official party name of liberal parties, nor was either a key aspect in liberals' party programmes before 1918 – with the one exception of a democratic connotation in the South

German 'Deutsche Volkspartei', later the 'Fortschrittliche Volkspartei', which was presented as a fusion between liberals and democrats.⁶⁸

Reformulating 'Liberalism' prior to and after the First World War

However, from the 1880s onwards, discussions over a necessary reformulation of 'liberalism' intensified.⁶⁹ Confronted with the consequences of dynamic industrial development and the emergence of an independent and strong party representing the working classes' interests, the circle around Friedrich Naumann and his 'Nationalsozialer Verein' sought to bridge the ideological gap between liberalism and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Naumann openly criticized the fact that German liberals, through their primary focus on constitutional and legal agendas, had never really developed a positive response to modern industrial society and the need to integrate the industrial workers positively. In Naumann's eyes, this also explained the crisis of liberalism's legitimacy, which became obvious around 1900 due to continuously decreasing electoral support in general elections. A merely political, constitutional or legal definition of progress, which had dominated the liberal paradigm of the pre- and post-1848 period, would not gain liberalism any popularity.⁷⁰ Naumann's premise was derived from his experiences of Christian Socialism, which, under the influence of Germany's dynamic industrial development in the 1870s and 1880s, had sought reconciliation between the social classes. As a young theologian under the influence of Johann Adolf Wichern and later as a Protestant minister, Naumann had noticed the social consequences of rapid industrialization. His initial response was not to attack the concept of private property, but a vague anticapitalism, which sought to go beyond both traditional paternalism and to respond positively to the rise of the SPD after the end of antisocialist legislation.⁷¹

Given the agenda of German National Liberalism and Progressive Liberalism under Eugen Richter in Wilhelmine Germany, there was little common ground between Naumann's position and that of organized party liberalism. For Naumann, German liberalism in general and Eugen Richter's Progressive Liberals in particular represented an inflexible and old-fashioned liberalism of notables ('Honoratiorenliberalismus'), staunchly opposed to any idea of social or economic state intervention. The contemporary criticism of German 'Manchester liberals' referred to the fact that the social expectation of most National or Progressive Liberals was still grounded in the earlier nineteenth century: the bourgeois model of a harmonious middle class in which all members would sooner or later, and as the result of a natural process, become property owners and hence be qualified for active political

participation.⁷² This model ruled out even modest attempts at social reforms, not to mention the implementation of compulsory social insurance schemes. Despite certain tendencies from the 1890s onwards, which indicated at least the start of a progressive reformulation of 'liberalism', intellectually stimulated by Lujo Brentano and politically fostered by Theodor Barth,⁷³ social liberalism still provoked widespread resistance among many liberals in Germany. Even in 1896, Ludwig Bamberger could still not see any fundamental difference between the regulation of working hours in bakeries and a state's trade monopoly, as they seemed to stand for the same false principle.⁷⁴

Confronted with the intransigent position of the Protestant churches in Germany, Naumann gave up his Christian Socialist beliefs and began to focus on party politics. His 'Nationalsozialer Verein', modelled after the 'Nationalverein' of the late 1850s, was meant to work as a political stormtrooper, balancing between the political representatives of the working classes and the established parties of Germany's political spectrum. At the same time, Naumann supported Max Weber's nationalist and imperialist position, as formulated in Weber's Freiburg inauguration lecture.⁷⁵ Naumann linked the idea of a necessary German expansion to the concept of social reforms in order to redefine 'liberalism'. Liberal imperialism could therefore be directed against the contemporary antisocialist integration policy, the so-called *Sammlungspolitik*. The result was a very ambivalent programme: support of navy armaments and demands of an unrestricted right of workers to form coalitions; an aggressive colonial policy against Britain; and a democratic franchise in all regional and local elections. However, in terms of party politics, this progressively oriented social imperialism had no chance. Naumann's 'Nationalsozialer Verein' remained without major influence among the liberal electorate.⁷⁶ Naumann argued that liberalism and socialism were inextricably related to each other by the relevance of democracy in modern industrial societies and strongly advocated a fusion between social liberalism and democracy. What he called in 1901 the 'innovation of liberalism' had to be founded on universal suffrage as a bridge between liberals and Social Democrats. Naumann also demanded a social opening of liberalism that should go hand in hand with Social Democracy becoming a national and integrative party in the German Empire's political system.⁷⁷

These attempts to overcome the semantic antagonism between 'liberalism' and 'democracy' marked an important ideological discourse before the First World War, but they did not change the nature of German politics as represented by political parties in the Reichstag.⁷⁸ It took many more years and the experience of the First World War before this trend was taken up again. When war broke out in the summer of 1914, the cultural war between European intellectuals concentrated on different understandings of political

cultures, but it was no longer 'liberalism' that served as a key concept in this context, but a negative image of Western 'democracy'. The German 'ideas of 1914' were identified with a particular understanding of culture and community and positioned against the French 'ideas of 1789', associated with mass politics, a fragile republican democracy and a decadent civilization, or against Britain's materialism and cultural decline.

Only after 1918 and against the background of the German Empire's collapse and the need to define a framework for the republic were new attempts made to overcome the semantic antagonism between 'liberalism' and 'democracy'. The German theologian and political observer Ernst Troeltsch offers a particularly interesting example of the attempts to reformulate a German political culture in a radically different political and social context.⁷⁹ A staunch supporter of the German 'ideas of 1914' in the summer of 1914, he became much more sceptical during the war. In 1919 and during the debates on drafting a new republican constitution, he insisted that this transformation was more than just the consequence of defeat and revolution in Germany. Instead, it reflected structural processes that had been catalysed by the events of late 1918: 'Democracy is the natural consequence of modern population density combined with the popular education, industrialisation, mobilisation, military reinvigoration and politicisation necessary for its sustenance.' Strongly opposed to the prospect of an October Revolution in Germany, a radical social revolution following the Bolshevik model, Troeltsch took up earlier approaches to reformulate 'liberalism' before 1914 and demanded the acceptance of social democracy as a historical fact – this relates his understanding of the concept to Arnold Ruge's definition in the 1840s and Friedrich Naumann's position around 1900. For Troeltsch, 'democracy' seemed to be 'the only means to lead the reverse class rule, the rule of the proletariat, into the course of a healthy and just state formation and to save the healthy nucleus of a state-preserving socialism'.⁸⁰ Democracy, according to him, was not the result of a mere political doctrine, but the consequence of a social process, which had been revealed by war and defeat.

Conclusion: German Semantics of 'Liberalism' in European Comparison

The ideological controversies that characterized the debates about the semantics of 'liberal' and 'liberalism' in early nineteenth-century Germany were a consequence of the fight for political institutions that had been in existence in France or were about to be reformed in Britain at the same time. In Germany, the discussion about 'liberal' and 'liberalism' accompanied the foundation of a political landscape with different political groups that later would become

political parties, whereas in France and Britain, this landscape already existed, marked by new party names as developed during the Revolution and the post-Napoleonic period in France, or traditional party denominations as in Britain. The evolutionary transition of this ideological landscape was anticipated by the transformation from 'Whig' to 'liberal', illustrated by John Stuart Mill's juxtaposition between an aristocratic Whig and a utilitarian middle-class understanding of 'liberal'.⁸¹

In Germany, on the other hand, the attempt to hold on to the concept 'liberal' as the expression of reasonable progress in cooperation with the reform-oriented state stood in contrast to revolutionary violence as exemplified in the eyes of many who accepted the concept 'liberal' as a self-description by France since 1789. This constellation illustrated the disintegration of the German opposition movement after 1830. The lack of concrete political participation in many states of the German Confederation before 1848, and in Prussia in particular, postponed the outbreak of this conflict until 1848, but the semantic distinction between *liberal* and *radikal* already anticipated different strategies and the polarization of semantics. In spite of the optimistic meaning of *liberal* at the end of the 1820s, it was no longer possible to integrate all political interests of a society in transition under this label – this led to ever more reformulations of 'liberalism' vis-à-vis the experience of revolution in 1848, of nation-state-building in the 1860s and 1870s, the problem of imperial expansion and social integration before 1914, and the challenge of war, defeat and the democratic republic after 1918.

In a long-term perspective, the *Weltanschauung* of progress in history and political reason as an enlightened response to 1789 did not fill the ever-widening gap between political and social interests. This led to a far-reaching ambivalence in the history of the concept in Germany in European comparison: ongoing optimism and the belief in natural progress, and the actual defence of 'liberal' and 'liberalism' in the face of conservative and radical groups overlapped. This constellation would continue in the later decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.

This simultaneous overlapping of noncontemporaneous semantic aspects crystallized the transformation of political language in Germany and distinguishes it from other European examples.⁸² The German example with its various historical layers of meanings, of controversies and reformulations, illustrates why Theodor Heuss in 1948 was so sceptical in applying the concept 'liberal' to the name of a new political party whose members saw themselves in the tradition of German liberalism. The concept seemed to be exhausted by its own history. What this sketch of different semantic transformations in European comparison shows is that there is no linear history towards a universal meaning of 'liberal' and 'liberalism'. Instead, the

focus on comparison and entanglement between the European variations of conceptual history leads to a complex representation of political landscapes, based on specific experiences of the past and expectations of the future.

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