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European Review / Volume 17 / Issue 3-4 / October 2009, pp 638 - 641

DOI: 10.1017/S1062798709001008, Published online: 14 July 2009

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1062798709001008

How to cite this article:

Machteld Venken (2009). European Review, 17, pp 638-641 doi:10.1017/S1062798709001008

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Liberty and the Search for Identity. Liberal Nationalisms and the Legacy of Empires

Iván Zoltán Dénes (Editor)

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In *Liberty and the Search for Identity*, 16 scholars, under the guidance of Iván Zoltán Dénes, explore how, in different European countries, liberalism and nationalism developed from being intertwined pairs at the beginning of the 19th century, to juxtaposed poles in post Cold War Europe. The volume uniquely gathers studies from various Western, Central and Eastern European countries. Until a few decades ago, studies on liberalism in Central and Eastern European countries mainly measured to what extent a mainstream Western European liberal tradition within their territories had (not) been adapted, and in that respect spoke of Central and Eastern European liberalism as a kind of *Sonderweg* (special case). This book, however, refutes the primordial character of national identities, reveals the forged nature of also British, German and French national identities, and opens the door for comparative research on the international exchange and the local articulation of universal philosophies, such as liberalism and nationalism. As such, it seeks to move beyond a static distinction between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ in favour of a context-specific circulation of ideas supported by complex modes of (mostly political) interaction and involvement. Inspired by the way the circulation of competing concepts of liberalism and nationalism impacted upon the dissolution of multinational polities in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the editor seeks to trace the overlapping concepts of liberalism and nationalism and their relationship with the decline of various multi-ethnic empires in Europe in the early 19th century.

In the first four chapters, the Western European cases of Scotland, the Netherlands and Belgium are discussed. The chapters of David McCrone and Richard J. Finlay describe how Scotland’s entering into the Union of 1707 laid the foundation for a United Kingdom on the basis of equality, but how Scotland now wants to revise the contract, striving for more autonomy. Whereas in the 19th century the Union furnished satisfying conditions for what was considered liberal-oriented unionist nationalism, 20th-century century Scottish yearnings for increased state intervention led to a growing number of separatist and nationalist voices. Henk te Velde explains why liberal constitutional demands in The Netherlands, which had regained its independence from France in 1813, were only successful from the mid-19th century on, when the un-French character of liberalism could be convincingly stressed. During the French occupation, the Dutch had lost their appetite for politics, and afterwards continued to dislike everything that was conceived to be French. For most of the 20th century, Dutch liberals failed to mobilize the masses, which deprived them of the leading role they had played before. Recently, however, a new popular

liberalism has emerged, which lacks the earlier nationalist inspiration. Janet Polasky argues that the liberal constitution of the newly born Belgian state in 1830 enshrined the principle of language freedom, which, ironically, over the next 150 years has provided the grounds for a (still continuing) fragmentation of the Belgian state between (northern) Flemings and (southern) Walloons.

Next follow seven chapters on Central Europe. Gabor Erdödy in his contribution on German liberalism shows how the 1848 revolution created the demand for a liberal national state, and how, when repressive policies hindered its installation, German liberalism came to strive for German unification as a means also to liberalize Prussia. After 1871, the revival of conservatism and the rise of socialism reduced the role of liberalism. Using the Swiss example, Albert Tanner sketches how a multinational, liberal, and highly decentralized state may cause less conflict than a centralized nation-state built on ethnicity. However, a more restrictive citizenship policy adopted because of swelling incoming migration currently undermines the idea of equality between all those living on Swiss soil. Highlighting the liberalist ideas of German-speaking Austrians in the Habsburg Empire of the 19th century, Vilmos Heiszler displays how their liberalism was an attempt to bring German and Austrian identity closer together, and how it quickly fell into decay when it turned out that German-speaking Austrians had no role in the German unification of 1871.

Iván Zoltán Dénes and Miklós Szabó discuss the long 19th century of Hungary in great detail. With Maciej Janowski and Otto Urban, authors of the subsequent chapters on Polish and Czech liberalism respectively, they share the aim to revise the commonly accepted opinion on liberalism in Central Europe. This opinion holds that because liberal ideas are mostly upheld by the bourgeoisie, and because the bourgeoisie was weak in Central Europe, liberalism was weak there too. The authors however stress the influence of Western intellectual ideologies in 19th-century Central European intellectual life, and argue that because liberalism was important in Western Europe it consequently also was in Central Europe. When liberalism is not pre-eminently seen as a political movement (as instanced in 19th-century Western Europe), but rather as a current of thought, its importance in 19th-century Central Europe can easily be recognized. For these authors, Central European nobility and intelligentsia served as the bearers of a liberal ideology, comparable to the function of the Western-European bourgeoisie in this. Such a reading of history, Maciej Janowski states, reveals that in Poland a liberal tradition was equally important in shaping public attitudes as the much better known 19th-century independence risings.

A further six chapters focus on Eastern Europe, the Balkans and Southern Europe. Two contributions on Russia, by Miklós Kun and Alexander Semyonov, question the common juxtaposition of a pre-modern autocratic empire and a modern nation-state, showing among other things that some commentators consider the 19th-century Russian Empire to have functioned as a nation-state,

given the liberal modernization attempts of, for instance, Alexander I. Serb, Rumanian, and Bulgarian liberals, discussed in chapters by Imre Ress, Daniel Barbu and Cristian Reda, and Diana Mishkova, successfully transformed traditional political legitimacies based on, for instance, ancient custom into forms more representative of the people. Diana Mishkova sees Serbian and Bulgarian liberals mobilizing the peasants in support of their ideas on nationalism, whereas the Rumanian liberals failed to do the same. Ironically, after having been instrumental in creating a representative nation-state, liberals in the three countries in question lost it in a democratic way to more radical nationalist voices. Eyüp Özveren rounds off the book with a detailed description of how the Ottoman Empire was transformed into a Turkish republic by liberal nationalists.

Although the book provides a detailed new reading of liberalism and nationalism, it was not always convincing to me. A pioneering stance does not always lead to pioneering work. The introduction to the work numbers only ten pages and does not succeed in efficiently summarizing the concept of the volume. It is often the authors of specific chapters, such as those on the Netherlands or Russia, that have to explain to the reader what the volume is actually about. Most strikingly, the reader is not offered a clear understanding of what liberalism is. Does it stand for liberal values, or for a liberal project aiming at political or social reforms? The various authors tend to formulate the concept as it pleases them. Moreover, the compilation of the various chapters leaves an unbalanced impression. Not only does the length of chapters vary from 12 to 53 pages, but also the level of analysis differs. Unfortunately, some authors do not move beyond mere description and, additionally, neglect to define their concepts. Furthermore, one is left to wonder if the study does indeed aim to compare across centuries, as not all the chapters move from the 19th century to recent developments. In fact, the authors do not always have enough space to go into the very thing that makes liberal projects in the 19th century different from those of the 20th: the intervening experience of communism.

The obvious choice of individual countries as units of analysis, moreover, impedes the interaction of insights. Given the volume's avowed aim of discussing the circulation of ideas this is rather strange. The volume contains only some references to comparisons between various nations, by individual authors, and even mostly in some footnotes. Only the chapter by Mishkova ('The Interesting Anomaly of Balkan Liberalism') leaves the strictly national approach and convincingly shows how comparison enriches. However, at no other point in the volume do we find any further reflections on possible other approaches. Instead, the editor hopes to publish a follow-up edition with more national case studies.

To end, *Liberty and the Search for Identity* is a challenging book that offers a new reading of liberalism in Europe, although it is not always clear what is meant

by that concept. However, it should now be followed up by more comparative research on a European level. Having used it as a handbook for students, one of its target audiences, I experienced the volume as not formulating its ideas sufficiently clearly and streamlined.

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