Liberalism

THE LIFE OF AN IDEA

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SECOND EDITION

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

To shore up a weakened building, you need to understand its foundations. You need to grasp what it rests on, why it arose, and what it is for. So it is with democratic liberalism, or to use the more familiar name, liberal democracy. Nobody who witnessed recent political shocks and watched antiliberal successes in Europe and the United States can doubt that liberal democracy is under challenge from inside and out. As discrepancies of wealth and power widened in recent decades, disaffected citizens questioned liberalism's aims and ideals. A great structure of historic wealth and shelter that lately appeared to be the envy of the world showed weaknesses and flaws. As the pride of its occupants gave way to self-doubt, people on all sides asked, were those flaws reparable or fatal? Across the world, liberalism's geopolitical prestige was dimmed by rising powers that offered attractive-looking nonliberal paths to material progress and stability. The liberal democratic world itself appeared to be splitting as the United States and Britain took illiberal paths politically and unilateralist paths internationally, leaving a shaken France and Germany as European standard-bearers for the liberal order.

The original edition of *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* in a final chapter mentioned, without dwelling on, the present weaknesses of liberal democracy. The book's aim was to show what liberalism is, the better to see what we should be worrying about. This updated new edition contains an expanded final part, written after the upsets of 2016–17, on liberalism's present ills and doubts about its prospects. A new Introduction makes clearer the book's underlying assumption that liberalism, although complex and diverse, is easy to recognize and distinguish from its rivals, especially in times as now when liberalism looks as if it is in jeopardy and needs defending.

Liberalism is an enduring practice of politics guided by distinctive aims and ideals. It began in the early nineteenth century, not before as often claimed, in a previously unimagined predicament. Amid the ceaseless change of capitalist modernity, the first liberals sought durable new ways to secure ethical and political stability. That liberal search, then as now, was guided by four broad ideas: acceptance that moral and material conflict in society cannot be expunged, only contained and perhaps in fruitful ways tamed; hostility to unchecked power, be it political, economic or social; faith that social ills can be cured and that human life can be made better; and law-backed respect by state and society for people's lives and projects, whatever they believe and whoever they are.

More follows in the Introduction about each of those ideas—in shorthand, *conflict*, *power*, *progress* and *respect*. They distinguish liberalism point-for-point from its chief rivals in the nineteenth century, conservatism and socialism; from fascism and communism in the twentieth century and from their diverse twenty-first-century competitors: authoritarians, populists of right and left, theocrats and one-party state-capitalists. Much of the unending conflict among liberals that runs through this book is about how to think about their ideals and realize their aims. Because liberalism's guiding ideas set such high hopes, they also cause swings of mood from triumphalism to despair—and back.

Despite its wide variety of parties, camps, interests, philosophies and dominant characters, liberalism has for two centuries shown a high degree of unity and continuity. In secure times, liberalism's variety has struck people as too bewildering to count as variation in a single political practice. Surely, it is said, the term "liberalism" names different practices. Surely, there are many liberalisms. Surely, there is no one settled concept *liberalism* or *liberal*. Although arresting when first heard, such claims are much exaggerated and hard to press without raising the suspicion that the claimant recognizes liberalism well enough but is foxed by the wealth of diverse ways to think and talk about liberalism. Fear of loss, however, sharpens the mind. In insecure times, as now, definitional puzzles are less worrisome than the blunt matter of liberalism's survival.

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Liberalism

THE LIFE OF AN IDEA

Introduction

The Practice of Liberalism

If you think that liberalism is in jeopardy and worth defending, then it matters to see liberalism for what it is. To see something for what it is, you need to recognize its kind. If you ask what kind of thing liberalism is, you are likely to be told that it is a political ideology, an ethical creed, an economic picture of society, a philosophy of politics, a rationale of capitalism, a provincial Western outlook, a passing historical phase or a timeless body of universal ideals. None of that is strictly wrong, but all of it is partial. Each of those answers makes one aspect of liberalism the whole of liberalism. None puts liberalism in its proper category. Seen in the round, liberalism is to be taken as a practice of politics.

Liberalism has no foundation myth or year of birth. Its intellectual and moral sources go back as far as energy or curiosity will take you, but it arose as a political practice in the years after 1815 across the Euro-Atlantic world and nowhere significantly before. Liberalism responded to a novel condition of society, grown suddenly larger with expanding populations, energized by capitalism and shaken by political revolution in which, for better or worse, material and ethical change now appeared ceaseless. In that unfamiliar setting, the first liberals sought fresh terms for the conduct of political life that would serve their aims and honor their ideals.

People before them had not imagined such an ever-shifting world. Thinkers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had encouraged the idea that people might understand and change society. Hume and Kant had welcomed liberty from ethical tutelage. Adam Smith had spied the first fruits of modern capitalism. None had experienced the true force

als, free markets—with the loose banner language of the political street, notably "Liberty!" They drew on intellectual precedents going back past sixteenth- and seventeenth-century defenders of toleration and anti-monarchical republicanism through the conciliarism and ethical rationalism of the scholastic church doctors to arguments about power, duty and justice of the ancient Greeks, all of which gave rise to unsettled arguments about when liberalism began.

No one version of the liberal outlook ever became canonical. Liberalism had no accredited doctrinalists, no Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, no Marx-Engels Standard Edition. No one philosophy spoke for its ideas. Millian Utilitarianism and Hegelian idealism served alike in the nineteenth century as justificatory narratives. In the English-speaking world after 1945, a rights-based liberalism came to dominate political philosophy. Given such variety of common terms and suggested vindications, liberalism's outlook was bound to be loose fitting, open to interpretation and unsettled argument. Liberal philosophers strive to justify liberalism. The rivals of liberalism strive to defeat liberalism. Liberals vie among themselves to own liberalism. In the thicket of liberal ideas, it is good to be clear which argument you are having.

Hopes and Fears in a Strange Predicament

Liberalism began in a predicament. The first liberals were looking for a new political order after the upheavals of early industrial capitalism and two late eighteenth-century revolutions—American and French—had thrown society into fruitful but unending turmoil. The principal liberal challenge was that order from now on would be dynamic, not static. When thrown out of balance, society might come to rest again but never, save by remotest luck, in its former place. Continuity of life imagined as a comforting return home was gone for good. Thrown into an unfamiliar world of nomadic modernity, liberals were thrilled and horrified. Neither their political temperament nor their political ideas can be understood without seeing the hold on them of that thrill and horror together. In searching for an acceptable political order in a destabilized world of ceaseless change, liberals had accordingly a hopeful dream, a nightmare and a daytime picture of human society that combined both good and

bad dreams in an unsteady, creative tension. Liberalism from the beginning was as much a search for order as a pursuit of liberty.

The hopeful dream imagined a myth of order in a masterless world: a peaceful, prosperous place without father figures or brotherhood, chieftains or comrades, final authorities or natural-born friends. It was an appealing myth shaped by distrust of powers, monopolies and authorities, by faith that the worst human ills of warfare, poverty, and ignorance were corrigible in this world, and by unbreachable respect for the enterprises, interests and opinions of people, whoever they were. Those convictions attracted and were first voiced by educated, propertied men keen to get ahead and to prevent existing elites from standing in their way, but the appeal of liberal ideas was not confined to such people, and in democratic times the appeal broadened without limits of social category. Liberalism's ideas served as guides in a world of ever-shifting novelty where interests clashed and argument never ended. Liberals were not sleepwalkers. They worked hard to convince themselves that their guiding ideas, ambitious and exacting as they were, might interlock and reinforce each other.

Liberals hoped for *ethical* order without appeal to divine authority, established tradition or parochial custom. They hoped for *social* order without legally fixed hierarchies or privileged classes. They hoped for an *economic* order free of crown or state interference, monopoly privileges and local obstacles to national markets. They hoped for an *international* order where trade prevailed over war and treaty prevailed over force. They hoped lastly for a *political* order without absolute authorities or undivided powers that all citizens might understand and accept under lawful arrangements honoring and fostering those other hopes.

The liberal nightmare pictured a world in disorder. The nightmare drew on the direct experience of revolution and warfare in 1789–1815 as well as on collective memory of the fratricidal conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It mingled fears of a return to historic intolerance and religious strife with revulsion at the terror and counterterror, popular unrest, vengeful repression, *levée en masse* and unlimited warfare that had recently swept over the European and Atlantic world. European liberals shuddered at riotous mobs in burgeoning cities. American liberals feared reprisal for the cruelties and wickedness of slavery. Ever deeper poverty in the countryside was bleakly forecast as

growing populations threatened to outstrip agricultural capacities. Liberals everywhere worried that whereas the benefits of progress were commonly diffuse and would be seen over time, the costs of progress tended to be local, sharply felt and abrupt.

Liberalism resolved hope and nightmare into a desirable picture of society as an unfraternal place without natural harmony from which clashing interests and discordant beliefs could never be removed but where, with luck and wise laws, unceasing conflict might nevertheless be turned to welcome ends in innovation, argument and exchange. That picture of conflict channeled into peaceful competition made a mystifying, fluid and constantly surprising society intelligible to liberals, and thence in some sense justifiable or acceptable.

Appealing reasons existed to suppose the elements of the liberal dream might work together and hopes might be achieved. Ethical order would become self-fulfilling with the spread of education and material independence, as people learned to take responsibility, to choose well and wisely for themselves and to respect each other's choices. Social order would be self-sustaining as the cumulative benefits of technical and economic change outweighed their costly disruptions. Economic order would be self-correcting, for when one market failed, another market could provide, and when a whole economy faltered, prosperity would return so long as the economy was left to rebalance itself without lasting or ineffective interference. International order similarly would prove self-imposing as the mutual gains from trade and openness outgrew the spoils of war. Political order, finally, would be self-fulfilling as subjects became rulers, the master-state became a servant-state and the only rules citizens had to obey were those they had in some sense accepted for themselves. As hopes go, those were big hopes.

Liberalism's ambition struck its rivals from the start as extravagant if not Utopian. Hope for masterless order among contented people asked a lot of steady material gains, which came, but not steadily. It asked a lot of rising forbearance among reasonable citizens within nations, which was visible in good times but vanished with frightening speed in bad. It asked a lot of declining belligerence between nations, which did indeed lessen for the kinds of reasons liberals gave only to return to their consternation in ever more destructive forms. In new guise, those same challenges are as stark now as in the nineteenth century. Hope for order

from horizonless innovation, open borders and limitless social freedom asks a lot of people who do not all share the gains, who long for stability and who do not always want to be reasonable or forbearing with neighbors they do not particularly like.

Dream and nightmare, success and wreckage mark the liberal story and, with them, wide swings of mood: politically, from over-confidence to self-doubt; intellectually, from unbounded universalism to worldly-wise damage limitation. At the top of the cycle, liberals could always be found spying calamity ahead. At the bottom of the cycle, liberals could always be found reminding shaken colleagues of the upturn to come. Like up-and-down capitalism itself, liberalism's mood swings are comforting only to a point. Cycles in history, like trends in nature, can come to an end.

Liberalism's Four Guiding Ideas

Liberalism's first guiding idea—conflict—was less an aim or ideal than a description of society, though hardly a neutral description. Conflict of interests and beliefs was, to the liberal mind, inescapable. If tamed and turned to competition in a stable political order, conflict could nevertheless bear fruit as argument, experiment and exchange. By treating society not as an extended tribe or a household writ large but as a field of peaceable competition, liberals put constraints on what prescriptive ideals to follow. Their ideals, that is, had to suit a competitive society. When liberals took conflict for inevitable and competition, its peaceable form, for desirable, they excluded or demoted social virtues that their political rivals favored. To liberals, competition in the town square, laboratory or market place encouraged bargaining, creativity, and initiative, whereas social harmony stifled or silenced them. Conservatives, who saw harmony in tradition, and socialists, who saw harmony in fraternity, were each quick to insist that liberal ideals grossly distorted the true picture of society. The liberal picture was, to their minds, a portrait painted to flatter liberalism's self-image, a picture not of how society was but of how grasping liberals wished it to become.

In thinking about conflict, American and British liberals have tended, in hopeful imitation of economists, to treat it individualistically as in-

volving two single bargainers or contestants that could without distortion be magnified to social scale. French and German liberals have tended to treat conflict more socially as taking place among shared mentalities and self-standing groups. With that contrast in mind, it will be suggested at the end of Part One that liberalism can be but does not need to be defended in contentious "individualist" terms.

Hopeful early liberals such as Constant, Tocqueville and Mill welcomed diversity and distrusted social unity. They saw in modern fragmentation the sunny potential of material and intellectual creativity. Liberalism, however, soon had to reckon with people who would rather fight than trade. It had to find something to say to people with little or nothing to trade, nothing, that is, of the marketable kind that liberal capitalism characteristically valued. Faced by those difficulties, later liberals, particularly after 1945, often tried to fool themselves that society was not after all in inescapable conflict. With a measure of bad faith, they were tempted to fall back on the fond belief that modern people's interests and convictions were converging on the common goals of social peace and material plenty. On that wishful picture, conflict in liberal modernity was not so much tamed as expunged.

To shaken liberals in the twenty-first century, it is not the least clear that modern society reliably turns conflict to net advantage or that liberal capitalism has achieved a wished-for steady-state of concord in discord. Theirs is not the sunny view taken by mid–nineteenth century liberals of vigorous argument and fertile competition. Nor is it the self-confident post-1945 liberalism of moderate government-aided economic convergence in a nevertheless open and diverse society, but a bleaker view of unremitting conflict and division reinforced by doubts about the liberal foundations. Rattled liberals nowadays are likelier to see the intellectual and material fractures of society more with the eyes of Jean Bodin or Thomas Hobbes, though without the recourse to absolute powers, a plausible solution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but in liberal modernity neither acceptable nor achievable.

As for liberalism's second guiding idea, human power was implacable. It could never be relied on to behave well. Whether political, economic or social, superior power of some people over others tended inevitably to arbitrariness and domination unless resisted and checked. Power might stop people from doing what they chose or make them do

grasped, modern citizens demanded ample room for public maneuver together with a secure private space, and had the self-possession to stand up for what they wanted.

As people faced a variety of impositions from state and society, the demands of civic respect came in several domains and took various forms. Again, they could best be put negatively. In setting limits to what superior power of some over others should not do, liberal respect insisted on nonintrusion, nonobstruction and—the democratic "whoever"—nonexclusion. Intrusive power might intrude on people's private world, interfere with their property or gag their opinions. Obstructive power might block creative aims, entrepreneurial ventures and technical innovations. Exclusive power might deny protections and permissions to the poor, to women, to the unlettered or the unorthodox. Power might deny them to anyone that is typed undemocratically for inferior citizenship by markers of social difference.

Civic respect promised people reliable protection from oppressive or unwanted power. It was a public, not personal, requirement addressed to state and society, hence the "civic." It called impersonally for restraint from the powers of those "cold monsters": state, wealth and society. It set high standards on what those behemoths owed each of us. It did not call on power to like, admire or take a personal interest in people, a misplaced hope like asking gravity to be nice to us. Taken democratically, civic respect was demanded for everybody, whoever they were. So understood, it was to be extended without the discriminations of favor or exclusion, neutrally, impartially and in blindness to people's given or adopted social clothes, a requirement of complexity and ambition, giving rise to unending dispute in thought and practice.

Particularly after 1945, liberals began to think of the permissions and protections offered by civic respect less in Utilitarian terms of their general benefits than in terms of personal rights. The shift involved a conceptual reduction and a pragmatic inflation. Philosophically, in looking for legitimizing answers to why power must desist from intruding on or obstructing us, liberal thinkers re-elaborated new contractarian versions of old natural-rights doctrines. Described in chapter 12, that modern search for the bedrock on which to rest inviolable rights started in the United States where methodological individualism dominated the social sciences, law courts played a leading part in politics, and every

kind of social conflict could be framed as a legal dispute between two parties, often one of them an agency of the state. The so-called rights explosion, however, was neither confined to the university world of political philosophy, nor was it purely American. Politically, post-1945 liberals everywhere tended to fall into a habit of treating any aspect of what state and society owed us by way of respect as a matter of personal rights that could be legally codified and in principle defended in court, an inflationary sequence described in chapter 11 on human rights after 1945.

The liberalism of rights was in time flanked by a neo-Hegelian liberalism of recognition. It too involved a reduction and an inflation. As his twentieth-century interpreters read him, Hegel described a contest between the unrecognized and powerless against the recognized and powerful until all recognized all in equal acceptance of a law-governed state. History, in that picture, became a struggle for recognition. The metaphor electrified neo-Hegelian liberals, who likened the impersonal respect owed by power towards people to the personal recognition that people owed each other. It was but a step to treating every public intrusion, obstruction or exclusion as a denial of recognition, and to a blurring of the line, precious to political liberals, between the public and the private spheres, between the political and the personal.

Intellectually, whereas the liberalism of rights had succored mid–twentieth century movements for non-discrimination and civil rights, the liberalism of recognition succored a problem stepchild of those great campaigns, the politics of identity. As described in Part Four in the chapter "Nationhood, Citizenship and Identity," unifying campaigns to end exclusion and win civic respect for all risked becoming divisive campaigns to celebrate difference. When pursued in separatist spirit, identity politics, for all its virtues, divided the left, gave weapons to the right and weakened the democratic idea of equal citizenship.

It's about more than liberty.

The triple structure of civic respect made it irresistible for liberals to simplify. Faced by the historic intrusions of rulers, bailiffs, tax collectors, book censors and priests, reliable protection from undue power was

what people had immemorially spoken of as liberty. In their several contests against unchecked power—political, economic and social—the first liberals seized on the idea of liberty, borrowing heavily against the moral capital of the parallel movement to free slaves. Eager to release vigorous new enterprise from old strictures against unequal bargains and unfair wages, liberal economists and lawyers worked hard to embed into nineteenth-century commercial law the idea of free contract. In facing down its twentieth-century rivals, fascism and communism, liberal democracy fought a successful contest of geopolitics and principle under the all-purpose banner of freedom.

Liberals, it is said, believe in liberty. Indeed, they do, but so do most nonliberals. Standing up for liberty does not distinguish liberals or what they believe in. Just about every modern rival to liberalism has claimed to stand somehow on the side of liberty. *Le Conservateur*, a French journal founded in 1818 to promote tradition and reaction, announced its aims as a defense of "king, religion and liberty." In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels looked forward to a classless society in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all." In 1861, the American Confederacy's vice president, Alexander Stephens, defended the newly formed government of the slave-holding South as securing "all our ancient rights, franchises and liberties." The encyclical *Libertas humana*, which Pope Leo XIII addressed to Roman Catholics in 1888, held that shaping human law so that everyone might better conform to "the eternal law of God" comprised the "true liberty of human society." The charter program of the Nazi Party in 1920 announced its goal as "Germany's rebirth in the German spirit of German liberty. Benito Mussolini described Italian fascists as "libertarians" who believed in liberty, even for their enemies.

Maybe so, but those nonliberals were surely thinking of different things from what liberals think of when they invoke liberty. That objection, telling perhaps on its own, would have more weight if liberals themselves agreed on what liberty amounted to and why it mattered in politics. But they don't. Although often spoken of interchangeably, freedom and liberty are not quite the same. Freedom implies absence of obstruction or constraint, which may be natural (a tree across the path) or social (a police officer's "Stop!", a no trespassing sign or a ticket barrier). When liberals talk of liberty politically, they have in mind

freedom of the second, social kind, particularly freedom from the prohibitions and intrusions of coercive authority. Yet even here, liberals do not all agree.

Some liberal thinkers would ask more of liberty in politics than simply the absence of outside constraint. Liberty would be of small worth in their eyes without capacities and resources to exercise liberty or without the assurance that liberty might not at the whim of power be snatched away. Other thinkers would push liberty yet further, taking it as the civic ideal of a self-possessed, autonomous citizen who chooses their own path in life but accepts nevertheless public responsibilities in the society to which they belong. Whichever of those several conceptions of liberty—negative, positive, or republican, to use labels from political philosophy, or some combination of the three—the democratic question would remain whether liberalism's promises of permission and protection were to be taken as extended to some people or to all people. Democratic liberals would take liberalism's promises as made for everyone. If driven to allow liberals one and only idea, democratic liberals would say that equality, not liberty, was its dominant idea. Other liberals, refusing to be driven, would deny that liberalism had one idea, be it equality or liberty, that somehow dominated the others and on which liberalism could be made to rest.

Liberty has held the stage in the monodramas of liberal history. In its Hegelian or Whig variants, the tale is essentially the same. History as Hegel imagined it was a kind of super-agent for the ever fuller realization of human liberty—for whatever counted in practice, that is, towards the extension of people's powers and capacities, both mental and material, in successive stages of society. As the common focus of people's drive for freedom, history on Hegel's account moved stage by stage towards its end or goal in an enlightened and law-governed constitutional monarchy. Only such a state, to his mind, could provide the ordered liberty that citizens needed to best achieve their proper ends. A twentieth-century Italian liberal, Guido de Ruggiero, told a Hegelian story of liberty's advance in his classic *History of European Liberalism* (1924), though with a different goal in view. For Ruggiero, the spread of liberty was tending to a condition of society in which each citizen had bankable opportunities to develop their capacities and realize their aims, a democratic commonwealth, that is, where everyone's hopes and chances in life were equally respected.

In the Whig epic of emancipation, liberty's agents were flesh-and-blood particulars—early Christians, medieval townspeople, reforming Protestants, seventeenth-century parliamentarians, anti-Stuart 1688-ers, anti-tax American colonists, French 1789-ers—knocking away one barrier or another to their advancement, motivated willy-nilly by private conscience, urge for gain or an expansive sense of self. Liberty on such accounts was a common human possession, ever at risk of hostile capture and in need of protection or release. The Protestant Macaulay's *History of England* (1848–61) celebrated the anti-Stuart revolution of 1688 in England as a restoration of ancient liberties lost to absolutism and intolerance. The Catholic Acton's posthumous *History of Freedom* (1907) tracked from antiquity to modern times a long campaign by personal faith to fend off suffocating authority. In the medieval contest for supremacy between church and crown that neither were in position to win, Acton spied a modern recovery of liberty and the creation of a lasting space for civic freedom.

Liberty-driven history survives in the recent fashion for books that recount modernity's unstoppable success as a happy *ménage à trois* of free enquiry, unobstructed new technology, and liberal politics. In biological mode, such tales make liberty an all-purpose reproductive advantage in the evolution of social forms. They credit just about every aspect of human betterment and social progress since Galileo spotted Jupiter's moons through a handmade telescope to liberty's selfless sharing of her bounty. The tale has dazzling appeal. But are the boons of universal schooling, democratic suffrage, and penicillin all forms or consequences of liberty?

There are simpler versions of the liberty narrative. They follow a memorable rule of three: political liberty's first victory was constitutional freedom (early nineteenth century), its second victory was economic freedom (later nineteenth century) and its final victory was democratic freedom (mid–twentieth century). That tidy sequence helps itself to the disputable claim that liberty is the one underlying value that representative institutions, free markets and democratic participation all embody. History is wilier than attempts to catch it in one trap allow. It concerns itself solely with liberty no more than liberals do. Obviously, you cannot leave liberty out of the liberal story. Like the king in chess, liberty comes into its own, but nearer the end of the game. For all its crowning appeal, liberty is the wrong place to begin.

itself has come to mean a heartless, mindless free-marketeer even on the lips of the former banker and centrist liberal Emmanuel Macron, who campaigned successfully for the presidency in May 2017 on the slogan "Ni libéralisme, ni nationalisme."

With the two exceptions of the short-lived Liberal Republicans, led to defeat in the presidential election of 1872 by the redoubtable newspaper editor Horace Greeley, and the mid–twentieth century Liberal Party of New York, a moderate wing of the local Democrats, the main parties in American politics avoided the name. After the 1850s, two loose coalitions, the Republicans and Democrats, each with liberal and less liberal wings, monopolized the nomenclature of party competition.

By 1945, "liberal" in the United States had taken on a local and an international use. When used of politics in the United States, "liberal" indicated a supporter of the New Deal and civil rights, normally a Democrat. Internationally, "liberal" contrasted an American-led West with a Communist East. The term in the use was interchangeable with "free," "open" and "democratic." The label "liberal democracy," barely recorded before the 1930s, became common, its share of occurrence in publications jumping, according to Google Books Ngram, five times between then and 1980 and another seven times in the next two decades.

The conservative right in the United States was by then using "liberal" as a term of abuse for almost anyone it disagreed with, and the ending of the Cold War soon, as it seemed, robbed "liberal" of use as a term of geopolitical contrast. Partly in result, "liberal" became scarcely usable in serious political studies without asterisks, qualifications and neck-covering disclaimers about separate referents or conflicting senses.

Never lost to view, despite the verbal and conceptual puzzles, was a recognized practice of politics that four notably varied Western societies serving here as an exemplary core—France, Britain, Germany and the United States—all uncontroversially converged upon after 1945. That familiar, stable-seeming practice became in the first decades of the new century, a focus of anxious concern, not because it was hard to define, but out of fear that it might not survive. The practice merited a label, and "democratic liberalism," or more conventionally "liberal democracy," has struck most people as apt. Difficulties with the word "liberal" or with the concept *liberal* are as big or small as you want to make them. Particularly in times as now, when some people are thrilled by

liberalism's travails and others are afraid for its life, everybody can be taken to know what they are talking about. The challenge is not to identify liberalism but to describe and understand it well.

Liberalism's Distinctiveness

Liberalism's four guiding ideas were distinctive. Taken one by one, they distinguished liberals from nonliberals and antiliberals. Taken together they stood out in relief against the competing outlooks of liberalism's chief nineteenth-century rivals, conservatives and socialists.

Both arose in reaction to liberalism, which they pictured as source and celebrant of blind, restless change. In the name of stability, conservatives appealed to the fixity of the past. They took society for a harmonious, orderly whole before critical modernity promoted self-seeking disaffection and liberal capitalism sowed discord between classes. They believed in the unchallengeable authority of established rulers and custom. Power, to the conservative mind, was to be obeyed, not questioned or made to justify itself. Conservatives took human capabilities for largely fixed and society's scope for wholesale improvement as small or nonexistent. They looked on liberal respect for people's chosen enterprises and opinions, especially when those took unwelcome or disruptive form, as harmful to orthodoxy and good order. Civic respect, to the conservative mind, undersanctioned human willfulness, overcelebrated private choice and scanted the demands of duty, deference and obedience.

Socialists also disagreed with liberals, point for point. In the name of brotherhood, socialists appealed to the fixity of the future. Conflict divided society at present, they accepted. But conflict was neither enduring nor ineradicable. For conflict, they believed, would end once its sources in material inequity were overcome. Socialism here stands for the many nineteenth-century families of the left that grew out of Jacobinism and popular radicalism to include Utopian collectivists, Fourierists, Marxists and early labor unionists. Socialists, like liberals, believed in resistance to power, but not all power. Wealth's power was their primary target, and to contain that power socialists flanked and blended with democratic movements for suffrage extension and political reform.

Socialists trusted by contrast the power of society, thought of as coextensive with the working people. Anarcho-socialists took society for self-organizing, hence in no need of protection from its own power. State-minded socialists took state power to express popular power, intuited by elected or self-appointed tribunes. Liberals, by contrast, distrusted all power, including the power of the people, however thought of or spoken for.

Like liberals, socialists had faith in human progress, but taken in contrary ways. For socialists, progress meant radical transformation of society, whereas liberals took progress for gradual improvement within society as it largely was. Some socialists would reach their goal gradually by the ballot, others in a revolutionary leap. All hoped for a postcapitalist society of effective material equality assured by commonly owned or collectively managed property. For socialists, lastly, liberal respect for people one by one overplayed privacy and self-interest at the expense of comradeship, class loyalty and solidarity. Nor were socialists persuaded that liberal respect operated evenly across its several domains. Liberals, in socialist eyes, respected private enterprises and private property above all else and, despite cries of denial, stood accordingly athwart genuine progress.

The early twentieth century was generous to liberal self-understanding with two defining Others: fascism and communism. Both rejected liberal values and adopted but perverted the democratic promise of universal inclusion. Fascism appealed to a false unity of nationhood, particularly nationhood based on the fiction of race. Communism appealed to a false unity of class, particularly the unity of the working class as somehow representative of humankind. To fascism there was no higher power than nation or race, to communism none than the working people. The mystical authority of each, as interpreted by an elite party, was absolute. Personal progress was thought of in terms of socially imposed templates rather than as a growth of capacities along privately chosen paths. Social progress was equated to progress of nation, race or class, from the benefits of which those in the wrong nation, race or class were excluded. Neither fascism nor communism offered benchmarks for civic respect, or indeed any clear lines that society might not overstep in its pursuit of the common good. As the more thoughtful liberals recognized, communism was an extremism of hope, fascism an extremism of

hate. They were nevertheless alike enough on those four counts to provide liberalism with a captivating image of itself in negative.

The comprehensive disgrace of fascism (1945) and a closing of the book on Soviet communism (1989) left liberalism, as it seemed, without a global rival against which to compete historically or define itself conceptually. That sense of an ending was short-lived. In the expanded field of the twenty-first century, it was soon clear that liberalism had attractive, competing "isms" that overplayed power, underplayed civic respect and acknowledged fault on neither score: one-party authoritarianism, state capitalism, democratic nationalism, theocratic Islamism and illiberal populist movements of left and right.

Unity and Shape of the Liberal Outlook

Liberalism's four guiding ideas may be taken for liberal answers to hard questions facing any political outlook. Is the conflict of interests and faiths in society inescapable? Is power implacable and, if so, is it controllable? Are human society and human capacities static or dynamic? Are there moral or prudential limits on how those with more power may treat those with less? Answers give political outlooks a characteristic shape.

Liberals accepted the fact of conflict but distrusted power and sought to limit power. To provide for order, they counted accordingly less on power to impose control on society than on human progress to foster self-control among citizens. Liberalism's rivals, conservatism and socialism, made themselves simpler choices, given their contrasting pictures of society's true character. For conservatives, society was an organic harmony, social conflict was a malady, and people were not at root improvable. In a harmonious society, progress was not needed to create order, and, if temporarily lost, order could be restored only by power, not by progress. Progress to the conservative mind, that is, was unnecessary or ineffective. For socialists, society was a fraternal harmony, distorted at present by resolvable conflict provided material inequity was removed. Radical progress for socialists, unlike gradual progress for liberals, meant a leap out of conflict into fraternity. Once arrived in fraternity, people and power would merge, removing any need to protect the one

from the other. There was a pattern here. To the hard questions about conflict among people and about tension between people and power, conservatives and socialists alike each answered in ways that lightened the burdens of containment and resolution placed on political action. Liberals, with their answers, made the burden on politics heavier.

There is no tidy answer to what made liberal answers liberal. If a satisfying, noncircular definition of "liberalism" is still wanted none is available. Looking for liberalism in semantic space or conceptual space is looking in the wrong places. Historically, liberal answers to the hard questions of politics were answers liberals gave. In addition, liberal answers and the outlook that came with them marked out clear differences with rivals on a familiar ideological map. Neither point will satisfy someone demanding the essence of liberalism or a decisive specification of the cultural kind *liberal*. The liberal outlook can, nevertheless, be seen for distinctive in a third, more helpful way.

Just as liberals would not simplify the hard questions, so they would not subordinate some guiding ideas to others, despite their inner tensions. Liberals held to all of them together, neglecting none. Whether taken as pragmatic open-mindedness or pluralism of a more theoretical kind, that second-order acceptance of tension and conflict among their own guiding ideas was itself characteristically liberal. Liberals, when being liberal, did not drop one requirement from their outlook in order to make that outlook neater to formulate or easier to follow. The liberal outlook is not a cohesive structure like the chemistry of a natural element. Some parts of the liberal outlook cohere, some conflict. Nor can the outlook be given intellectual coherence or persuasive appeal by reducing all its requirements to one overriding idea, such as liberty or equality. Liberals give their outlook coherence when pursuing its discordant aims together, and they are not acting like liberals unless they do.

Among liberalism's guiding ideas, resistance and civic respect reinforced each other. Respect and progress pulled against each other in tension. As to that first pairing, resistance and respect each bore on the proper relationship between power and people, but a relationship viewed from different sides. Resistance enjoined citizens to restrain power by law and institutions, and if that failed, by dissent. Respect enjoined power to desist from undue use of power against citizens. There was one play but two roles, rulers and ruled, each with distinct kinds of

ginal cases. Tocqueville yes, Marx no, although some have thought he was a liberal. Being or not being liberal came in degrees. Guizot and Mill were both unmistakably liberals, but Mill, who admired Guizot as a thinker and historian but not as a politician, was more liberal. Herbert Hoover was a liberal of a kind but less liberal than Franklin Roosevelt. Much had to do with who you took for allies. Business-minded liberals by the end of the nineteenth century were, as just noted, often hard to tell from business-minded conservatives. Social-minded liberals were similarly often hard to tell after 1945 from liberal-minded socialists.

If exemplars are demanded, Gladstone and Lincoln were exemplary liberals in the nineteenth century, Beveridge and Lyndon Johnson in the twentieth. Mill, Weber and Rawls were exemplary liberals among thinkers. There were also intriguing outliers and marginal cases. Among nineteenth-century politicians, Richter in Germany and Laboulaye in France were minority liberal voices in illiberal regimes. Among thinkers, neither Sartre nor Oakeshott were straightforwardly liberal. Each scorned the label. Mentioning either of them in a work on liberalism provoked dismay or charges of incomprehension from reviewers of this book's first edition. It would be odd, however, not to hear something liberal in Sartre's philosophical veneration of sovereign personhood or in Oakeshott's mocking suspicion of systems and planning.

Liberal Passions

Speeches, talk and fiction have mattered for liberalism as well as treatises. To follow liberalism's story, you need a scalpel for its ideas, but also an ear for the moral sentiments, passions and attachments that gave those ideas force. In *Anna Karenina* (1873–78), Tolstoy described "the true liberalism" of Anna's amiable, shambolic brother, Stiva Oblonsky, as being "in his blood." Oblonsky's was not the doctrinal liberalism he read about at the club in his liberal newspaper, but a deep-rooted set of moral sentiments. That temperamental liberalism, Tolstoy told us, rested on "a leniency founded on a consciousness of his own defects" and on a profound sense of human equality which "made him treat all men alike whatever their rank or official position." The American poet T. S. Eliot took a less flattering view of the liberal temperament. "He is a liberal,"

Eliot said of his friend and fellow poet Stephen Spender, "and therefore tends to intolerance and to judging others; and he tends to take an unctuously superior tone on the basis of very imperfect understanding." There are many feelings in the liberal breast.

Characteristic social sentiments and moral emotions lent strength to liberalism's guiding ideas: hatred of domination (resistance); pride or shame in your society (progress); outrage at maltreatment and exemplary wrongs (respect); zest for competitive challenges (conflict). None were liberal property. When such feelings were brought into politics, liberalism gave them a characteristic voice. Those liberal feelings had also darker counterparts. The powers that came with strength, excellence, wealth or moral splendor provoked liberal envy and resentment. Liberal zeal for progress could mask self-punishing scrupulosity towards blameless collective ills. Insistence on civic respect for people was ever open to the distortions of selective indignation. Blithe acceptance of conflict could tip to its opposite, undue fear of disorder and anxious longing for calm. Liberalism's sharper critics to left and right—Joseph de Maistre, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Maurras, and Carl Schmitt, for example—all made hay with that shadow side of liberal sentiment. Liberalism's great orators, Guizot, Lincoln, and Gladstone; liberalism's great talkers, Clemenceau and Lloyd George; and liberalism's great writers, Orwell, Camus, and even semiliberal Sartre, all understood liberal sentiments, the bright and dark ones alike. To understand liberalism, you need to keep in mind its characteristic temperament and its shifting moods.

Liberalism as a Practice

As a practice of politics, liberalism can be taken naturalistically for a norm-governed adaptation to modern historical circumstance. Like any broad human practice, liberalism has a history, practitioners and a distinctive outlook to guide them. Practices are familiar. They may be thought of as cultural kinds, whose members are open to observation and inspection much like natural kinds. Law, marriage, religion and art are examples. Politics is another. As politics is a practice, liberalism strictly is a subpractice or the practice of a practice. So are its rivals,

conservatism and socialism, each of them being ways to practice a practice. Once that is understood, it is simpler to avoid the stutter and speak of liberalism as a practice without ado. By "practitioners" is meant simply liberals, the men and women who have engaged in, voted for and thought about liberal politics. The term "practice" could be replaced by "tradition." Which one is preferable depends on the ear. If a term of art is wanted, "ideology" could replace "outlook." Talking of a liberal ideology rather than a liberal outlook is harmless so long as it is remembered that liberals *have* guiding ideas but that liberalism itself, taken as a practice or tradition stretched out in historical time, cannot *be* a set of guiding ideas, something abstract and in need of mental labor to pull to earth.

Nor, to avoid a related mistake, is liberalism a philosophy of politics. To take it for one involves a confusion of levels between politics and history on the one hand and philosophy on the other. Political liberalism has had high-order justifications for its guiding ideas in abundance: Kantian, Hegelian, Utilitarian, neo-idealist, neo-Lockian, Popperian, Rawlsian, neo-Hegelian and pragmatist. Without first identifying the liberal outlook, you cannot analyze or justify that outlook philosophically, indispensable as both tasks are to liberalism's higher self-understanding. To identify the liberal outlook without tying it to particular philosophies, you need to see how that outlook has guided liberal practice historically. The same is true of other attempts to anchor the liberal outlook in some nonpolitical discipline. Liberalism as such may, but has no need to, appeal to speculative anthropology, sociological methodology or, as the chapter on Spencer will suggest, evolutionary biology.

The Liberal Story

Part One (1830–1880) of this book recounts liberalism's arrival in political argument and ascent to government power. After a sketch of the historical setting, its first seven chapters describe the lives and thoughts of the founders of liberalism, often in contrasting pairs to dramatize a contest of ideas. Humboldt, a professor, stressed human advance through education, Constant, a social outsider, the growth of individuality in private pursuits. Against the looming power of mass society,

Tocqueville promoted voluntary association; against that of the mass market, Schulze-Delitzsch promoted economic localism and cooperatives. Chadwick worked for social progress by government action, Cobden by expansion of free markets. Smiles took personal progress for self-improvement, Channing for moral uplift, each distinct from socialist class advance or from conservative doubt that people deeply change at all. Mill made a philosophic attempt to square liberal respect for people with social progress understood as expansion of the general good. Lincoln and Gladstone, great users and expanders of government, exemplified liberal ideas in office.

Part Two (1880–1945) describes liberalism in command together with its successes and failures as it compromised with democracy. Liberalism in this period went a long way to meeting its aims and honoring its ideals. It also survived, barely, calamities of its own making. Constitutionally, state power was segmented and controlled even as the reach of government grew. Chapters on Walras, Marshall and the business press illustrate how states were resisted on behalf of markets. The power of the market was tempered by the beginnings of a welfare state, as the parallel careers of the "social" liberals, Hobhouse, Naumann, Croly, and Bourgeois, will show.

Liberalism (1880–1945) made peace with democracy. From that historic compromise emerged the practice of liberalism known as liberal democracy. The grand bargain between liberalism and democracy involved political choice, economic power and ethical authority. In each area liberals abandoned whatever monopoly hopes they may once have entertained as a rising elite of educated, propertied men intent on supplanting previous régimes. Liberals accepted popular sovereignty across those three domains. In return, popular forces accepted liberal rules of procedure, protections of property and respect for personal choice. The compromise was neither smooth nor automatic, but grudging and hard fought. Least of all was it historically inevitable or conceptually necessary. Liberal democracy is contingent and reversible.

In the decades after 1880s under pressure of class conflict, governments enacted sweeping social reforms and gave the state new tasks, welcomed by most liberals as an application of liberal principle to new circumstance, though resisted by an unconvinced minority as an abandonment of liberal principle. Education and cultural progress did not,

first of all, eradicate prejudice and intolerance or create reasonable, dispassionate citizens as reliably as liberals had hoped. Aggressive nationalism, jingo imperialism, anti-Catholicism, white racism, anti-Semitism and other exclusionary hatreds proved winning vote-getters, to which liberal elites often responded opportunistically when not offering active encouragement. The varied early twentieth-century careers of Bouglé, Alain, Baldwin and Brandeis illustrate the challenges of embedding civic respect for all and protecting unorthodoxy and diversity against society's pressures, challenges not met until the human rights and civil rights movements after 1945.

Trade and economic interdependence, secondly, did not ensure peace and amity. They brought a rivalry of liberal imperialisms, illustrated by the parallel careers of Joseph Chamberlain and Ernst Bassermann. In 1914 came an unexpected and bewildering world war that many took to mark liberalism's end. That war introduced two new political types that came to prominence in the twentieth century, the liberal hawk defending liberal values by military strength, and the liberal internationalist, promoting multilateral negotiation and peaceful cooperation among competing nations. Nor, lastly, during the decade-long slump of the 1930s could liberals convincingly persist in the laissez-faire doctrine that when markets capsized, they righted themselves. Their after-runners have made of them warring prophets, but as the chapter on them makes clear, Keynes, Fisher, and Hayek were all aiming to save capitalism.

Part Three (1945–1989) describes liberalism's restabilization and success. Liberal democracy survived economic collapse, world war and moral ruin to enjoy a second chance after 1945. The liberal world took that chance, and succeeded beyond expectation. The story opens with human rights, liberal democracy restored in full to Germany and the expansion of the liberal welfare state. Representative liberal thinkers of the 1950s–80s occupy the next five chapters, followed by the turn of liberal economists against the state. Three politicians each from the liberal left and the liberal right close the years 1945–89.

Were 1989 the end, the narrative arc would be simple: liberalism is up, it's down, it's up. The liberals of 1830–80 drew the blueprint. The liberals of 1880–1945 built the house and then almost burned it down. Liberals took their second chance in 1945 and by 1989 liberalism was the pride of the neighborhood. That was then.

1

Historical Setting in the 1830s

Thrown into a World of Ceaseless Change

On April 12, 1835, Wilhelm von Humboldt—diplomat, linguist, advocate of universal education, and liberal pioneer—was buried beside his wife, Caroline, in a small plot overlooked by a statue of Hope in the park of their estate on the northwestern edge of Berlin. Through the oak trees lies Tegelsee, one of many lakes that give the city its sparkling light. A short walk away stands the family's elegant villa, rebuilt to a neoclassical design by Prussia's leading architect of the day, Karl-Friedrich Schinkel. The calm and seclusion give little clue that Humboldt lived in a world turned upside down. He was born into a Prussian noble family in 1767 before liberalism was dreamed of. By the time he died, revolutions in the Americas, the Dutch Republic, and France had shaken the Atlantic world and liberalism was on its way to becoming what it is today, a common practice of politics for market societies in perpetual motion.

At the time of Humboldt's birth in the court and barracks town of Potsdam to the southwest of the city, an enlightened warrior king, Frederick the Great, ruled Prussia, the American colonies were British, and the Bourbon monarchy ruled, or attempted to rule, France. Most Europeans lived and worked on the land near where they were born, dying as a rule before they were forty. Most could not read or write. In Britain four in ten men and seven in ten women could not sign their names at marriage. Urbanization, like industry, lay in the future. In the German Ruhr Valley, Düsseldorf was a tiny town and Essen little more than a village. London, Bristol, and a few small cities aside, England was a place of countryside and market towns. In a flash of scientific imagination,

James Watt had grasped how an efficient piston might work, but a reliable steam engine had yet to be perfected and harnessed in industry. To satisfy a flourishing new social type, the middle-class shopper, Europe relied on trade and on slaves sold by Africans for work in New World colonies. Enlightenment thought thrived on hopes for human betterment but also on sugar, coffee, and tobacco.

Law and custom commonly limited where you could work or live, what associations you could form with like-minded friends or fellow workers, and what moneymaking enterprises you could start. Serfdom of a kind, tying laborers to their villages, survived in rural Prussia. Close to a quarter of Britain's two million American subjects were slaves or indentured servants working payless for a fixed term in return for their Atlantic passage and keep. Non-Anglicans could not teach in British schools or universities, nor marry legally without a vicar's dispensation. Catholics could not vote or sit in parliament. Jews in Britain, France, and Prussia lived on sufferance, without political or civil rights. Protections of speech and press were precarious. Prior censorship, where it existed, was spotty and haphazard, but the threat of reprisal was enough to make people think twice before speaking their minds. Punishments were frequently cruel and spectacular, especially if you were poor, defied power, or flouted orthodox opinion.

Such was the old world of Humboldt's birth in 1767. It was not as stunted or backward as critics made out. The world of Humboldt's birth was above all not fixed or frozen, but a world in movement. After centuries of creeping up and falling back, Europe's populations were exploding with growth. Pressure was on to find new ways to feed and provide for more people. The term would not be heard for another eighty years or so, but the first shoots of industrial capitalism—investing in productive machinery for private profit—were already visible. Pressure was also on to find new ways to do what wise and effective rulers had always done: listen to the people.

For voices were being raised against ills and encumbrances of the old world: against absolute and arbitrary monarchs, against backwardness, neglect, and illiteracy, against slavery and intolerance, against not being able to say and print what you wanted or make money as you pleased, against not having a voice. Established ethical authorities and accepted models of conduct, once as pervasive and weightless-seeming as air, felt

suddenly burdensome and had to explain themselves. To practices and conditions previously taken for natural or irremovable there were, many now insisted, alternatives. There was, though, no one party of change, no one focus of opposition, no one vehicle of progress. There were in particular no liberals. In Humboldt's youth the word "liberal" meant generous, open-handed, or perhaps lenient to a fault. The phrase "a liberal" was a grammatical mistake and the term "liberalism" would have met blank stares. By the time of Humboldt's death, in a world transformed, a new approach to politics was emerging to welcome and, it was hoped, to channel breathtaking change.

Humboldt was too young and distant to witness the first great upheaval of his life, the American Revolution, when Britain's fractious New World colonies won a war of independence in 1783, imposed a disputed constitution on themselves and founded a divided, experimental new republic, the United States. For the lasting aftershocks of another upheaval, the French Revolution, Humboldt was present in person as a high official, diplomat, and liberal dissident in an enlightened but autocratic Prussian government.

In the summer of 1789 young Humboldt was on a European tour with his old tutor when news reached them of revolution in France. They rushed to Paris, and three weeks after its fall visited the Bastille, which workmen were beginning to demolish. The "grave of despotism," as the tutor solemnly put it, impressed them both, but the idea of revolution did not sweep young Humboldt away. He asked himself what revolution would do for the sick and poor of the city, whose condition appalled him. Nobody knew what lay ahead. In Paris, as on the rest of the trip, Humboldt mostly saw sights and visited brothels, carefully noting what he spent there in his day book.

Humboldt welcomed what he took for revolution's higher aims: an end to arbitrary rule and a historic release of human capacities; but he thought the means, rewriting society's ground rules, were sure to fail. Foreign invasion, civil war, counterinvasion, and state-led terror—against foes of revolution rich or poor and soon against any who murmured a word against terror—seemed to confirm Humboldt's worst fears. They left him also with a historic challenge. Revolution and war had shattered Europe's old political order. Humboldt's generation and those that followed faced a long search for a new one.

The French declared a republic, executed their Bourbon king for treason, won and lost again control of most of Europe under a corporal-turned-emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte, lived through fifteen years of reaction after his defeat in 1815, and then shook Europe a second time by throwing out a restored Bourbon monarchy in 1830. The British and Germans caught the mood. In November, the liberal Whigs replaced the conservative Tories in power after almost half a century in opposition, and an era of economic, social, and political reform began at Westminster. In the German lands—the nation was unified only in 1871—absolute princes, whether despotic or enlightened, faced demands for civil liberties, constitutional rule, and representative government. Everywhere the brutalities and excesses of the old order began to pass. In the United States a wave of campaigning improvement, both political and moral, swept the fractious new republic. It took in many causes—temperance, women's rights, and slavery, the most divisive of all—but animating each of those causes was a fervent, often religious, conviction that American life on earth should be less wild, more orderly, and more reformed.

In Europe half a century of conservative attempts to sit on change, to maintain or restore the old order, was ending. Restrictions on speech, press, travel, residency, association, trade, commerce, and the public practice of religion came under challenge and were in many places lifted. In the new American republic, restrictions of like kind rejected in the federal constitution but surviving in state law or custom were by now also disappearing. It was a motley of causes pressed by clashing voices with rival interests and conflicting priorities. The word meant different things in different mouths. But a flag of convenience that swept up many of those separate causes was the banner term "liberty." A vast and loose party of movement began to form. Its followers started to call themselves liberals.

In 1835, the year Humboldt died, Germany's first steam train, the *Adler*, puffed up a section of line from Nuremberg to Fürth. That same year French navvies began laying railway track from Paris to the Atlantic port of Le Havre. Samuel Morse devised a code to shorten messages on the newly invented electric telegraph, and Samuel Colt took out a patent for his revolver. The German chemist Justus Liebig synthesized a precursor for the artificial material known as plastic, which before

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Guiding Thoughts from Founding Thinkers

Conflict, Resistance, Progress, and Respect

i. Humboldt and Constant: Releasing People's Capacities and Respecting Their Privacy

It is tempting to wonder how Humboldt would have responded to this new world had he lived on like his younger brother, the explorer and naturalist Alexander, into the 1850s. Though some have taken Humboldt for an open-minded but conservative friend of the old world, he voiced a conviction that runs like an arrow through nineteenth-century liberal thought. His leading idea—dashed off in a youthful essay, *The Limits of the Effectiveness of the State* (1792), but published in full only after his death—had a head and a tail, a positive and a negative part: developing human capacities to the full in their diversity and individuality was an urgent task, but a task for which laws, government, and regulation were generally inept.

For anyone who did not get past his essay's title, it was easy to miss what Humboldt was saying. He was not thinking so much of government intervention in markets as of how state and society, which were not distinct in his mind, could stifle the true end of human life: finding and making full use of your talents in your own way. Humboldt certainly took a narrow view of the state's capacities. It had a job, he wrote, to defend people ("negative welfare") but not to support them ("positive welfare"). The state's holding property was a poor idea, as it was virtually bound to end up owning too much, and there was no future in levying sales taxes, which cost almost as much as they brought in. To pay for tasks the state could and should carry out, defense and justice, it might

on the other hand tax income. It should not try to improve morals and should leave private conscience alone, for Humboldt believed everyone should be able to follow whatever religion they chose, or none. Humboldt was open-minded about constitutions. Different ones suited different places. The key everywhere was to have a constitution with "the least possible positive or special influence on the character of the citizens." His friend and contemporary Benjamin Constant (1767–1830) echoed and amplified the protective, negative aspect of Humboldt's leading idea. In *Principles of Politics* (1815) Constant wrote, "There is a part of human existence that remains of necessity individual and independent, and which lies by right utterly beyond the range of society."

Clustered here in celebration of people's independence are thoughts that lie at the liberal core. The first is that everybody—but especially those with power—must respect the deep-held aims and beliefs of others and not intrude on them by imposing purposes and ideals people have not chosen for themselves. The second thought is that people have within them an open-ended capacity for betterment and reform: to grow, to improve, to progress, with help or direction from others if need be. Constant, a more laid-back and permissive spirit, stressed more the first, nonintrusive thought. Humboldt, a born teacher, stressed the second, more educative thought. Though both men saw unique worth in people, Constant thought of that worth as something private that modern people now had ever more means to defend from intrusion; Humboldt saw it as a germ of potential to be cultivated and encouraged to grow. In theory both convictions—respect for personal privacy and zeal for human progress—sped together in parallel. In practice, they often got in each other's way, as liberals soon had to confront. Hardly a topic in nineteenth-century liberal thinking about politics did not turn in some way on the intrusive business of improving people's capacity to choose the aims of life well for themselves—on education that is, thought of in the broadest terms.

Both men were outsiders among insiders, Humboldt by temperament, Constant by temperament but also birth. Constant the man together with his defense of liberal privacy will appear in turn. We need to see first how, on turning from diplomacy to education, Humboldt put his ideals about nurturing human potential into practice.

After Prussia's capitulation to Napoleon's armies in 1806, Humboldt lost his post as envoy to the Holy See and soon left Rome, where for six years he had happily drunk in and written about the classical past. On return to chilly Berlin, he took charge of the section in the Interior Ministry that set up Europe's first full system of centrally administered state schools and founded a university teaching the nontechnical subjects of humanities and law. A strange step, you might think, for a pioneer liberal who insisted that the state was a "body of laws, not a school." Humboldt saw no conflict, for what mattered to him was the kind of school a state provided. Education that imposed purposes and limited choices should be discouraged, he believed, particularly if they were a state's purposes or those of its elites. With that in mind Humboldt tried, without success, to close Prussia's military academies and schools reserved for nobles. He opposed also vocational schools that taught chiefly crafts and trades. The trouble with them all in Humboldt's mind was that such schools aimed at a final product: soldier, state official, artisan. They narrowed life's choices. They put or kept people in boxes. He favored by contrast an open, nonimposing "liberal" education, rich in Greek and Latin, of the whole man, whatever he might turn out to be—women were not as yet part of the liberal story.

The ideal was not easy to realize. Humboldt was in his education post less than two years. Prussia's state schools were quickly stratified in content and selection on class lines. The elites read Homer and Virgil. The poor did craft work. Liberals like Cobden visiting in the 1830s from backward Britain were nevertheless struck with admiration all the same that Prussia, unlike Britain, had state schools at all.

Shining as it was, the ideal of humane well-roundedness left liberalism with an open question. Was it that pursuing many aims and interests without overspecialization was good for each of us? Or that a society with "diversity of stations" was healthier and more creative? Many-sidedness in people and social diversity were distinct. Generalists might lead richer lives but contribute little to society. The division of labor enriched society but narrowed people's lives. Questions of whom "individuality" benefited—people one by one or society as a whole?—passed down to an admirer, John Stuart Mill, who cited Humboldt with enthusiasm in his essay *On Liberty* (1859). Later in the democratic times

of the 1880s to 1940s, "new liberals" raised a different question about people's capacity for personal growth along lines they chose for themselves. What did it serve, they asked, to celebrate that capacity unless everyone had the means—the health, time, space, and money—to exploit it?

Humboldt returned to diplomacy as second to the Prussian chancellor Karl-August Hardenberg in the peace talks of 1813–15 in Paris and Vienna that ended the Napoleonic Wars, but as helpmate and companion to his near-deaf superior more than as active participant with a say of his own. Humboldt had hoped for a loose confederation of self-governing German lands each with a representative constitution suiting its character and place. His arguments against princely absolutism immediately went nowhere. The powers at the Congress were after peace and stability among Europe's nations, not liberal change within them. When in 1819 the Prussian authorities followed those of Austria in suppressing the press and arresting radicals, Humboldt objected, the king sacked him, and he left public service for good.

In likenesses of him, young or old, Humboldt stares out at us through large eyes with a look of unreadable detachment. Letters to his many women friends brim with warm abstractions or passionate anxieties but few particulars. It was somehow typical that, hard as he argued for the emancipation of Prussia's Jews, he had almost no Jewish friends. In the closed circle of Prussian public life, Humboldt was arrogant and shy, too lofty for intrigue and too impatient for maneuver. Perhaps nobody was less suited to understand the rough-and-tumble of commerce that was transforming his country and its elites. Rather than ask, he waited to be given. When no offers came, he made sudden unmeetable demands and was surprised when his superiors or his friend, the king, turned him down. After the final rebuff, Humboldt retired to his estate at Tegel, where he added to his large collection of classical sculpture, widened an already astonishing range of tongues including Basque and Javanese, and elaborated his remarkably modern picture of human language as tightly rule-governed but open and endlessly fertile. Unbounded creativity within dependable order was not far from Humboldt's beguiling but strikingly detail-free picture of an ideal liberal society. His claim to rank among pioneer liberals lies in his insistence on the need for finding and releasing the unique potential in each of us.

Humboldt's belief in the human capacity for growth was sunlit, philhellene, and in the air among German writers of the day, including Goethe and Schiller, who knew Humboldt and admired his learning. His confidence spoke of a class and a time. Benjamin Constant's insistence on personal independence came from his own fluid personality, from his Protestant faith, and from observation of modern life. He was a lifelong gambler, weathervane in party politics, and restless seducer of other men's wives. His foibles and absurdities gave opponents ample ammunition for mockery: ridiculous duels, interminable court cases, groveling to the Laffittes and to the king to pay his gaming debts. "The Weathervane," a satirical song of 1815, taunted Constant for spinning round in his attitudes to Napoleon, first foe, then ally, then foe again on the French emperor's final defeat at Waterloo. Late in 1830 Louis Philippe, France's "citizen king" in the July Monarchy (1830–48), named the dying Constant to the Conseil d'Etat in return for support in France's liberal revolution earlier that year. Constant, the story goes, took the opportunity to touch the new king for a draft to pay his gambling debts, adding that he would still have to be among the first to criticize if the sovereign erred. "Just so, just so," Louis Philippe murmured indulgently as he waved for Constant's money.

Constant was born in Swiss Lausanne to a family of French Huguenot origin. His mother died soon after his birth. His father, a colonel in the Dutch service, spent much of Benjamin's youth trying to clear himself of responsibility in the death of a soldier under his command during an off-duty fracas. By background, Constant was oddly like the silent opponent he often found himself arguing with in his writing, another motherless boy with a weak but affectionate father from nearby Geneva who turned himself into a Frenchman, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Both were clever young men, both Protestant outsiders who adopted a Catholic country. Neither was conventionally religious, but both took faith, in a large sense, as vital for humankind and necessary for society. Both brimmed with erudition without being scholars, although unlike the self-taught, polymathic Rousseau, Constant had a lengthy formal education. At Oxford he learned English, at Erlangen drinking and gaming, and at Edinburgh a lesson of the Scottish Enlightenment to pay close attention to the human content of moral ideas and the historical context of political arrangements.

after much shoving, that everyone enjoyed the common rights and privileges that came with human personhood. Constant was saying something less ambitious and more limited: because of how society was changing, old forms of interference with people's interests and beliefs were ceasing to be practical or effective.

About progress, Constant sounded blithe. In the new society that was emerging, progress could be counted on for several reasons. Unless interfered with, the benefits of progress were likely to flow easily and naturally. Society did not greatly need reform, for it was reforming itself. The big obstacles to progress, to Constant's mind, were attempts to stop it or channel it in chosen directions. To take particulars, experience suggested that human knowledge and intellectual vitality increased unless interference got in their way. Dogmatic ways of thought were vanishing as people turned away from authorities in spiritual and moral matters. Warfare and its cousins, despotism and empire building, were out of keeping with the commercial spirit of the times. Destructive and oppressive forms of life would diminish as people turned to making, buying, and selling.

The thought that more trade might encourage war or that large movement of peoples and contact with foreigners, far from creating amity, could provoke hostile passions gave Constant little pause. The next century and a half would make liberal faith in the reliability of progress look overtrusting. In his enthusiasm, Constant tended to talk of progress as automatic and self-driven. By writing as if modern society were now likely to generate prosperity and peace on its own, as if disagreement and competition could now be counted on to yield fruitful results, Constant voiced what became a liberal fault: underplaying how much people had to do to bring the boons of progress about, and how easily they might slip away unless worked for.

In thinking about how to restrain power, Constant also started from how society was changing. Societies were growing more complex. People were less directly in touch with each other. Lines of supply between buyers and producers were lengthening. Government's reach was widening, but from ever further away. Trying to hold back such changes was pointless, Constant thought. The thing was to find apt ways to resist power in the new context. What could surely no longer restrain power was direct democracy. Far-flung, mass society was putting that ancient

ideal beyond reach. Constant was here arguing with that inner opponent of his, Rousseau.

Rousseau's picture of small republics where citizens took personal part in the conduct of their common life in a way appealed to liberals. In theory, a direct say in affairs with fellow citizens was an attractive defense against outside domination and tyrannical rule. Under the label "republican," that ideal of active citizenship among equals without a single domineering power had defenders in Machiavelli in the sixteenth century, English radicals in the seventeenth century, and Jeffersonians in late eighteenth-century America.

Constant's conviction that modern society had put the ideal out of reach was clearest in his essay *Liberty Ancient and Modern* (1819). By ancient liberty Constant meant the direct say in government that everyone in a Greek city-state was believed to have had. Theirs, Constant suggested, was the liberty to take part and not to be imposed on without taking part. Modern liberty in contrast was protection from unwanted interference by state or society. Each kind of liberty had advantages and disadvantages: a direct say but little personal leeway under ancient liberty, or little direct say but a lot of leeway under modern liberty. Representative democracy rested on an implicit bargain: citizens gave up direct powers over their lives; the state compensated them by letting them alone. Was it a good trade? Here again, politics on Constant's story tracked society. Modern people, he was saying, wanted privacy more than they wanted a direct say in public life. Those were now facts of social life that liberal politics should take account of. Constant saw risks, without having clear remedies, in too much disengagement from public life, an idea that struck deep with a fellow liberal who developed it more fully—Tocqueville.

Constant was not blithe about power. Another of his fertile suggestions tossed out for later liberals to exploit recalled the old wisdom that despotism had no dates and came in many guises. Tyrannous power, Constant held, took various forms and could occur in any age. Society could be counted on to improve, Constant believed, but the risk of overweening power would remain. Progress, in other words, could not be counted on to exclude undue power. Constant left it to a historian and fellow politician, François Guizot, to build on his thoughts about power and to draw a lesson for liberals: the job of resisting it never ends.

Constant's works were out of fashion by the end of the nineteenth century. John Stuart Mill, a keen observer of French politics, admired Constant as a defender of the press and a true liberal among "intriguers." In a newspaper obituary in 1830, Mill called Constant's death a "misfortune for the world." Constant's objections to autocracy passed down to later French liberals in the economically liberal but politically despotic Second Empire, such as Jules Simon and Edouard Laboulaye, who republished Constant's lectures on politics. Constant was less read in the Third Republic, not only because of his eighteenth-century tone and inattention to economics but because his ideas about undue power, a free press, and personal privacy were by then widely absorbed into the French liberal outlook. When Constant's writings were re-edited and republished in the 1980s, he joined François Guizot, Aléxis de Tocqueville, and Mill in the modern canon of liberal founders.

Neither Constant nor Humboldt were democrats in an electoral sense or friends of the worker. Humboldt's liberalism was that of an elite expecting to govern without serious interference from below. Constant opposed privilege and favored a society open to talent. He thought people, ethically speaking, should go their own way. He believed neither in strict equality at the ballot box nor in industrial democracy. The world of Humboldt and Constant was changing in ways neither fully grasped. Politically, people without Humboldt's background or Constant's connections wanted a say in government. Economically, class struggle had begun between bosses and workers. Liberals who came after Humboldt and Constant faced fresh lessons. They learned that civic respect for people might have to apply to everyone "whoever they were" in a new and unrestricted way—that is, democratically.

In the same month that Humboldt died, April 1835, a mass trial got under way in Paris of *canuts*, silk workers from Lyon, and their supporters. The workers had occupied their factories the previous year in protest against low wages and bad conditions. France's liberal minister of the interior, Adolphe Thiers, had sent troops to dislodge them at the mill owners' behest. Workers who survived the slaughter went for trial, and most were deported or given heavy prison terms. In their search for order, conflict between capital and labor was to preoccupy liberals for the rest of the century and beyond. The long-lived Thiers would be remembered on the French left both for Lyon in 1834 and as the man who

ordered the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune of 1871, leaving a picture, and not only in French minds, of the typical liberal as given to kindness when convenient and butchery when necessary.

ii. Guizot: Taming Conflict without Arbitrary Power

If Thiers was the most hated liberal of nineteenth-century France, François Guizot (1787–1874) was probably the most despised. A professor of history turned politician, he was the brains of the July Monarchy, the liberal interlude between Bourbon reaction and the autocratic rule of Louis Napoleon (1848–70). When in February 1848 the July Monarchy ended in débâcle, Guizot became a scapegoat for its failures. His career was over and his reputation vanished. A dim figure though he may be to British and American readers, Guizot takes first rank in the liberal story. In his day, Guizot was among the acclaimed liberals of Europe. Young Tocqueville attended his Sorbonne lectures in the early 1820s, taking copious notes. John Stuart Mill wrote in 1840 that Guizot "now stands before the world as immeasurably the greatest public man living." Mill changed his mind not long after about Guizot the politician, disappointed as were many fellow liberals by Guizot's "low tricks" and illiberal conduct in office. For Guizot the historian and thinker, Mill never lost esteem, and it is not hard to see why.

Guizot spelled out for liberal minds the enduring threat of unchecked power and the urgency of preventing any one class, faith, or interest from dominating society. His grasp of both ideas was historical and dynamic. Power was subtle, was fluid, and returned in ever fresh forms. Politics was about forever finding new points of balance among conflicting interests. Guizot wrote against the background of the French Revolution that had torn his country and much of Europe apart. He grasped that societies were not harmonious, but riven by conflict. He grasped it with a vividness of earlier thinkers such as Bodin and Hobbes, shaken by religious discord and civil war in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Guizot grasped it with a strength that the young Marx admired and that more complacent liberals were later in danger of losing. Guizot's answer to conflict and disorder, though, was not power, as it had been for Bodin and Hobbes and as it was soon to become within

the Marxist canon. Power for Guizot was the problem, especially when supreme or unchecked. Restraining power was for Guizot the first task of politics.

Guizot's overarching conviction was, as he put it, "the radical illegitimacy of all absolute power." Government was stablest and left people most alone, Guizot thought, when power was not held in single hands and when rulers, wise or foolish, had to listen to those they ruled whether they wanted to or not. Absolute power by contrast was concentrated and had only to listen to itself. The term "absolute" was a legalism and historical term of art, but what Guizot had in mind was familiar enough to everyone as despotism or tyranny. Such unchecked power could be, and often was, arbitrary, unresponsive, and oppressive. The trouble was not what power chose to do but what power was capable of doing. Absolute power could, as its defenders argued, be enlightened, beneficial, and benign. To liberals that was not enough. Absolute power could also change its mind when it wanted. It could turn harmful and malign. Intentions changed. Capacities lasted. Power was not to be trusted.

To support his thoughts about the differences between good government and tyranny, Guizot plunged as a historian deep into Europe's past. In tracing his lessons to obscure or possibly mythical early forms of representative government in the Lombard councils and the Saxon Witenagemot, Guizot had a double purpose. To his French hearers he was recommending reconciliation in a nation divided into supporters and opponents of the French Revolution. Like most early French liberals, Guizot saw good in the revolution as well as bad. He appealed accordingly to both sides. To the forces of reaction, with their veneration for the past, Guizot sought to show that divided power and representative government had their place in French tradition. To the forces of progress, he hoped to recover history for use by liberals in the cause of constitutional government and reform.

Guizot's other lesson about power applied broadly and was not limited to France. The historian's time in the archives had confirmed Constant's thought that despotism could occur in any age and took no single constitutional form. It could arise, as the ancients had known, from the rule of the one, the few, or the many. Classifying governments as monarchies, oligarchies, or democracies was proper but superficial. Each

under a monarch who reigned but did not rule. They believed in divided control, speaking back to power and party competition. They took politics, in other words, for a contest. They did not believe that people en masse were capable of taking part in that contest.

Such views were reflected in the *doctrinaire* understanding of the French Revolution as "good" until Robespierre and the Terror turned it "bad." Against the Ultras of 1815–30, the liberals argued historically. French society had moved on and the *ancien régime* was not reimposable. The revolution of 1789 had brought palpable gains liberals wished to hold on to. A uniform, well-administered rule of law now favored private property and commerce, two prerequisites of social order and economic progress. The spread of land ownership with the revolutionary sale of church and noble estates had not created a property-owning democracy of twenty million as the liberal historian Jules Michelet enthusiastically claimed in his *History of the French Revolution* (1847–54). It had entrenched a social pillar of nineteenth-century rural France, the rich "peasantry." The "good" revolution had also embraced Enlightenment ideals of religious toleration, civil liberties, and free speech, which the old regime had taken cautious steps toward and which the extremes of revolution and counterrevolution had then ignored or thrown away. Such was the common understanding of the 1789 revolution that passed from French liberals to liberals generally.

When during the late 1820s Bourbon Ultras appeared to threaten those gains of the "good" revolution, France's liberal opposition recovered its nerve. In 1830 its moment came. Rather than listen, an obdurate king rashly dissolved the legislative chamber. The liberal press, led by Thiers at *Le National*, stormed in protest. The common people of Paris took to the streets and persuaded troops to fraternize, an episode fixed in our imaginations and vocabularies by Eugène Delacroix's painting *Liberty Leading the People*. Once the streets were safe, Guizot and his allies swept the king and the Ultras out and put on the throne the Orleanist claimant, Louis Philippe, son of the man who had voted in 1793 for the execution of his cousin, Louis XVI.

France's "glorious three days" in July 1830 shook Britain and Germany. In November, Britain's opposition Whigs—the loose coalition of enlightened landowners and city radicals that eventually fed into the modern Liberal Party—took office in Westminster alone for the first time in

almost half a century. Across the German lands calls were heard to replace the unchecked power of kings and princes with constitutional rule and representative government. A liberal phase in Europe had opened, with France and Guizot in the lead.

There was not the least aura of majesty to the July Monarchy. Daumier depicted Louis Philippe, barely a year on the throne, as an inert, cavern-mouthed Gargantua swallowing bribes by the sackful. Guizot, Thiers, and other liberals took charge of the ministries. To Karl Marx, graduated from Berlin and author with his friend Friedrich Engels of *The Communist Manifesto*, the *doctrinaire* professors and liberal newspaper editors were a front for the true power: money. Writing after the regime's fall in 1848, Marx described the July Monarchy as "a joint-stock company for the exploitation of France's national wealth."

The July Monarchy brought France food shortages, corruption, and repression. It also brought greater press freedom, state schools for boys, and growing, but uneven, prosperity. The 1848 revolution that did for Guizot mattered more politically than socially or economically, burning out almost before it began. By the summer of that year, the radicals were dashed. Economic progress and social order returned, though it was not a liberal order. A second Napoleon established himself as an elected despot. As did Chancellor Bismarck later in Germany in the 1860s to 1880s, the new Napoleon squeezed liberals politically by meeting liberal goals in an illiberal way.

Restless in English exile, Guizot turned down an offer of a professorship at Oxford and returned to France in 1849. Where other liberals succeeded, Guizot tried but failed to re-enter parliament. Not only did he carry the blame for the fiasco of the July Monarchy's collapse, he had in office betrayed his highest liberal ideals. He had muzzled the press and barred Michelet from public lecturing—as in the 1820s the Ultras had stopped Guizot. Perhaps most damagingly of all, Guizot had given foes to left and right cause to think him un-French. A devout and lifelong Protestant who prayed every morning, he was neither anticlerical nor atheistical in the manner of an eighteenth-century *philosophe*, and saw no clash between Christian faith and liberal ideals. Not only did the cosmopolitan Guizot speak the main European languages with ease. Foes attacked him when foreign minister for being soft on Britain and mockingly referred to him as "Lord Guizot," deaf to his liberal conviction that

conciliation with a former enemy in the cause of trade was better than armed rivalry. Guizot never lived down the charge from the republican and pro-Napoleonic left that—when visiting Louis XVIII in 1815 at Ghent, avowedly to plead for a constitution—he had betrayed military secrets to France's enemies. He began a long retirement, wrote his memoirs, and sank, politically, into oblivion. Resisting the authoritarian rule of a seductive second Napoleon fell to a new generation of French liberals.

Guizot in truth loved France with passion, and he expressed that love in a way that had lessons for later liberals, foreign as well as French. Guizot did not deny national attachments or try to wash them out with universal principle. Rather he hoped to encourage a sense of the French nation that did not rest only on foreign glory, exclusion of others, or military prowess. As minister of education in 1833 he supervised the central reforms that set up state schools for boys in every French commune, training schools for teachers in every department, and the beginnings of a national curriculum. On the rough benches of their schools, French boys began to learn that they were French, not least by learning to speak French. Second, Guizot created in 1830 an inspectorate for identifying and preserving historical sites and national monuments. The phrase did not take wing for another century and a half, but Guizot was one of the first and most dedicated champions of France's *lieux de mémoire*—sites of memory or places where people could begin to think of themselves as sharing a common past and hence to some degree a common present.

Guizot's place in liberal thought rests on his ideas about resistance to absolute or undivided power. He gave them clear expression in the sixth and eighth of his *Lectures on Representative Government* given in Paris in 1820–22. Guizot started those lectures when the reactionary government of Count Villèle snuffed out hopes of constitutional change. His lectures were stopped and he was fired from the Conseil d'Etat. When allowed again to lecture in 1828, Guizot resumed, "You may recall that six years ago we were saying . . ." and the cheers rang.

The tasks of containing power, Guizot argued, flowed from what was known about power from experience. Unlimited power tended to perpetuate itself. Few or none who claimed to rule by right had shared their powers. Whatever was insisted otherwise, sovereignty belonged by right

to none. Nobody was capable of its unlimited exercise, neither kings nor citizens. "Sovereignty belongs as a right to no one person whatever," he wrote, "since the perfect and continued apprehension, the fixed and inviolable application of justice and of reason, do not belong to our imperfect nature." Neither singly nor together did what we happen to want at any given moment underpin just decisions or proper choices. Guizot was here attacking the weakness of left and right alike for believing in final says. He was rejecting the idea, dear for example to Rousseau, that we were in command of ourselves and could not be countermanded. No, Guizot believed, reason and right were in charge, not our wishes. Ideally, people's wishes would be coherent and proper. But people were not ideal, and politics had to work with people as they were. At the same time, Guizot was attacking Legitimists who clung to the doctrine of the absolute right of kings. The very idea of sovereignty as the exercise of supreme power had to be abandoned in Guizot's view. The only sovereigns in politics were law, justice, and reason. The consequences were momentous. All exercise of power had to be shared. Governments had to be removable in elections. The press had to be unrestricted and political meetings freely permitted.

For Guizot that last requirement mattered most. Power needed to be talked back to, to be asked "Why?" and to be made to give answers. Without scrutiny and criticism, the division of powers and the sanction of intermittent elections might prove inadequate checks on power. For law could underpin tyranny and voters might elect despots. Guizot's idea was that nobody should count on power to follow rules by itself. Power needed another voice. Being talked back to was for Guizot as necessary to the responsible power as it was to the exercise of reason itself. The contrast with absolute power was clear. Those with absolute power might find it wise or expedient to listen to those it ruled or explain to them its conduct, but they were not under any necessity. If it so chose, absolute power might be opaque, when power ought to be transparent; mystical, when power ought to be accessible; irrational, when power was obliged to give reasons. The practical upshot lay less in institutions or laws than in forceful, unending argument. Guizot thought of mentalities first, institutions second. Though Guizot the politician disregarded his belief in public argument when in office, Guizot the thinker tirelessly repeated that the sharpest weapons of resistance to

power were a critical press and public meetings allowing for unlimited debate.

In Guizot's strictures against absolute power we clearly see the first difference between liberals and their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century rivals, conservatives and socialists. To schematize, conservatives revered traditional or established power. Authority was to be obeyed and orders followed without question. To the conservative mind, the very idea of limited power or divided sovereignty involved a confusion. For sovereignty was no more or less than supreme power of command without having to answer "why."

Socialists were different. Like conservatives, they revered absolute power and recognized sovereignty as supreme power. Unlike conservatives, they located absolute power not in dynasty or tradition but in the people. The people's voice was supreme and final. Here and in what follows, "socialist" is a cover-all term for the antiliberal left including latter-day Jacobins and populist republicans as well as collectivist followers of Fourier or Marx. Whatever particular line they took, socialists had no good answer as to who was to intuit or channel popular power. So liberals at any rate insisted. Their complaint generalized in democratic times to include populists of the right as well as the left. To the liberal mind, nobody claiming to intuit the popular will or to speak for "the people" was to be trusted.

As a liberal, Guizot disagreed about power with both conservatives and socialists. Whereas conservatives rejected, Guizot accepted the power of the people, albeit understood in a subtly negative way. Whereas socialists made the power of the people absolute and conclusive, Guizot thought of popular power as essentially dispersed and provisional. The people, on Guizot's view, should not have the final say. For nobody should. Guizot knew perfectly well that decisions had to be taken. Rather, he was saying that public argument about decisions should never stop.

Guizot's theory of popular sovereignty resembled that of James Madison, the American constitutionalist, in being at root negative. Popular sovereignty for Guizot was in effect the nonsovereignty of any one section, class, faith, or interest. None should dominate or have the last word. Nobody should claim to speak for all, just as no one reason should end a public argument. The power of the people, like public reason itself,

that it was endless or inevitable. It disagreed with liberals also about how many sides were involved. For liberals, conflict involved many, many sides and many, many matters. Conflict's subject matter, in a sense, was unbounded. To socialists, conflict involved only two sides, rich and poor, and one topic, material inequity. Conflict would cease, they held, once its sources in material inequity were removed. Socialists disagreed with conservatives that society was harmonious until foolishly interfered with. They faulted liberals for refusing to see where the roots of one, overarching conflict lay. Those roots lay for the socialist mind in differences of material interest among unequal classes, differences from which other conflicts, notably of faith and opinion, invariably stemmed. Remove inequity and harmony came in all life's departments. That, in crude summary, was the socialist dream of one-stroke emancipation. Although divided and denatured at present, society for the socialist left was by nature harmonious. There it agreed with conservatives, though not about structure or timing. For conservatives, harmony lay in a hierarchical past, for the socialist left in a brotherly future.

Society for liberals was always in conflict. To liberals there never had been and never would be a time of harmony. The best hope was for a frame of order and stability that was flexible enough for adjustment as the forces in conflict changed. Such a frame would be "artificial" and "man-made." It would be neither God-given nor natural but reliant on common interests in peace, stability, and prosperity. Within it, private conflicts could be bargained away leaving no one with festering regrets that might threaten common interests.

In anxious moods, liberals looked on unending conflict with stoical dread. In calmer moments, they welcomed conflict as zestful and energizing, the opposite of sterile harmony and dull uniformity. In tense times, liberals pictured conflict as terror, riot, and religious war. In tranquil times, they rethought conflict as competition, diversity, and individuality, welcoming them all. When giving in to hope, liberals pictured conflict as tamed and productive, the arena replaced by market and forum. Later, as the terminology of liberalism crystallized, "market" liberals persuaded themselves that conflict, softened into competition, was an unalloyed good, only to have to relearn, again and again, that interfering rules of order and credible government to defend them were required after all. Similarly, "social" liberals persuaded themselves that

open-ended conflict was an avoidable harm, only to have to relearn time after time that conflict, in the guise of competition, could also be fruitful, and its absence stultifying. Whatever the liberal mood, the task of containing and utilizing conflict was never over, just as the task was never over of resisting power. For liberals, unlike for conservatives or socialists, there was no escape from politics.

iii. Tocqueville and Schulze-Delitzsch: The Modern Powers of Mass Democracy and Mass Markets

Guizot experienced the arbitrary power of absolute monarchy, the Jacobin street, and the military strongman. A generation later, Aléxis de Tocqueville in France and Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch in Germany preoccupied themselves with new forms of power. Tocqueville looked for a counterweight to the pressure of mass democracy. Schulze-Delitzsch for a middle way between the new power of the industrial market and the growing weight of the central state. Both hoped for an answer in local and voluntary collectivities of public life becoming known as civil society.

Though attached to his class, Tocqueville was a liberal of the left in the July Monarchy and briefly foreign minister in the Republic of 1848–51. He was known across Europe for his writing on politics, praised by Mill and credited with introducing the term "individualism" to public argument in France as something more than an antiliberal term of abuse. Schulze-Delitzsch was a leading member of the liberal Progress Party and founder of German cooperativism, a vigorous movement of local financing and self-help that spread and survived well into the twentieth century, especially in German cities.

Aléxis de Tocqueville (1805–59) saw the spread of democracy in broad terms of ethical and cultural change, and not simply a matter of voting. Authority in matters of belief and taste was disappearing, just as hierarchy was vanishing socially. Everyone was becoming his own arbiter. So it seemed to Tocqueville. He did not think that democracy in his large sense could be stopped. Society was evolving, and with it outlooks and attitudes. There were costs as well as benefits, and the large question was how to handle democracy's costs: an overpowered modern

state and an underpowered modern citizenry. Both were connected in Tocqueville's mind and both were to be resisted. At its most lurid, his fear was that society was turning into an atomized mass of willful, self-interested egos that an intrusive state could suborn, especially a state with benevolent motives. Tocqueville's alarming picture, retouched for novel conditions, bewitched many twentieth-century liberals.

Of frail health, Tocqueville lived on his nerves, working in bursts followed by frequent collapses. The surface calm of the books, with their balanced contrasts and untroubled assurance, was a deception. As his British biographer Hugh Brogan has described him, Tocqueville was less a cool-headed analyst than an impulsive Romantic, able to write well only when his feelings were engaged. He feared and loathed the Paris crowd, adored his run-down family manor in the Cotentin Peninsula, and loved France almost to the point of jingoism. He found religious belief absurd on the whole, but—another echo of Constant—he took some unquestioned faith or other as necessary to serve as society's ethical glue. Since it was familiar and available, Roman Catholicism, Tocqueville believed, met that purpose well.

Cool as he might sound, Tocqueville was a man of attachments. Though lucid about their failings, Tocqueville was proud to belong to the secular twin peaks of old France, the landed *noblesse d'épée* and the professional *noblesse de robe*. His father came from a line of Norman squires claiming a warrior ancestor who sailed to England in 1066 with William the Bastard to claim the Saxon crown. His maternal great-grandfather was Guillaume de Malesherbes, a lion of the Paris bar who defended Louis XVI for abandoning his country during the French Revolution. The Terror swept away Malesherbes and several of his family. Tocqueville's father, jailed with them, escaped only because the guillotine caught up with Robespierre first.

The son respected many of his family's attitudes but flouted others. His legitimist father had flourished in the Bourbon restoration, but at its fall in 1830, young Aléxis, then a government lawyer, faced a choice. Officials had to take an oath to the new Orleanist king. The cynical old Etienne Pasquier, who had run Napoleon's police in Paris, laughed off the oath as a harmless "ticket to the spectacle." On point of honor, many legitimists, who had sworn fealty to the Bourbons, refused. Tocqueville agonized, and took the oath. Yet more daringly for a man

of his milieu, in 1835 he married an Englishwoman who was not noble, Catholic, or rich.

Tocqueville's arias to excellence and warnings about democratic mediocrity have misled people into thinking him a snob, the sort of person who looks disdainfully down at the crowd but insecurely up at their supposed betters. Tocqueville, on the contrary, was a nob—an aristocrat, that is—with a strong sense of *noblesse oblige*. Public office, though no longer a privilege, was still to his mind a duty. A poor speaker and hopeless party man, Tocqueville was elected deputy at second go in 1839 and he sat with the center-left. In 1848 he was briefly foreign minister and drafter of a republican constitution that lasted barely a year.

His *Recollections* (1850) record his part in France's unhappy second republic (1848–52). During the bloody June days, Tocqueville, a member of the National Assembly with parliamentary privileges, went to see the street fighting for himself. There was no doubt whose side he was on. The forces of order, Tocqueville wrote, "delivered the nation from the oppression of Paris workers and restored its self-possession." Other liberals thought differently. Tocqueville neglected to report that on his excursion he apparently ran into a platoon of soldiers who had just arrested the exiled left-wing liberal, Alexander Herzen, a Russian nobleman's son. Herzen was also out observing events, though with more sympathy for the people's cause. The radical Russian baron asked the liberal French count to intercede. Detainees were vanishing, Herzen explained, and many were being shot. Tocqueville listened politely to his plea for help but, as Herzen told it, declined to intervene, priggishly explaining that a member of the legislative branch could not interfere with the business of the executive branch. The soldiers took Herzen away. He won release several nervous hours later after persuading an intelligent and sympathetic police captain that he was not a foreign agitator.

A liberal of Tocqueville's outlook had more to fear than the Paris street. His fears that a modern despot might manipulate the popular ballot came true under Bonaparte's nephew, Louis Napoleon, president from December 1848. Three years later Napoleon closed parliament, made himself emperor as his uncle had done, and rigged a plebiscite to make it seem legitimate. Although the Second Empire promised France stability and prosperity, the price in despotism to Tocqueville was too high.