

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01743-6 - French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day

Edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

*French liberalism, an overlooked tradition?**Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt*

There is an enduring assumption that the French have never been, and never will be, *liberal*. As with all clichés, this one contains a grain of truth, but it also overlooks a school of thought that has been a significant presence in French intellectual and political culture for nearly three centuries: *French political liberalism*. This new collection of essays, authored by a distinguished group of scholars from diverse fields, explores this rich and largely untapped tradition in French political thought.

The past decade has witnessed a revival of interest in authors like Montesquieu, Constant, and Tocqueville, both in the United States and Europe. New translations have appeared and intellectual historians have significantly advanced our understanding of the political conflicts through which many ‘French liberal’ ideas were originally developed. Normative philosophers have also begun to employ these arguments in contemporary debates. Yet whether there exists a distinct and internally consistent *paradigm* underlying this tradition of thought is rarely discussed. Moreover, many influential and interesting members of the tradition, including a large number of political economists, have by and large remained out of sight. One of the core aims of this book is to provide a picture of French liberalism that is at once more comprehensive and more nuanced.

Despite the rich variety of thinkers that can be brought together under the heading of ‘French liberalism’, they do have one common ancestor in Montesquieu. *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu’s massive, almost encyclopaedic effort to rethink the normative foundations of law in a more empirical manner, set the tone for generations to come. His sharp insights into the relationship between freedom and its social and political preconditions became a major source of inspiration for those who, after the trauma of the French Revolution, tried to strike a balance between revolutionary ideals and a more conservative concern for political order. It is at this juncture that we meet the most prominent examples of the French liberal tradition, such as François Guizot, Mme de Staël,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01743-6 - French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day

Edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

RAF GEENENS AND HELENA ROSENBLATT

Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville. But *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day* also brings to light the ideas of many lesser-known French liberals, from Étienne Dumont and Élie Halévy to Alfred Fouillée and Célestin Bouglé, as well as a group of nineteenth-century liberal economists who, although relatively forgotten today, were highly influential in their own lifetimes. We also encounter a number of twentieth-century economic thinkers who called themselves ‘neoliberal’, but meant something quite distinct from how the term is most often used today. Finally, the so-called liberal revival of the twentieth century, as exemplified by the works of Raymond Aron, Claude Lefort and Marcel Gauchet, is subjected to scrutiny.

IN SEARCH OF A LOST LIBERALISM

One of the overriding aims of this volume is thus to convey a sense of the richness, variety and longevity of French liberalism, from Montesquieu to Lefort and Gauchet. Another goal is to interrogate the internal consistency and uniqueness of this tradition. Although working in the context of French politics and circulating within the same intellectual universe, it is anything but obvious that these authors share a stable set of theoretical commitments. Are there common assumptions behind the wide array of ideas formulated by these diverse thinkers? Does it in the end make sense to speak of a specific French liberal paradigm?

The first person to put that question in such explicit terms – and to answer it in the affirmative – was Larry Siedentop. In a seminal article, originally published in 1979 and reprinted in this volume, Siedentop makes the case for a specific French liberal paradigm, and strongly emphasizes its difference from mainstream (Anglo-American) liberalism. What are the main traits that, according to Siedentop, set French liberalism apart? He specifies three central characteristics. First, theorists in this tradition never surrendered to the ‘methodological individualism’ that dominates standard, Anglo-American liberalism. Instead, they pay particular attention to the social situatedness of human beings and, accordingly, to the importance of socializing processes. They are aware that individuals, even modern liberal individuals, have their conditions of possibility in specific social or political institutions. Second, French liberal theorists ‘discovered’ that political ideas (conceptions of freedom or equality for example) are intimately related to specific, historically circumscribed modes of life. This made them sensitive not just to the political differences between different societies, but also to the fact that not all political options are available

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01743-6 - French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day

Edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)*French liberalism, an overlooked tradition?*

3

to all societies: both the limitations and the possibilities of collective life are delineated by very concrete historical processes. Third, French liberals never narrowed down liberty to non-interference or to private happiness, but always included the kind of fulfilment that comes with public action. This ‘republican’ emphasis on self-government was partly inspired by the practical insight that local political involvement is the best safeguard against the centralization of power. But it was equally inspired by a pedagogical concern with the moral effect of political participation, that is, its effect on the development of free *mœurs*. Siedentop concludes that the mode of argument developed by French liberals amounted to ‘a stunningly original breakthrough’.

A strong case could be made, then, for the distinctiveness of the French liberal school of thought. However, one might object that a closer look at ‘French liberalism’ reveals not one, but several diverse strands of thought. This is the argument that Lucien Jaume makes in the next chapter. Jaume notes that there were, in fact, not one but *three* principal variants of French liberalism in the nineteenth century. The dominant variety was an elitist and conservative form of liberalism headed by François Guizot, Royer-Collard and the so-called *Doctrinaires*. A second variety was the individualist and more democratic form of liberalism espoused by Mme de Staël, Benjamin Constant and the Coppet group. Finally, there was the smaller, ‘fringe movement’ of liberal Catholicism, led by thinkers like Lacordaire, Lamennais and Montalembert, which had its own unique concerns and sensitivities. Jaume contends that both the *Doctrinaire* and Catholic varieties of liberalism were relatively favourable to the power of the state and suspicious of the individual, inflecting French liberalism in a distinctive way. Jaume also makes it clear that French liberals defined their theoretical positions in reaction to actual questions or problems that the historically unique situation of post-revolutionary France forced upon them. One overriding concern for French liberals was what to do with the state apparatus bequeathed to them by a long tradition of monarchical absolutism, the Revolution and the Napoleonic era. Jaume’s article ends with a consideration of how each of the three principal varieties of French liberalism responded to the hotly contested issue of freedom of the press.

A ‘LIBERAL-REPUBLICAN’ CONCEPTION OF FREEDOM?

After Siedentop’s and Jaume’s exploratory chapters, Part II of this volume focuses on the French liberal understanding(s) of freedom, beginning with Montesquieu. Montesquieu towers over subsequent

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01743-6 - French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day

Edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

generations of French liberals by the enormous influence he exerted. However, in Chapter 4, Céline Spector questions whether he should really be called a liberal at all. Investigating closely the sense in which his defence of liberty fits the bill of classical liberalism, Spector ultimately concludes that it does not. Three elements support her thesis. First, given Montesquieu's interest in the dynamics of power relations, his primary political concern was with the principle of moderation, rather than with the protection of a predefined, a-contextual kind of liberty. In fact, Montesquieu resisted giving an abstract definition of liberty, thereby suggesting that the feeling of liberty was always situation-specific. Second, Montesquieu *appears* to have had a typically modern confidence in mercantile interactions, both as a civilizing force and as a mechanism of social integration. Upon closer inspection, however, Montesquieu's discussion of *doux commerce* is highly ambivalent, and he clearly feared that the greed and egoism accompanying economic exchange would damage social ties. Third, it is sometimes said that Montesquieu espoused a version of that quintessential motif of economic liberalism, the idea of an 'invisible hand'. As Spector points out, however, the one vice that Montesquieu did indeed bestow with potentially virtuous effects was not material interest but the pursuit of honour, which still has a social or symbolic dimension. Taking these three elements into account, Spector argues that Montesquieu cannot be read as a classical liberal. The wider point suggested by her essay is that if French liberalism stands apart from other strands of liberalism, it may very well be because of Montesquieu's rich but inconclusive legacy.

Indeed, prominent French liberals writing after Montesquieu continued to subscribe to conceptions of liberty that were far from 'classically liberal'. In Chapter 5, Andrew Jainchill ascribes this aspect of French liberalism to the abiding influence of its republican roots. He notes that the political philosophies of Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville frequently employ a conception of liberty indebted to the early modern republican tradition. Each of these thinkers emphasized the importance of a robust political life and the moral personality of the citizenry in order to preserve both the body politic and individual liberties. According to Jainchill, this distinctive view of liberty developed among French liberals in response to the deprivation of politics under the absolutist monarchy of the *ancien régime*, the experience of revolutionary Terror, and Napoleon Bonaparte's dictatorship. The centrality of the republican conception of liberty makes French liberalism a unique form of political philosophy and clearly differentiates it from its Anglo-American counterparts.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01743-6 - French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day

Edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)*French liberalism, an overlooked tradition?*

5

Early French liberals may have been indebted to the republican tradition, but this does not make their ideas any less modern or relevant to liberal democracies today. This is the thought-provoking point made by Stephen Holmes in Chapter 6. Holmes brings to light the eerie timeliness of Benjamin Constant's admonitions about the importance, especially in times of crisis, of abiding by legal procedures. Again and again, Constant warned his readers about the dangers of using irregular courts and preventive police actions, even when rationalized by declarations of national emergency and appeals to public safety. Holmes reminds us that in our own post-9/11 world such policies are often described by our political leaders as pillars of the 'war on terror'; Constant, however, regarded them as constitutive of terror itself. The right to violate the constitution in order to save it was, to him, an 'absurd' and ominous proposition.

THE FORMATIVE ERA

The third part of this volume turns to a consideration of a number of key issues in French nineteenth-century liberalism. In Chapter 7, Helena Rosenblatt rectifies a long-standing misconception concerning the French liberal attitude towards religion. She argues that nineteenth-century French thinkers did not feel that they were living in a 'disenchanted' world, or in a 'post-religious' society. The nineteenth century saw a series of successive religious revivals so strong that some prominent liberals both believed and hoped that France was on the verge of a Protestant Reformation. They advocated Unitarianism as the form of Christianity best suited to a modern and liberal political regime. Rosenblatt suggests that the liberal Protestant sympathies of at least one major vein of French liberalism, namely that of thinkers such as Benjamin Constant and Jean-Charles-Louis de Sismondi, divided and thus weakened the movement as a whole.

In Chapter 8, Cheryl Welch investigates the place of utilitarianism in French liberal thought. Unlike the prominent role it plays in Anglo-American intellectual life, where it functions as an inspiration or worthy adversary, utilitarianism in France is still either largely invisible or used as a denigrating shorthand for what is repulsive about modernity. Welch explains how this came to be. Why did utilitarianism disappear as a serious system of thought in nineteenth-century France? She then turns to a few significant exceptions, namely Tocqueville and Élie Halévy, who deliberately engaged in a dialogue with utilitarianism. She suggests that these exceptional voices used a discussion of the fate of utilitarianism in

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01743-6 - French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day

Edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

another social and political milieu as a kind of disruptive detour: a way to jolt their readers into a new perspective on the possibilities of political life. In doing so, they illustrate a distinctive impulse in French liberalism.

In Chapter 9 Alan Kahan considers a question that has recently become very topical, namely the relationship between liberalism and colonialism. Focusing on Tocqueville's writings on Algeria and India, Kahan illustrates that Tocqueville's unremitting nationalism often conflicted with the liberal values he held dear. Kahan analyses the nature of this ambivalence in Tocqueville's work, explaining why, throughout his discussion of Algeria, freedom often took a back seat to national interest. Tocqueville was capable of simultaneously promoting decentralized administration, European colonization and, for the native Arab and Berber populations, the creation of a community of interests with the French. After completing *Democracy in America*, and with Algeria in mind, Tocqueville entertained the project of writing about the British conquest of India. What interested him was how the English had managed to *keep* India (and at a relatively low cost), and what France could learn from this. It seems that for Tocqueville, in France freedom trumped power, while elsewhere the maintenance of national power took precedence. Freedom here, despotism there, Kahan concludes, was perhaps not so illogical in the mind of this nineteenth-century Frenchman desperate to maintain his country's ideals as well as its power.

POLITICAL ECONOMY

Economic thinkers are often left out of discussions of French liberalism, and undeservedly so. Part IV of this volume explores the views of several prominent economic liberals and considers what their perspectives might add to our understanding of the French liberal political tradition. In Chapter 10, Richard Whatmore complicates the widespread notion that at the turn of the nineteenth century French liberals were unequivocally admirers of England. While they may, indeed, have thought the British constitution a 'masterpiece of reason and liberty', they also thought that Britain's commercial policies amounted to a rapacious form of economic imperialism that was inimical to peace. Early French advocates of free trade were motivated by a desire to put a stop to what they regarded as the dominating economic policies of Britain. Jean-Baptiste Say's influential *Traité d'économie politique*, for instance, was in large part aimed at defeating the British mercantile system and fostering peace and cosmopolitanism in Europe as well as in the wider world.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01743-6 - French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day

Edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)*French liberalism, an overlooked tradition?*

7

In Chapter 11, Philippe Steiner argues that French economic liberals were not only influential in their times but also articulated ideas about freedom and self-government that have contributed to our own contemporary understanding of liberalism. It is not enough, he writes, to reduce their thought to simple anti-statism; in fact, they often articulated remarkably nuanced and interesting ideas on the role of the state. Perhaps most importantly, economists like Jean-Baptiste Say, Charles Dunoyer and Frédéric Bastiat sought to encourage rational self-government by educating people as to what constitutes enlightened economic behaviour.

In Chapter 12, Serge Audier traces the French lineage of the word ‘neoliberalism’ and arrives at some surprising conclusions. When the word first emerged in France in the 1930s, it referred primarily to a posture *critical* of laissez-faire doctrine and *positively* inclined towards state intervention. Although the content of the word ‘neoliberalism’ was always somewhat ambiguous and even contentious in France, it continued, until the 1970s, to mainly refer to the acceptance of government intervention. It is only then that the term gained its contemporary, anti-statist meaning. As Audier demonstrates in great detail, this libertarian inflection of the term is a very recent phenomenon, and not indigenously French.

THE FRENCH LIBERAL LEGACY

The first half of the nineteenth century arguably represented the golden era of French liberalism. Yet the distinctive interpretations of liberal values carved out by earlier French liberals continued to shape the thought of authors who resisted the centralism and even authoritarianism that remained an enduring trait of political thought in France, even as the country moved into the twentieth century. Despite the changes in context, and perhaps never reaching the originality and subtlety of previous generations, these later French thinkers carried on the task of renewing the French liberal legacy and constructing that very French synthesis of a principled defence of individual rights and liberties on the one hand and an unwavering attention to the social situatedness of these individuals and their ideas on the other.

This is particularly true of the thinkers studied in Part V of this volume. As the discipline of sociology emerged in France (evidently influenced by the ‘comparative’ mode of thought pioneered by Montesquieu),

¹ As Raymond Aron famously argued, Montesquieu can even be considered the founder of the discipline of sociology. See R. Aron, *Les étapes de la pensée sociologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), pp. 27 ff.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01743-6 - French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day

Edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the promise of a strictly scientific approach to social phenomena lured many thinkers into hoping that it could also provide a solid basis for the liberal values they championed. In Chapter 13, William Logue sketches a picture that runs chronologically from Charles Renouvier and Alfred Fouillée to Émile Durkheim and Célestin Bouglé. Logue examines how these thinkers increasingly used sociological theories and findings as the foundations for their own ideas, while at the same time criticizing some of the new ideas advanced by sociologists. For example, they explicitly reaffirmed the importance of the individual against Durkheim's perceived collectivism.

In Chapter 14, Jean-Fabien Spitz offers a spirited defence of what he regards as a distinctly French conception of liberty. Against those who accuse French political culture of illiberalism, Spitz asserts the reasonableness of thinkers like Louis Blanc, Charles Dupont-White and Émile Durkheim, who defined liberty as originating *in* law rather than *against* it. These men understood that without a vigorous democracy embodied in an active political authority, the notion of individual liberty would, in reality, be empty and devoid of moral legitimacy. Spitz thereby invites us to rethink what is truly liberal and illiberal in the French political tradition.

In the book's closing part, the identity of twentieth-century French liberalism is interrogated. In Chapter 15, Aurelian Craiutu evaluates Aron's place in the French liberal tradition. According to Craiutu, one of the main merits of thinkers in this tradition is their adherence to the principle of political moderation. This sets them decidedly apart in a country known for its radicalism and for its often volatile revolutionary spirit. In Craiutu's narrative, Aron's sense of moderation, which can be observed in both his political positions and his style of argumentation, makes him a direct heir to Montesquieu and an unmistakable relative of Tocqueville. Craiutu compares Aron's position in 1968 with Tocqueville's reaction to the revolution of 1848 and points out many similarities. For both men, the sudden disruption of legality was a painful reminder of the fragility of the liberal order. Craiutu concludes regretfully that Aron's moderation marginalized him. Although a true member of the classical French liberal tradition and an important source of inspiration for like-minded liberals after him, Aron remained a solitary figure, whose isolation was most of all an unfortunate result of the polarized context in which he lived.

In the final chapter, Samuel Moyn investigates the work of two contemporary political philosophers, Claude Lefort and Marcel Gauchet. More specifically, he looks at how, at the beginning of the 1980s, they somewhat

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01743-6 - French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day

Edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)*French liberalism, an overlooked tradition?*

9

surprisingly revived the language of human rights in France. Moyn emphasizes that this seemingly liberal turn did not cause them to relinquish their affinity for Marxism, their commitment to human sociality, or their deep suspicion of individualism. On the contrary: according to Gauchet, the state creates individuals and without the state there would be no individuals. In consequence, the idea that one can appeal to rights against the state is almost nonsensical. Moyn thereby invites us to question whether Lefort's and Gauchet's 'turn to rights' was really liberal at all.

A FRENCH LIBERAL PARADIGM?

The picture that emerges, then, is admittedly ambiguous. From Montesquieu to the present day, many key figures in France's 'liberal' tradition actually hold a subtle and somewhat reticent attitude towards what are traditionally – from an Anglo-American perspective – seen as core liberal values, in particular towards the idea of individual rights. Although unwavering as to the importance of upholding the rights of individual citizens, they mostly steer away from defending these rights on the basis of an abstract or natural conception of the individual. Indeed, the search for an alternative basis seems to run like a red thread through the work of many French liberals.

Montesquieu had already posed the question of freedom in a particular manner. Freedom, in Montesquieu's thought, is never uncoupled from the concrete circumstances of its institutionalization. The primary political problem was the risk of an overly centralized accumulation of power in large societies. Freedom must therefore always be thought of together with the distribution of power throughout the polity. Also thanks to Montesquieu, French liberals tend to approach freedom in a comparative manner. The nature of 'our' freedom can only be grasped in light of the specificity of our society and hence in contrast with unfree regimes or in comparison with other understandings of freedom. Montesquieu's 'proto-sociological' approach would become a defining trait of the French liberal approach to liberty.

Thus, in his famous speech 'On the Liberty of the Ancients compared to that of the Moderns', Constant juxtaposes two types of liberty, noting that man's 'social organization' had changed dramatically since ancient times. The 'progress of civilization' necessarily involved 'new duties' for government. Similarly, Guizot believed that a society's *état social* determined – or at least exerted a strong influence on – its political institutions. The same approach can then be found in the work of Tocqueville, who

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-01743-6 - French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day

Edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

famously studied the relationship between democracy as a type of society and democracy as a type of regime.² This trend found its logical culmination in what can be dubbed the ‘sociological turn’ of French liberalism. As the discipline of sociology emerged, authors such as Fouillée or Bouglé connected the dots and sought to construct an explicitly sociological foundation for their liberal political commitments. Twentieth-century social democratic thinkers such as Lefort went even further. Coming from a Marxist background, Lefort defended the idea of individual rights as the necessary vocabulary in which to express an emancipatory agenda.

As Lucien Jaume emphasizes in his chapter, the specificity of the French liberal approach to individual rights should also – and perhaps principally – be understood in light of France’s institutional context. The main problem faced by nineteenth-century liberals in France was the large state apparatus they inherited from their country’s absolutist tradition, only reinforced by the Revolution and Napoleonic years. Much more than elsewhere, the state in France was and is appreciated as the dependable representative and protector of the general interest. As a result, setting up a defence of individual rights *against* the state was (and remains) a highly peculiar enterprise in France.

These, then, are the principal parameters within which French thinkers developed their liberal perspectives. Working in a country where public power has generally been revered and where science took an early and sustained interest in social mechanisms and collective processes, French liberals were never naive about individual autonomy or the ‘naturalness’ of the individual. They understood that individuals depend on collective institutions. As several chapters in this book testify, this dependence is at least twofold. On the one hand, institutions play an instrumental role in enabling the material preconditions for individual emancipation. On the other, it is only by virtue of political institutions that individuals become aware of themselves as citizens – and as citizens endowed with rights that can be claimed and must be respected.

It is perhaps this, rather more subtle, investigation of the relation between collective institutions and the constitution of individuals that can be singled out as a central merit of ‘French liberalism’. Although never a unified paradigm and not necessarily at odds with forms of liberalism developed elsewhere, the work of many – if not all – French liberal

² On this, see especially *French Liberalism and the Question of Society*, special issue of *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004), 1–148.