The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty: A view from Europe
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Dear Hartmut,
Dear Tim,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for this kind introduction. And thank you for the invitation to present my book at the European Studies Centre of St. Antony's. It was in fact here that I have completed the manuscript — precisely three years ago, on Hilary Term 2015.

I was here as Visiting Scholar, sponsored by my good friend Timothy Garton Ash — who very kindly accepted to discuss the book today. Thank you, Tim.

This book I am presenting today is basically a book about a love story: a love story with the Anglo-American tradition of liberty from a European perspective.

May I underline though, especially after the British referendum, that mine is not an anti-European point of view. I actually argue in the book that the Anglo-American tradition of liberty is part of the European and Western civilisation. But it has its specificities, I submit. And we, continental Europeans, should acknowledge those specificities — as the surprising result of the British referendum somehow has shown. And, mind you, I actually have argued in the book, although very briefly, in favour of Britain remaining in the EU. The main argument, though, was that this might allow the EU to become more flexible and more maritime, along the lines of the Anglo-American tradition of liberty. I am not sure this has been a very popular argument in continental Europe — in any event, it certainly was not a very successful argument in Britain either.

Be it as it may, the book was written much before the issue of the referendum even existed. A first Portuguese edition was published in 2008, with a very kind Preface by Manuel Braga da Cruz, then Rector of the Catholic University of Portugal. And the origins of the book go back to 1988 — yes, 1988.

I
A conversation with Karl Popper in 1988

This was when I visited (Sir) Karl Popper at his home in Kenley, south of London. He lived in a charming cottage with a lovely garden, which he kept immaculate. Opening into the garden, there was a spacious living room, with an elegant Austrian piano and a couple of chairs. In the remaining walls there was a huge collection of books. I immediately understood that this collection was highly selective: only the great books and the great authors of the West were there. Because of this, I was rather surprised when I found a huge shelf, perhaps two huge shelves, full of books by and on Winston Churchill. And I could not help

asking Popper: “Why do you have so many books on Churchill? I thought he was mainly a politician.” (I was young and very spontaneous, and very arrogant too, at the time, you see.)

He looked at me with great intensity. And he said: “sit down my boy, I am afraid I have to teach you something very seriously”. And we sat. And he spoke for more than an hour about Winston Churchill.

What I retained is this. That Winston Churchill had literally saved Western Civilisation. That he was the only leading politician, not only in Britain but in the whole of Europe, to have perceived the threat of Hitler almost a decade before he and Stalin invaded Poland and started the Second World War. And that Churchill had resisted all sorts of tempting compromises with Hitler because he knew what others could not understand: that the European and Western civilisation is based on liberty and cannot survive without liberty. ‘Now, there you have the answer to your question’ — Popper said. ‘Why do I have so many books on Churchill? Because he saved us.’

This was already a full lecture to me. But it did not stop there. Popper then went on speaking on the conditions that had allowed Churchill to mobilise his country, the British Empire and ultimately even the United States of America in the war against Hitler. And then he said something that would become decisive to my future life, not only my intellectual life. He said that there was something peculiar to the political culture of the English-speaking peoples: they have a deep love of liberty, combined with a deep sense of duty.

‘It is a mystery’, I remember him saying, ‘you can call it the British mystery. Perhaps it is this idea of the British gentleman, someone who does not take himself too seriously, but is prepared to take his duties very seriously, especially when most around him speak only about their rights.’ (He would repeat to me this definition of gentlemanship several times later).

Finally, Karl Popper told me that, if I was serious about my research project on his political philosophy, I should come to study and live in Britain. Only living in Britain, or also in America, could I grasp the specificity of the Anglo-American tradition of liberty, a crucial pillar of the Western and European civilisation of liberty which he had tried to defend in his political philosophy.

This conversation literally changed my life. In August 1990, I started my education in Britain, as Karl Popper had told me to do, having completed my DPhil at Oxford, in this College, in July 1994, under the supervision of (Lord) Ralf Dahrendorf — who had been a student of Popper at the LSE after the war and later had been Director of that school. After this, I went to teach at Brown and Stanford Universities, later also at Georgetown, again at Popper’s and this time also Dahrendorf’s insistence.

This is the story of the book, then. It is an attempt to come to terms with the conversation with Karl Popper, back in 1988, about the Anglo-American Mystery of orderly liberty, of liberty and duty.

II

Karl Popper’s British Mystery rediscovered and redefined

The structure of this book reflects the long voyage of intellectual exploration that I have undertaken since 1988. It is mainly about influential authors who, in my view, have contributed to shaping and understanding the political tradition of the English-speaking peoples. Only in the last section, Part V, do I try to articulate my own understanding of the specificity of that political tradition, on the basis of those authors' s contributions and of my own reflection on those contributions.

I have discussed 14 authors, 7 of whom were in fact continental Europeans who admired the Anglo-American tradition of liberty.

Part I , under the title "Personal influences", is devoted to authors that I have known personally: Karl Popper (1902-1994), Ralf Dahrendorf (1929-2009), Raymond Plant (1945-), Gertrude Himmelfarb (1922-) and Irving Kristol (1920-2009).

Part II deals with five authors that I call Cold Warriors: Raymond Aron (1905-1983), Friedrich A. Hayek (1899-1992), Isaiah Berlin (1912-1997), Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990), and Leo Strauss (1898-1973).

Part III is devoted to three thinkers who are well known in "Anglo-America" but hardly known, not to mention studied, in continental Europe: Edmund Burke (1729-1797), James Madison (1751-1836) – whose views I present in contradistinction with Rousseau's (1712-1778) -- and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859). 'Orderly liberty' seemed an appropriate label for these three great men.

'Quite simply a great man', incidentally, could have been the title of Part IV, solely devoted to Winston Churchill (1874-1965). In including him alone in Part IV, I have tried to pay a more vivid tribute to my 1988 conversation with Karl Popper on Churchill, gentlemanship and the Anglo- American tradition of liberty.

One striking feature of the above list of authors is certainly the variety of their political dispositions. Michael Oakeshott, for example, defended what he called 'a conservative disposition', whereas Friedrich A. Hayek famously added a postscript to his magnum opus, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) entitled 'Why I Am Not a Conservative'. Ralf Dahrendorf and Isaiah Berlin, on the other hand, were often described as left-of-centre liberals, whereas Gertrude Himmelfarb and Irving Kristol have been conspicuously associated with neo-conservatism. Raymond Plant, in his turn, is a well known political theorist affiliated to the Labour Party.

This variety may seem peculiar. And it certainly is, I have argued, peculiar to the Anglo-American tradition of liberty. This tradition is not a monopoly of one single political tendency or family. It has grown among different political families and it has distinguished those families from their counterparts in the European continent. Perhaps one could say that **the left in the Anglo- American tradition is more conservative than the left in the European continent and that the right in the Anglo-American tradition is more liberal than its counterpart in the Continent.** This is however a very simplified version of a complex phenomenon which has grown over at least the last three centuries and constitutes one of the crucial distinguishing features of the 'English Mystery' and the Anglo-American political tradition.

In fact, when I started studying Popper's 'British Mystery', I soon discovered that this was not a new topic but a very old one. This 'British Mystery' had in fact captured the imagination of several generations of Anglophiles in Europe, at least since the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and perhaps even more after the French Revolution of 1789. Popper's 'British Mystery' had in fact been formulated in different ways by continental admirers of British orderly liberty.[1]

One of the many versions of this 'British Mystery', and one which I have come to consider one of the most insightful, has been given by Anthony Quinton. In a chapter on political philosophy, which he contributed to *The Oxford Illustrated History of Western Philosophy,* Lord Quinton said that 'the effect of the importation of Locke's doctrines in to the European continent was much like that of alcohol on an empty stomach'. In Britain, Anthony Quinton added, Locke's principles 'served to endorse a largely conservative revolution against absolutist innovation,' whereas on the continent the importation of Locke's ideas led to radicalism and to what Tocqueville had described as 'the permanent and sterile conflict between the Ancient Regime and Revolution.' Why was this so?[2]

Gertrude Himmelfarb expressed the same problem in a slightly different way. Recalling the work of another famous French representative of the British school on the continent, Elie Halevy, Himmelfarb said:

> The true miracle of modern England` (Halevy`s famous expression) is not that she has been spared revolution, but that she has assimilated so many revolutions – industrial, economic, social, political, cultural – without recourse to Revolution.[3]

I believe these are all versions of Karl Popper's 'British Mystery', of which he spoke to me so movingly in that day of 1988. Perhaps it was also that 'British Mystery', or 'English Miracle', which Winston Churchill had in mind when he so persistently decided to write the four-volume work on *The History of the English-Speaking Peoples*. (In fact Churchill started working on the book at the end of 1932 and never gave up the project, even though he was able to finish it only in 1956. It was the last of his more than forty books).

III

Approaching the British Mystery in three steps

As I have said, my book devotes four of its five parts to the presentation of fourteen leading authors whom I consider to represent aspects of the English Mystery. Only in Part V do I

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[1] In *Anglomania: A European Love Affair* (New York: Random House, 1998), Ian Buruma gives an excellent overview, entertaining and informative, of the impact of the Anglo-American (mainly English, in this case) tradition over several generations of Anglophiles in Europe. On the other hand, James W. Ceaser gives also an excellent overview of the reaction in Europe against the Anglo-American tradition (mainly American, in this case) in his superb book *Reconstructing America: The Symbol of America in Modern Thought* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1997). A slightly biased, in my view, but still very powerful and thoughtful, account of the Anglo-American political tradition has more recently been given by Daniel Hannan (MEP) in *How We Invented Freedom & Why It Matters* (London: Head of Zeus, 2013).

[2] Anthony Quinton, "Political Philosophy", in The Oxford Illustrated History of Western Philosophy, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994), 327.

[3] Gertrude Himmelfarb, Victorian Minds: A study of intellectuals in crisis and ideologies in transition, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995 [or. ed. : Knopf, 1968]), 292.

submit my own general proposal to address the starting problem of Karl Popper's British Mystery. I then return to Anthony Quinton's question about the reasons that led the importation of Locke's doctrines into the continent to produce an effect 'much like that of alcohol on an empty stomach'. And I then draw on the thoughts of the authors previously discussed in an attempt to suggest some ingredients of the Anglo-American specificity – as it can be perceived from a European perspective, which is mine.

My suggestion may be briefly summarised in **three steps**.

1. Popular Government as a form of limited Government

First, it seems to me that Locke's principles 'served to endorse a largely conservative revolution in Britain' (and, in my view, to a great extent also in America) because those principles were combined with, and understood within, a tradition of limited and accountable Government. This tradition existed long before Locke, at least since Magna Carta of 1215, and therefore did not have to be deduced from Locke's first philosophical principles – or, for that matter, from any other particular first philosophical principles. This means, on the other hand, that the tradition of limited and accountable government may be compatible with several – but certainly not all – particular first philosophical principles. The principle of limited and accountable government emerged in England through a long process of "muddling through", of which Magna Carta and the 1688 (Glorious) Revolution are highly instructive moments.

Not in spite of this evolving and unsystematic philosophical background but precisely because of it, the concept of limited and accountable government has had tremendous consequences. It has allowed Britain 'to assimilate so many revolutions without recourse to Revolution', in the famous expression of Halevy retaken by Himmelfarb. That same principle had a huge impact in the perception of democracy, or popular government, among the English-speaking peoples. **Popular government, when perceived within the tradition of limited and accountable government, is itself understood as a limitation on Government**.

In other words, modern **popular government is not perceived, among the English-speaking peoples, as a replacement of an absolutist and reactionary government of one or of the few by the absolutist and progressive government of the many.**

2. Two kinds of Rationalism: Critical or Dogmatic?

In continental Europe, by contrast, liberal democracy has been initially presented as a political expression of a rationalist project, a 'blueprint' for a radically new society, in the tradition of what Popper, Hayek, Berlin and Dahrendorf called dogmatic rationalism, and which Oakeshott merely called rationalism, or politics of passion or faith, as opposed to scepticism or politics of imperfection. In other words, whereas in Britain and America, liberal democracy has emerged as a protection of existing ways of life, in continental Europe democracy has been initially associated – both by its critics and by most of its promoters – with a political project of changing existing ways of life. This project may have several purposes – secularisation, modernisation, enlightenment, equality, moral neutrality, etc – but its main feature is an adversarial attitude towards existing ways of life. It is a sort of culture war against the retrograde past in the name of an enlightened future, as Himmelfarb has pointed out, which among other things creates an 'unbridgeable divide between reason and religion'.

To put it bluntly, this adversarial attitude springs mainly from the fact that the existing ways of life were "already" there, they are based on habit, or tradition, or convenience, or particular attachments, as Michael Oakeshott put it. In a word, they were not designed by 'Reason'.

Michael Oakeshott's essay 'Rationalism in Politics' and Karl Popper's 'Towards a Rational Theory of Tradition' (which are discussed in their respective chapters) contain in my view some of the most powerful descriptions and critiques of the dominant frame of mind in continental politics.

3. Liberty understood as conversation

This understanding of liberty as conversation was epitomised by Winston Churchill. As I argue in Part IV, I don't think that the main issue that led Churchill to oppose Communism and Nazism was in the first place a matter of ideological doctrine (an ugly expression, as Churchill said). He did not draw upon a systematic rival ideology against Communism and Nazism. What shocked Churchill was precisely the revolutionary ambition of both Nazism and Communism to reorganise social life from above, imposing on existing ways of life a deductive plan based on a total ideology (or a scheme of perfection, as Anthony Quinton and Michael Oakeshott put it). In Corporal Hitler, in the former socialist Mussolini, and in the communist ideologues Lenin and Stalin, Churchill saw the coarse fanaticism of those who wanted to demolish all barriers to the unfettered exercise of their will.

Winston Churchill, I submit, perceived liberty and democracy mainly as a protection of people's spontaneous and really-existing ways of life. These ways of life exist as homes of real people, who have inherited them from their ancestors and will pass them onto their descendants. In this spontaneous dialogue between generations, these ways of life will gradually be adapted and made more convenient to new circumstances. But in no way can they or should they be redesigned by the arbitrary will, or an abstract scheme of perfection, of a single power. People, as individuals or persons, are there first, prior to governments, the main purpose of the latter being to protect life, liberty and property of the former. This is the understanding of liberty underlying the following beautiful passage by William Pitt in 1763:

> The poorest man may in his cottage bid defiance to all the force of the Crown. It may be frail; its roof may shake; the wind may blow through it; the storms may enter, the rain may enter — but the King of England cannot enter; all his forces dare not cross the threshold of the ruined tenement![4]

This understanding of liberty and democracy was presented by Winston Churchill on innumerable occasions. One of the most inspiring was certainly his description of his father's political views:

> He [Lord Randolph Churchill] saw no reason why the old glories of Church and State, of King and country, should not be reconciled with modern democracy; or why the masses of working people should not become the chief defenders of those ancient institutions by which their liberties and progress had been achieved. It is this union of past and present, of tradition and progress, this golden chain, never yet broken, because no undue strain is

[4] William Pitt (the elder), Speech on the Excise Bill, House of Commons (March 1763), quoted in Lord Brougham, Historical Sketches of Statesmen Who Flourished in the Time of George III (1855), I, p. 42.

placed upon it, that has constituted the peculiar merit and sovereign quality of English national life.[5]

Thank you.

[5] Winston S. Churchill, Thoughts and Adventures (London: Thornton Butterworth, Ltd., 1934), 52.