

Winston Churchill Memorial Dinner
Estoril Political Forum 2016
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Ladies and Gentlemen,

Well, I actually didn't find it proper that I presented my own book in a conference in which I am the host. But my friends Marc Plattner and James Muller made up this gentle plot and I now have to say something about the book.

It won't take long, though. It is basically a book about a love story: a love story with the Anglo-American tradition of liberty from a European point of view. 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 in favour of Britain remaining in the EU. The main argument was that this might allow the EU to become more flexible and more maritime, along the lines of the Anglo-American tradition of liberty.

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, who kindly is with us today. And the origins of the book go back to 1988 — yes, 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. And then -- this I remember Karl Popper literally asking me with great intensity -- what

would have happened to the European civilisation had Hitler prevailed? And he replied, as I was kept in total silence: It would have been destroyed, our civilisation, which was born in Athens and has always been based on liberty, would have been destroyed. Now, there you have the answer to your question. 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). I remember Popper adding something about the mistaken view that gentlemanship was a snobbish concept, because, I am sure he said, being a gentleman also involves having sympathy towards the eccentric and the "underdog" (an expression that I did not know at the time and that he explained to me).

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. Back in Lisbon, I talked to my wife and she agreed that we should leave our relatively comfortable position in Lisbon -- I was then political advisor to President Mario Soares and she was a career civil servant -- and apply to a doctoral programme at a British university. I then wrote to Ralf Dahrendorf, Warden of St. Antony's College, Oxford, who had been a student of Karl Popper at the LSE, of which he had later been the Director. He kindly interviewed me at Oxford and most kindly agreed to be my supervisor. In August 1990, I started my education in Britain, as Karl Popper had told me to do, having completed my DPhil at Oxford in July 1994.

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 British mystery of orderly liberty, of liberty and duty. I of course do not claim to have found the key to this mystery. But I have enormously enjoyed looking after the key — that I have not found.

I have learnt something throughout the process though. And the book is about what I believe I have learnt. I cannot and I should not try to summarise the whole book here tonight. But if I have to choose a sentence to conclude this presentation, I am afraid I would choose a passage by Winston Churchill about the political philosophy of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill:

“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 placed upon it, that has constituted the peculiar merit and sovereign quality of English national life.”

Thank you.