



The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty: A View from Europe

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The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty: A View from Europe

by **João Carlos Espada**

(Routledge: London, 2016), 222 pages

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Those of us who are rather attached to the values and institutions of political and economic liberalism have been having a hard time lately. Financial crisis and economic stagnation, fear of the influx of (mostly Muslim) migrants, and rising threats of terrorism have all combined to erode public trust in open societies and capitalist democracy, and to stoke popular support for illiberal forces, not least within the heartlands of the West itself. In fact, the vote share of anti-establishment parties or candidates in national elections in major developed countries is now at its highest level since the dark days of the early 1930s. So far at least, the most organized challenges to the liberal order have emanated not from Islamist or other overtly authoritarian ideologies, but from variable forms of populism, coming from both the left and right sides of the political spectrum inside the democratic world. Despite marked differences, what they all share is an amalgam of statist, protectionist, anti-pluralist, authoritarian, and often conspiratorial instincts that are fundamentally anti-liberal and corrosive to the values and institutions of free societies.

Against this background—that of Hugo Chávez, Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders, Marine Le Pen, Alexander Gauland, Viktor Orbán, and Donald Trump—liberalism is in serious need of rethinking and renewal. Those searching for ways forward would be greatly served by reading João Carlos Espada's important book *The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty: A View from Europe*.

The epitome of a gentlemanly and learned guide, Professor Espada—who has lived, taught, and advised national leaders in continental Europe, Britain, and America—takes his reader on a rich journey of intellectual discovery through the Anglo-American tradition of modern liberal political theory. Indeed, the overall experience of reading the book is analogous to that of taking a leisurely walk through a glorious English garden of the mind, escorted by a wise and sympathetic mentor. Touring the history of ideas with Espada is what I imagine going on safari with Sir David Attenborough must be like.

With subjects ranging from the eighteenth and nineteenth-century giants of classical liberalism—Edmund Burke, James Madison, and Alexis de Tocqueville (J. S. Mill is mentioned but does not receive his own chapter)—through the great Cold War opponents of totalitarianism and socialism—Isaiah Berlin, Friedrich Hayek, Michael Oakeshott, Karl Popper, Leo Strauss—and lesser-celebrated figures such as Ralf Dahrendorf and Raymond Plant, the author weaves an original and colorful tapestry of ideas, experiences, and historical lessons that ultimately provide an intellectual basis for liberal democracy. Throughout the book, Espada credits thinkers generously and refers the reader to the most relevant scholarship in the field.

The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty: A View from Europe is organized into five sections. Reflecting Espada's evidently passionate belief in the importance of education, conversation, and debate in the nurturing of free individuals, the first part of the book is dedicated to a number of figures—Popper, Dahrendorf, Plant, Gertrude Himmelfarb and Irving Kristol—with whom Espada interacted as a student and colleague and who have deeply influenced his life. In another context, this could have come across as self-indulgent reminiscence laced with namedropping, but Espada's purpose and treatment of the luminaries skirts these pitfalls entirely. Far from being an exercise in hagiography, Espada eschews adulatory writing and leverages familiarity to conduct a sharp critical appraisal of these and other thinkers' ideas, while at the same time demonstrating the centrality of mentorship and conversation to the transmission of liberty from one generation to the next.

The second part of the book, entitled "Cold Warriors," is devoted to five men—Raymond Aron, Hayek, Berlin, Oakeshott, and Strauss—whom Espada identifies as having, through meticulous and dogged argument, fought the decades-long war of ideas against economic central planning, Soviet totalitarianism, and the more diffuse forms of nihilism that took root within the West over the past century. Together with the book's chapter on Karl Popper, these five chapters ought to be required reading for educators and students seeking to better understand and respond to the resurgence of authoritarianism (Russian, Chinese, and Islamist), leftist populism, and the self-hatred prevalent among contemporary Western elites.

Espada may be an ardent Anglophile, but he is also a Portuguese citizen, and, as such, is especially concerned about continental Europe's proclivity for statism, over-bureaucratization, and destructive utopianism. Throughout the book, Espada urges continental Europeans to internalize and exercise what he sees as central Anglo-American political virtues: limited and decentralized government; protected spheres of private life immune from state intervention and guarded by the rule of law; incremental change respectful of exiting ways of life; the avoidance of dogmatic rationalism; and the embrace of the politics of imperfection. He therefore dedicates the third section of the volume to Burke, Madison, and Tocqueville,

whose political philosophies, Espada argues, embody the idea of “orderly liberty” and who are not sufficiently known or appreciated in continental Europe.

What Popper called “The British Mystery”—the puzzle of how Britain largely managed to avoid royal absolutism, successive violent regime changes, and totalitarian ideologies—fascinates Espada, and he sees it as a modern miracle to be recognized and emulated. Time and again he returns to Elie Halevy’s observation that the true “miracle of modern England” is not that it has been spared revolution, but that it has managed to assimilate so many revolutions—industrial, economic, political, cultural—without recourse to violent Revolution (with a capital “R”). Once again, the insight is not only of historical value, but prompts the reader to consider how contemporary liberal democracies might best accommodate the enormous and ever accelerating technological and cultural disruptions shaping our lives in the twenty-first century.

The writing of *The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty*, we are told, was originally inspired by a conversation between Espada and Karl Popper in 1988 about the political culture of the English-speaking peoples and, in particular, about Winston Churchill. In the penultimate section of the book, Espada returns to that conversation and pays tribute to the great man who, quite literally, saved Western civilization from extinction under the Nazi yolk. In the chapter on Churchill, we find valuable insights into the life and times of a great man, but, more importantly, a learned consideration of how his experiences shaped in him a set of defined political, economic, and social beliefs. So, for example, Espada observes that what shocked Churchill so deeply about Nazism and Communism was not only their brutality, but their ambition to reorganize human life from above and to impose upon existing ways of life a totalitarian deductive plan based on an abstract, all-encompassing ideology. Churchill, Espada concludes, perceived liberty and democracy mainly as an institutional arrangement to protect people’s private, spontaneous ways of life.

If there is a cause for regret in *The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty: A View from Europe*, it is that Espada spends the lion’s share of the book analyzing the thoughts of others, and only ventures to develop his own in its fifth and final section, entitled “Politics of imperfection: the Anglo-American tradition of liberty.” This is a pity, and a short postscript on Britain and the European Union (written before the Brexit referendum) only serves to accentuate the regret, and whet the appetite for more. One would hope that Espada (which literally means “sword” in Portuguese) will venture to cut through current confusion and propose ways in which the spirit and institutions of liberty might be rejuvenated.