JOURNAL OF DEMOCRACY

*January 2017, Volume 28, Number 1 $13.00*

# Britain After Brexit

*Anne Applebaum* ▪ *Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin*
*Tom Gallagher* ▪ *Adrian Guelke*

## The Three Regions of the Old Soviet Bloc

*Anders Åslund*

## Turkey: How the Coup Failed

*Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu*

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*Monica Marks* on Comparing Islamists
*Mona Lena Krook* on Political Violence Against Women
*M. Steven Fish and Michael Seeberg* on Mongolia
*Malte Philipp Kaeding* on Hong Kong
*Oisín Tansey* on the Anti-Coup Norm
*Srdjan Darmanović* on Elections in the Balkans

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## The Signs of Deconsolidation

*Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk*

BOOKS IN REVIEW

# TWO TRADITIONS OF LIBERALISM

*James H. Nichols, Jr.*

***The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty: A View from Europe.*** By João Carlos Espada. Routledge, 2016. 212 pp.

The central theme of João Carlos Espada's thoughtful and lively new book is the gulf between the Anglo-American and the Continental European understandings of liberty. In his telling, the Anglo-American tradition views liberty as pluralistic, adaptive, reformist in a piecemeal manner, and without a comprehensive and fully coherent rational design. Continental European doctrines of political liberty, by contrast, tend to be dogmatically rationalistic, comprehensive, and even utopian, and in consequence liable to promote revolutions that in actual practice end up producing the very opposite of liberty.

As befits its understanding of the Anglo-American tradition, this book itself is a complicated and multifarious artifact—not simply theoretical or practical, but aimed at understanding theoretical issues with a view to encouraging the most beneficial practices; neither a simply personal account nor a purely objective analysis; directed to academics on the one hand, but perhaps still more to citizens and statesmen. It offers an engaging account of the author's initial discovery and subsequent in-depth inquiry into the distinctiveness of the Anglo-American tradition of political liberty and the reasons for its success in promoting its citizens' well-being.

The book consists of five parts. The first, "Personal Influences," discusses five contemporary thinkers with whom Espada has had personal contact. He begins with Karl Popper, who introduced him to the greatness of Winston Churchill and presented him with arguments in favor of

*Journal of Democracy Volume 28, Number 1 January 2017*

fallibilism and against dogmatism as bases for a free and open society. The others included in this section are Ralf Dahrendorf, Raymond Plant, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Irving Kristol. Two quotes from Himmelfarb express insights that run throughout the rest of the book: "The true 'miracle of modern England' (Halévy'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." And soon after: "The British and American Enlightenments [in contrast to the French Enlightenment] were latitudinarian, compatible with a large spectrum of belief and disbelief. . . . And for both, religion was an ally, not an enemy." (pp. 53–54).

Part II, "Cold Warriors," presents another five twentieth-century thinkers: Raymond Aron, with special emphasis on his famous critique of Marxism in The Opium of the Intellectuals; Friedrich Hayek, the defender of the "spontaneous order" produced by market economies; Isaiah Berlin, whose pluralism, Espada contends, can provide support for liberty without sliding into relativism; Michael Oakeshott, the great expounder of the "conservative disposition"; and Leo Strauss, who underlined late modernity's tendency toward a relativism that calls into question liberal democracy (and everything else distinctive of Western civilization), and argued instead for an approach to politics grounded in the ancients' understanding of practical wisdom.

In Part III, "Orderly Liberty," Espada analyzes the contributions of three classic exponents of political liberty: Edmund Burke, James Madison (presented in sharp contrast with Jean-Jacques Rousseau), and Alexis de Tocqueville. These three chapters provide eloquent and forceful statements of the understanding of liberty found in these great authors and the appropriate political modes of attaining it.

From the standpoint of giving practical advice, the contrast of Madison with Rousseau may be helpful for encouraging limited government, but a certain misunderstanding of Rousseau is in evidence here. He is said to aim at total governmental control: "Rousseau . . . imagined that, as the people became the sovereign, their own government should be absolute." (p. 114). Yet while Rousseau argued that the individual citizen does not need securities against the sovereign (a whole of which the citizen is a part), he also distinguished the sovereign from the government. The sovereign cannot be limited, but it can act as sovereign only through the general will, which must be general in its object as well as in its source. That is, the sovereign can act only by making general, impersonal laws (in the strict sense in which Hayek speaks of laws as distinguished from decrees of various sorts). For Rousseau, it must be the government that acts in a way that involves particulars rather than universals, and to be legitimate, government must act in accord with the general will (the laws in the strict sense made by the democratic sovereign). Rousseau does not think democratic government is to be recommended in most circumstances.

This theoretical clarification helps us to understand what otherwise might be puzzling indeed: how Tocqueville, evidently a proponent of limited government, could choose to be, as Espada notes that he was (p. 123), an attentive (and not a hostile) reader of Rousseau. Tocqueville's reading led him to observe and explain a number of fascinating Rousseauan features in American democratic society (such as Americans' tendency to side with the officers of the law, because they think of the law as theirs, unlike the French, who typically side with the person pursued by the officers).

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Part IV is given over entirely to Winston Churchill, presented as the fullest recent embodiment of this section's title, "The Spirit of Liberty." Churchill was a profound thinker and a staunch supporter of British traditions of liberty, but no ideologue, as his changes of political party allegiance make evident. In times when the worst were full of passionate intensity, Churchill drew upon his deepest convictions to defend liberty and civilization in the best ways possible. With his thoughtful discussion of Churchill, Espada returns to where his introduction began, with Karl Popper's serious talk to him about the greatness of Churchill.

Finally, in Part V, "Politics of Imperfection: The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty," Espada brings together and distills the conclusions of his inquiry. A thoughtful chapter on limited and accountable government suggests that the gradual introduction of democratic elements with a view to making government accountable is a more promising route to achieving real liberty than is seeking to design a democracy from scratch. A chapter on "Two Kinds of Rationalism" distinguishes critical rationalism, which looks at actual facts, seeks to understand them, and then to work out real improvements, from dogmatic rationalism, which seeks to rely on no presuppositions but to construct a political and social order through wholly rational means. This latter approach has never met with practical success; moreover, the impossible goal of proceeding with no presuppositions eventually leads the dogmatic rationalist into a complete relativism that can provide no support for political liberty. Finally, a chapter on "Liberty as Conversation" conveys the view that political liberty is a work ever in progress; therefore, its various signs of incompletion and imperfection are to be expected and even welcomed.

A "Postscript: on Britain and the European Union – the Missing Debate," written before the British vote to leave the EU, urges those concerned with preserving the European Union to learn from the Anglo-American tradition and to become more open to diverse and pluralistic approaches to political

construction. The European Union already accepts a degree of "Europe à la carte" in respect to the Schengen agreements and the Euro currency zone; Espada urges the EU to welcome even more diverse approaches to membership, thereby helping to disarm criticisms of excessive bureaucratic control and of the undermining of local traditions. By aiming at a less comprehensive and uniform agreement, the EU could create, albeit more slowly, a longer lasting and more successful structure.

Concerning the book's account of the British tradition, a couple of questions arise. By his book's silence about the mid-seventeenth century—Charles I, Cromwell, the Commonwealth period, and the Restoration—does Espada leave readers with a somewhat rosier view of British political development than is warranted? And how true is the picture of British life as characterized by a kind of contentment and enjoyment that goes along with a willingness to leave others alone to their own modes of life (p 193)? I note that a great admirer of Britain, Montesquieu, found the British to be rather more irritable and anxious than that (*Spirit of the Laws,* Book XIX, chapter 27).

As regards the United States, one might well ask whether theory played a greater role in the American than in the British tradition. American debates over the meaning of the Declaration of Independence have sometimes had a rather comprehensive theoretical character. If, as Espada argues, political liberty and limited government mean above all protecting existing ways of life, still the question arises: Are any ways of life excluded, and if so, why? The way of life that rested on slavery was originally accepted and protected under the Constitution, as a necessary compromise, but ultimately it was judged to be incompatible with fundamental American political principles. But this judgment could only be implemented through civil war. Is this a break in the continuity of the Anglo-American tradition of liberty, or is it something that this book's understanding of that tradition can accommodate?

The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty does not resolve important disagreements about political institutions or public policies. What it shows is that we should expect, and indeed welcome, continuing public arguments about these most important matters. Old arguments on fundamental issues are likely to continue, and with changing circumstances new ones will ever arise. We should be skeptical of any grand project to reorder our politics in accord with fully rational designs—and the more comprehensive the design, the more skeptical we should be. Espada's practical and sensible approach provides academics, citizens, and political actors with valuable matter for reflection. His understanding of political action, though rooted in Anglo-American examples, is as akin to Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom as it is to Burke's or Churchill's.

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