

Liberalism and/or socialism: tensions, exchanges and convergences from the 19th century to today - University of Lorraine – Nancy (France), 21st-22nd October 2021

Deadline for submissions: 10th May 2021

The fall of the Berlin Wall led Francis Fukuyama in 1992 to predict the triumph of liberal democracy. However, the terrorist attacks of 2001, the economic crisis of 2008, Brexit and the Covid crisis have resulted in the reappearance of debates about the relationship between the state and the individual, ranging from the representation of the former in democratic countries to the distribution of wealth. These transformations question the boundaries between systems of political and economic thought that had previously been considered, perhaps wrongly, as being separate: China claims to bring together socialism and capitalism, while the ruling British Conservatives, like other governments which advocate free-market economics, are resorting to increasing public spending on a massive scale in order to address the current health crisis. In countries where the left has not gained sufficient support to be elected to government, it has displayed a vibrancy which refutes the thesis of its collapse, but it contains deep divisions concerning social reforms and the role of the state in the face of globalisation and multiculturalism. The principles of emancipation and individual rights based on modernity and the Enlightenment have faced criticism, which has been expressed in the rise of populism, conservatism, and the endorsement of holism as the basis of politics.

In light of the aforementioned changes, this conference aims at reevaluating the relationship between two major ideologies – liberalism and socialism – which seem to be contested nowadays, exploring the forms they have taken and tracing their development from their rise in the 19th century onwards.

Socialism seeing itself as a critique of economic liberalism, the two systems of thought emerged partially in opposition to each other. The extension of the state was sometimes cited as a means of emancipation of an oppressed class (Marx) and sometimes as a means of subjugation of individuals (Hayek). Antisocialist rhetoric was a platform for important figures of economic liberalism such as Herbert Spencer in the 19th century and Margaret Thatcher in the 20th century. Conversely, left-wing theoreticians and activists found in the critique of capitalism common ground uniting various, potentially conflicting, currents like syndicalists, social democrats, cooperators and Marxists. The main focus of study will be the way socialism and liberalism use each other to define themselves as ideologies. To what extent do they draw their identity from their adversaries' representation and critique of them? How does the polarisation of debates serve political mobilisation and activism?

The question of private property reveals elements of convergence between the two systems of thought and visions of the world. The liberal tradition, which cannot be reduced to rational individualism, was able to incorporate into its project the concepts of common good and community, particularly in a moral dimension (Rosenblatt) and, at the turn of the twentieth century, the principle of collectivism exerted an influence over the New Liberalism, just as the latter contributed to the development of reformist socialism (Jackson, Clarke, Freedon). On the left, figures such as Anthony Crosland or Tony Blair laid claim to ethical socialism, a current represented earlier by Robert Owen, the Christian socialists and R.H. Tawney, which judged that the egalitarian ideal was to a certain extent compatible with the two pillars of liberalism – the market economy and democracy.

Consequently, can representations and assumptions which are common to liberalism and socialism be identified, and how do values and political principles (democracy, equality, social justice) borrowed by one ideology from the other allow the ideologies to be (re)defined? Close attention will be paid to thinkers and theoreticians who, either by their trajectories (J.S. Mill, D.G. Ritchie) or in their system of thought (N. Geras), have laid claim to both ideologies. To what extent does their thinking result from political, economic and social contingencies or from specificities belonging to one system or the other?

Through these points of convergence or divergence, the conference will be an opportunity to question the meanings of political concepts and language in their context and will seek to identify the evolutions as well as the durability and / or the disappearance of these ideologies. Can socialism be rethought along the lines suggested by Axel Honneth and by the adoption of the principle of liberal democracy? Or are the class struggle and opposition to capitalism the very essence of this movement? Must Mark Bevir be followed when he states that, “ideologies are not mutually exclusive, reified entities. They are overlapping traditions with ill-defined boundaries” (Bevir, 86)? Is it possible to agree with Michael Freeden that the concept of a “post-ideological era” serves to promote in itself a system of thought which prefers to remain hidden (Freeden, 2005, 255)? The rootedness of the two currents in modernity can also be examined. On some occasions, they have privileged the individual and on others the group, both defending a universal emancipatory project in history. Does the appearance of what Marx predicted as “an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” find a paradoxical echo in the project developed by R. Nozick to promote a minimal state in order to achieve a libertarian utopia of cooperation?

We will welcome papers that address the interactions between socialism and liberalism in the English-speaking world (Ireland, the United Kingdom, the United States,...) , in the fields of intellectual history, the history of political and economic thought, economic and political history. The aim of this interdisciplinary conference will be to explore the overlapping of these ideologies and systems of thought, the implementation of policies drawing on them and the work of intellectuals and activists who have contributed to the shaping and evolution of these traditions.

Papers may discuss, but are not limited to:

- Transfers of concepts and the blurring of systems: new liberalism, liberal socialism, libertarian socialism and market socialism in theory and practice
- Interpretations and reappropriations of liberal thinkers by socialists, of socialist thinkers by liberals
- Philosophies of history common to the two ideologies
- Socialism, liberalism and the theories of value
- Methodological individualism and holism
- Socialism and liberalism faced with questions of identity and the influence of communitarians

- Liberal and socialist roots of working-class and radical movements: cooperatism, chartism, syndicalism, etc.
- Questioning of the socialist-liberal divide by conservative, anarchist, populist trends
- Theoretical and practical overlapping between socialism and liberalism in times of crisis (environmental, health, economic, political...)

Organising committee

Vanessa Boulet, Stéphane Guy, Peterson Nnajifor, Ecem Okan, Jeremy Tranmer,

Academic and scientific partners include CRECIB, IDEA (UR EA2338 – Université de Lorraine), PHARE (Université de Paris I – Panthéon Sorbonne).

Submissions

Please send proposals (300 words maximum) and a short biography to liberalism.socialism.conference@gmail.com and stephane.guy@univ-lorraine.fr by 10th May 2021.

You will be notified by 30th May if your paper is accepted.

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