JÖRN LEONHARD

From European Liberalism to the Languages of Liberalisms: The Semantics of “Liberalism“ in European Comparison

Originalbeitrag erschienen in:
Redescriptions: Yearbook of political thought and conceptual history 8 (2004), S. 17-51
Redescriptions
Yearbook of Political Thought and Conceptual History

Redescriptions
Yearbook of Political Thought and Conceptual History
(formerly Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought)
SoPhi 91

SoPhi publishes social sciences at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and it is located at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy. It provides a forum for innovative studies in social policy, sociology, political science and philosophy. SoPhi publishes 10-15 titles per year, both in Finnish and in English. Manuscripts are selected for publication on the basis of expert opinion. Correspondence should be sent to SoPhi, Dept. of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, FIN-40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland, fax +358 14 2603101, email: kustannus@minervakustannus.fi. Website: www.minervakustannus.fi/sophi.

SoPhi is distributed world-wide by Drake International Services, Market House, Market Place, Deddington, Oxford OX15 0SE, UK, tel. (+44) 01869 338240, fax (+44) 01869 338310, e-mail: info@drakeint.co.uk, website: www.drakeint.co.uk. In North America SoPhi is distributed by International Specialized Book Services, 5804 NE Hassalo Street, Portland, OR 97213-3644, USA, tel. 503 287 3093 or 800944 6190 (toll free), fax 503 280 8832, e-mail: info@isbs.com, website: www.isbs.com.

Visit SoPhi home page at http://www.minervakustannus.fi/sophi
Visit Redescriptions home page at http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/redescriptions/

ISBN 952-5478-84-X

Copyright © authors and SoPhi 2004
Printed at Kopijyvä Ltd., Jyväskylä 2004
Jörn Leonhard

*From European Liberalism to the Languages of Liberalisms:*

**THE SEMANTICS OF LIBERALISM IN EUROPEAN COMPARISON**

Within the mainstream analyses of the European variations of bourgeois society, much intensified during the last ten years by comparative research projects, approaches developed by social history clearly dominated the field of research.¹ Yet in the last few years we have observed a shift towards more coverage of the cultural aspects of bourgeois societies in 19th-century Europe, part of which is the analysis of ideological language and political discourse.² A comparative history of concepts examines the transformations, value and validity, coherence and connections of basic concepts in order to reconstruct the long-term transition of the old European social order into modern bourgeois societies on the level of political discourse. The comparative analysis aims at finding the specific ambivalences, turning-points, con-temporaneity and non-contemporaneity within this European transformation by contrasting the different histories of the same concept in different countries. The premise of this approach results from the idea of specific historical experiences and expectations which determined the semantic structure of any socio-political concept.³
This paper tries to apply a semantic analysis to the comparative analyses of European liberalism. It is obvious that many results of comparative analyses dealing with Germany and Britain question the traditional roles of the English pioneer and the Sonderweg of Germany in view of political, social and economic modernization. Nevertheless these prejudices gave rise to many studies comparing English and German Liberalism: Whereas the English model showed an apparent harmony of political, social and economic modernization, the German disharmony between a delayed social and economic development on the one hand and constitutional and political backwardness on the other apparently predestined the failure of German liberalism. But these retrospective categories of winners and losers in history do not take into consideration a fundamental question that seems to be essential for any comparative analysis, namely the different contemporary meanings of such basic concepts as liberal in different historical contexts. The neglect of this semantic aspect results in what I call the trap of semantic nominalism, that means the unconsidered transfer of a concept from the contemporary political language of one country to the political discourse of another. The implicit equating of contemporary meanings in different contexts conceals an important focus of specific experiences and expectations, in other words the possibility of replacing the category of a universal European Liberalism with a spectrum of different histories of contemporary meanings of liberal.

The study of the history of concept is, as a result of different intellectual traditions, not the same in different countries. In Britain and the United States we still find, among other trends, the traditional history of political ideas. The so-called Cambridge School which seems to offer the most advanced theoretical position is associated with so famous scholars like John Pocock and Quentin Skinner, Terence Ball and John Dunn. Its methods are mainly based on philological traditions, often accompanied by systematic and normative approaches and closely linked with political theory and philosophy. In France the quantitative analysis of political vocabularies has led to a technically advanced branch of linguistic computer-research. In Germany the history of concept has been a well established discipline in the field of historical research since the early 1970s. It was motivated by the observation that the language of the sources
was insufficient to express the modern perspective on the past. The structural approach by Werner Conze and Reinhard Koselleck found its expression in the “Historical Basic Concepts. Dictionary of the Political and Social Language in Germany”, published between 1972 and 1992, now consisting of seven volumes with 120 articles in almost 7,000 pages. It is an interesting perspective of scientific development to see the German approach theoretically adapted in the United States and that there is at least a beginning discourse of methods between the different schools.

The theoretical approach presented in this paper follows the history of concept and tries to develop it further on the level of a comparative research. It can be sketched shortly by the following four premises:

(1) Although the semantic relation between words and things is fixed in any speech-act, it changes in time. The semantic transformation of political and social concepts is not congruent with the transformation of political and social structures. Therefore it is a task of historical investigation to find out the specific relation between language and historical reality.

(2) There is no proper or fixed description of the past. As a historian one is always confronted with two faces of the past: We try to reconstruct the changing meaning of concepts in the language of the sources to learn about the contemporary point of view, and by using our modern terminology we subsume the past under our own modern categories and interests. The historian has to be aware of both aspects and the hermeneutic differences: Through an analysis of the contemporary language we may be able to reconstruct mental dispositions and their change in the past, but we also need the modern language to fit the past into our own understanding of the world. It is even more important to be aware of the historical dimension of political semantics as such. Political language is a matter of transition and transformation, thus indicating different experiences and expectations in specific contexts.

(3) Concepts are at the same time indicators and factors of historical reality. They describe the past but they also act in the world. Although one might distinguish different theoretical levels in a philosophical analysis, in terms of a historical analysis political concepts as indicator and factor are mixed together.
(4) Political concepts are not the same in different countries. Different contexts, different mental dispositions are reflected in apparently equal concepts. This leads to the necessary expansion of the history of concept on a comparative level.

The following outline, part of a much larger project which compares the history of the concept liberal/liberalism in 19th-century Britain, Germany, France and Italy in order to examine the semantic analysis as a category for a comparative history of European liberalisms, first focuses on liberal in the English political discourse up to 1830, and then puts this analysis into a comparative perspective by looking at trends of semantic transformation in Germany at the beginning of the 19th century.

Liberal in English Political Discourse: From a Whig Attribute to a Utilitarian Reform Concept

Any analysis of the semantic transformation of the adjective liberal in English political discourse until the beginning of the 1830s presupposes an understanding of the pre-political meaning of liberal during the 17th and 18th centuries. In contrast to the continent, liberal in Britain described much more a social quality than in Germany or France, where it stood for an enlightened attitude, especially since the late 1750s. The Liberal arts, in opposition to the servile or mechanical arts, since the early Middle Ages were an attribute of the free man and pointed to the private sphere of a gentleman. In a society which, in comparison with Germany or France, was much less characterized by formal criteria, the notion “as a gentleman be liberal” signified a social distance defined by cultural criteria: Munificence and tolerance presupposed economic independence and a classical education. The persistence of this aristocratic meaning of liberal cannot be overestimated: It dominated the pre-political meaning of the concept liberal for a long time, and even when a new political meaning was imported from the continent in response to the consequences of the French revolution, the traditional pre-
political meaning of *liberal* as a social attribute of an educated gentleman was never totally eliminated.

Even in 1818 a contemporary dictionary attributed "*liberal habits*" to "*persons of good birth*". The expression *liberal attitude* rather indicated an individual quality than a political program. It depended on tolerance, an open and unprejudiced state of mind and the will to take responsibility for one's own opinion in public. On the other hand, this private and aristocratic context of the adjective *liberal* could easily be transformed into a political one. Since 1815 *liberal measures*, *liberal principles* and *liberal pursuits* were more than mere pre-political concepts. Without already being a party denomination, *liberal* in these expressions catered for specific political and social expectations by integrating new meanings into an adjective that already existed: The complex overlapping of pre-political and political aspects marks the first stage of the semantic transformation.

The link between the originally un-political adjective *liberal* and a distinct Whig identity was strengthened during the 18th century. This did not already mean a political adaptation of *liberal*. But for the Whig aristocracy a *liberal education* was an essential part of their own distinct sphere, a necessary step if one wanted to belong to an aristocratic political and social elite. In this sense Lord Holland in 1830 spoke of "*good liberal,* nay I should say, Whig principles", thus signifying the connection between both concepts. Even then neither *Whig* nor *liberal* could be reduced to a mere political meaning. In this context they rather represented a cultivation of the private. Being confronted with a radically new concept of political and social liberty in the course of the French Revolution, which no longer originated from an organic concept of liberty but from the *principes* of the French Enlightenment which claimed natural rights for all men, thus refusing to accept any historical, religious or social prejudices or privileges, Edmund Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, opposed a revolutionary understanding of the concept *liberality*. For him, the idea of necessary political change was deprived, through this new meaning of *liberality*, of historical continuity in the face of abstract principles. Criticizing the confiscation of private property by the French revolutionary government, Burke pointed to similar measures during the reign of Henry VIII and continued ironically:
Had fate reserved him to our time, four technical terms would have done his business, and saved him all his trouble; he needed nothing more than one short form of incantation — ‘Philosophy, Light, Liberality, the Rights of Men’.  

In contrast to the Whig understanding of liberality as a characteristic mark of the noble, free-minded, munificent gentleman, this new liberality was nothing but a result of Jacobin and revolutionary principles and thus a great danger to the political system in Britain.

Though one might argue that, during the 18th century, the differences between the traditional concepts Whig and Tory regarding the social and political system of Britain were more and more reduced because both political groups identified with the principle of private property as the basis of the political and social system, it was nevertheless possible for the Whigs to resume their historical role as friends of liberty. It is obvious that the ideological conflicts and discussions, caused by the French revolution, served as a catalyst for a new kind of semantic segregation between Whig and Tory and a reformulation of Whig political identity. In 1815, James Mackintosh wrote:

The precise difference between a moderate Tory and a moderate Whig, is, we conceive, this – That a Tory is more influenced by loyalty, and a Whig by the love of liberty – that a Tory considers liberty as the second interest of society, while a Whig regards it as the first.  

Henry Brougham, in 1824, pointed out that “the principles of high Toryism are working in favour of ... the conspiracy ... against the liberties of mankind” whereas the Whigs seemed to be and to have been their natural defenders, thus also fulfilling the duty of maintaining the British constitutional system. The new adjective liberal became part of this specific identification of Whig, in contrast to the Tories as the “High Church party” who had been “always the most bitter enemies of liberty, and indeed of all improvements”. So Brougham characterized Lord Clarendon as “the most liberal and the least enemy of freedom”. Liberal principles were now easily attributed to a special Whig-identity and a universal fight for political liberty. The Edinburgh Review for example praised Lafayette and pointed out that “... no friend of liberal
principles can feel anything but sympathy and pride in following the progress of this great patriot through the United States”.22

The origin of the political meaning of liberal as a party denomination comes from the first Spanish constitution of 1812. The adherents of this new constitution called themselves liberales and spoke of their opponents who supported the absolute monarchy as serviles.23 It was with regard to the political situation in Spain that the new political adjective liberal found its way into the English political vocabulary. It is significant, that this import was a negative semantic adaptation. Lord Castlereagh, in 1816, thought rather of a purely revolutionary party in the tradition of the French Jacobins when speaking of the liberales although their origin was the fight against French occupation during Napoleon's reign. Castlereagh was afraid of any danger to political stability abroad but he did not think of any political group at home which deserved the new party name:

The ‘Liberales' though in a military point of view an anti-French party, were politically a French party of the very worst description. They had declared that they would not admit Ferdinand's right to the throne, unless he put his seal to the principles which they laid down, and among the rest to that of the sovereignty being in the people. The ‘Liberales' were a perfectly Jacobinical party, in point of principle.24

Until 1818/19 English authors made use of the new political concept liberal very often in the foreign spelling to describe the interior political situation on the continent, thus also underlining the un-English origin of the new political concept. In march 1817, Francis Jeffrey spoke of the adherents of the constitution in Spain: “The Liberales are habitually sneered at and the Constitutionalists made a name of mockery”.25 Henry Brougham described his traveling companion in Genoa as “a distinguished Liberale, of a very high birth, who has just refused an archbishopric from principle”.26 But when speaking of British politics, authors referred to the historical party names Whig and Tory or radical which characterized the extra-parliamentary opposition and their demand for parliamentary reform, equal representation, the end of corruption and elections on the basis of a disproportionate system. The continental context dominated the meaning of liberal when being used in English political texts for a considerably long period. Only
very reluctantly did liberal appear after 1815 indicating a changing tone in British politics. Robert Southey, in 1816, spoke for the first time of the “British ‘liberales’”, thus mixing the Spanish spelling of the party name with an application to the English political scenario in order to point a negative picture of the political opponent. As late as 1826 Walter Scott was using the French spelling of liberal to point to the reformers in parliament when speaking of “Canning, Huskisson, and a mitigated party libéraux”. For many Tory authors, liberal simply served as a negative label that was clearly related to continental revolutionary experiments, be it French, Spanish, Italian or Greek. For them liberal represented Jacobin terror and Napoleonic despotism under the guise of an apparently progressive label. Liberal seemed to be essentially un-English and defined the border between continental political instability in the course of 1789 and the British model of political and social stability. In this sense liberal was an easy semantic tool to stigmatize the political opponent by relating him to political revolution and social upheaval.

In August 1819 the conservative Courier took up liberal in the English spelling in an article dealing with the Peterloo massacre, attributing the negative meaning of the un-English concept to the supporters of extra-parliamentary reform at a time when the authorities still seemed to guarantee political order and social stability:

As we predicted, the liberals are beginning to ring their doleful changes upon the transactions that occurred at Manchester on Monday ... The liberals of course attribute this peaceable and orderly conduct to the lamblike and gentle dispositions of the Reformers themselves ... We have to high a respect for the noble qualities of British jurisprudence to imitate our Liberals.

This semantic opposition between liberal and the Tory government dominated the 1820s and served at the same time as a catalyst for the application of the term Liberal party, criticized by the Tories but subsequently accepted by certain Whigs to denote their progressive position. In 1821 E. Ward wrote in a letter to Lord Castlereagh from Lisbon:

The Cortes ... are ... a little afraid of England, and of England only. But they think the Liberal party is so strong amongst us that the Ministry,
however they may love despotism and legitimacy, cannot act against them.31

Another important catalyst for the semantic adaptation and integration of liberal into the English political vocabulary was the founding of the short-lived but influential literary journal of the Byron-circle “The Liberal, or Verse and Prose from the South” by Leigh Hunt in 1822. It contained articles by Byron, Shelly and others, often in a critical if not opposing tone, not only dealing with the political developments in the south of Europe but also criticizing the politics of George III and Lord Castlereagh. The title already anticipated the program: The south of Europe with the many revolutionary movements demanding independence and political freedom, such as in Greece, constituted the background, but Leigh Hunt, in the preface of the first edition, also pointed to the traditional meaning of liberal in the context of classical education, thus relating the political implications with the ideal of Roman and Greek literature as the framework of humanity and political freedom.32 It is significant that in the public controversy about the new journal critics reacted to the title to formulate a satirical antidote: “The Illiberal, or Verse and Prose from the North”.33

The enthusiasm for the Greek movement for national independence from Turkish despotism and an advanced political constitution found many supporters in England. The London Greek Committee organized a special loan to help the Greeks and many popular radical reformers like Bentham appeared in the subscribers’ lists.34 These circles with their pamphlets and tracts were at the same time avenues for the diffusion of the term liberal. In contrast to the negative meaning dominating the Tory use of the concept, they attributed advanced political opinions and a desire for constitutional change to the adjective. Bentham contributed his Constitutional Code of 1822 to Greece “for the use of All Nations and all Governments professing Liberal Opinions” which for him stood for universal suffrage, representative democracy and freedom of speech.35 Edward Blaquiere, a leading member of the London Greek movement and a close friend of Bentham, after a long journey in the Mediterranean countries developed the idea “to promote a closer union and clearer understanding between the liberal thinkers throughout Europe”.36 Already at the
beginning of the 1820s it became clear that *liberal* was not only coined in regard to the Greek or Spanish political movements but was more and more applied to the English Philhellenes themselves. Thus Leicester Stanhope, who in 1825 stressed the “*liberal course in politics*” of the leading Greek politicians,\(^{37}\) appeared to be “*champion of liberal opinions*” in the British public.\(^{38}\) The English Philhellenic circles first integrated the imported concept *liberal* in order to denote the popular movements in Greece, Spain and Italy before they were called or called themselves *liberals* to indicate their advanced political opinions. Stanhope in 1857 stated with regard to his support for the Greeks that he had been “*a liberal in politics all my life*”.\(^{39}\) William Hazlitt described Byron “*in his politics*” as “*a liberal*”. Hazlitt's view on “*Lord Byron's preposterous liberalism*” already reflected the ambivalence between Byron's aristocratic origin and his romantic enthusiasm for national independence and political freedom.\(^{40}\)

The end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 also marked the end of the internal political abstinence in British politics. The blocking of any public reform debate, defended until 1815 because of the necessary concentration of the national forces in the fight against France, ceased and the shift from foreign affairs to home affairs produced to a certain extent the nutriment in which the semantic transformation of the political adjective *liberal* from an un-English adjective with revolutionary implications into an integral concept of the English political language took place. The changing atmosphere of public opinion, now considered an important factor in the political life of the nation, was reflected by the slow adaptation of the imported concept *liberal*. A quotation from Robert Peel's letter to John Wilson Croker in 1820 exactly marks this state of the semantic process:

*Do not you think that the tone of England – of that great compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy, and newspaper paragraphs, which is called public opinion – is more liberal – to use an odious but intelligible phrase, than the policy of the Government? Do not you think that there is a feeling, becoming daily more general and more confined – that is independent of the pressure of taxation, or any immediate cause – in favour of some undefined change in the mode of governing the country?* \(^{41}\)
THE SEMANTICS OF LIBERALISM IN EUROPEAN COMPARISON

Although liberal for other Tories stood for the import of revolutionary experiments into British politics, Robert Peel believed it to be the right expression to indicate the changing “tone of England”. Public opinion for him was no longer divided along the traditional party names Whig and Tory. The line of demarcation was marked by those who were in favour of maintaining the political status quo and those who supported “some undefined change”. For him, the dissatisfaction of the public opinion was evident and pointed to the necessity of political reforms. Peel’s use of liberal in this context indicates the point of transition between the imported invective and the adaptation of liberal as the political concept denoting the growing demand for reform, a process closely connected both with a polarization and an intensified ideologization of the political language at the beginning of the 1820s.

In 1827, Henry Brougham, a leading member of the moderate Whigs among the Edinburgh Reviewers, reflected on the “State of parties” since the beginning of the 1820s. He made extensive use of liberal to denote a new principle in British politics. Behind the progress of liberal opinions he identified a new course of foreign policy, advocating national independence abroad and thus opposing the restorative objects of the Holy Alliance:

The progress of liberal opinions was immediately and rapidly accelerated by the conduct, and still more by the language of the Government in 1823 and the subsequent years. In a few months the disgraceful connexion with the Holy Alliance was at an end ... The recognition of the new commonwealths in South America, and the establishment of political as well as mercantile relations with them, very soon followed ... and the most decisive steps were taken to defend Portugal, harassed by the intrigues, and menaced by the arms of Spain, for the crime of having accepted a Constitutional Government.42

Because for Brougham as for other Edinburgh Reviewers, liberal no longer implied a revolutionary tone in politics, it was now not only possible for the Whig reformers to apply the term when speaking of a new political concept, but also to use it as a self-indication. However, the semantic application and integration of liberal did not develop along clearly defined demarcation lines between government and opposition or between Tory and Whig. Liberal was not yet a party
denomination, but rather represented those groups in Parliament that demanded reforms. Brougham consequently spoke of the “Liberal Parties on both sides of the House”. They should stand for an advanced and progressive, but moderate reform-policy “for the good of the country”, which – according to Brougham – also included members of the government:

it was to the ‘Liberal part of the Government’ that they [the Whigs’ opposition] lent their aid; it was to them they looked for the reform of abuses; it was in their sound principles that they reposed confidence for the future. To give them encouragement in their wise and honourable course, became an object of importance for the good of the country; and aware how their opponents in the Cabinet endeavoured to hinder their progress, the Opposition employed all means for comforting and strengthening their hands, and enabling them to overcome the common enemy.43

It is a fundamental function of any analysis of the history of concepts to find semantic indicators that anticipate historical changes, transitions and turning points on the level of political language before the consequences of these changes become obvious on the level of political actions. Already before the transformation of the traditional party names Whig and Tory into the new concepts liberal and conservative – a long-term semantic process that ended in the late 1830s – and before these new denominations became widespread and popular, Brougham came to the conclusion that the main ideological antagonism in British politics was no longer expressed by the traditional concepts. These party names originated either in the 17th century and thus reflected the factions of the civil war (Court versus Country), the political antagonists of the Glorious Revolution (Whig versus Tory) or they indicated the aspirations of the Stuarts (Loyalist versus Jacobin) during the 18th century if not the new party names coined in the course of the French Revolution. Liberal as a post-revolutionary concept in England cannot be interpreted but with regard to the ideological polarization since the experiment of absolutism during the 17th century. This was reproduced in the subsequent party-names that did not have any equivalent on the continent:
The semantics of Liberalism in European Comparison

A new casting also of political sects has taken place; the distinctions, and almost the names, of Loyalist and Jacobin, Whig and Tory, Court and Country Faction, are fast wearing away. Two great divisions of the community will, in all likelihood, soon be far more generally known; the Liberal and the Illiberal, who will divide, but we may be sure most unequally, the suffrages of the Nation.

For Brougham, the concept Liberal party did not only stand for a coalition of reformers in parliament but for a national movement, united in the demand for advanced and progressive reform but equally united in the desire for stability and order:

Nor is it the name only that this arrangement will be new; the people will be differently distributed; the coalition, which has been gradually forming among the public men whose personal respect and mutual confidence has brought about so fortunate a union, extends to the community at large. Some of the older questions, by which Tory and Whig were wont to be divided, retain all their importance; but upon these, the Liberal party, of whatever denomination, are well agreed.

This Liberal party had to be open to all those who advocated reforms as long as they followed a gradual and not a revolutionary strategy. Indirectly this included a leading position for the Whigs and their self-defined role as historical and natural friends of reform and liberty:

Extremes will be avoided; alterations in our system will be gradual; and the only risk which the existence, or the measures of a Liberal Government could run, will be avoided, – that of a reaction against them, – when it is distinctly perceived by all men, that we are governed by individuals, whose great parts are under the control of sound discretion, and whose conduct is, in all things, tempered with the moderation of practical wisdom.

As long as liberal did not stand for a party denomination it was also possible for moderate Tories to use the term in order to point to the advanced character of their policy. George Canning, who at the end of the 1820s saw Britain “on the brink of a great struggle between property and population”, believed that such a social and political conflict could only be avoided “by the mildest and most liberal legislation.” A liberal legislation included, for instance, the emancipation of the Catholics.
and dissenters and diplomatic support for constitutional and national movements abroad. This policy was warmly welcomed by the reform oriented Whigs as examples of sound, enlightened, liberal, and truly English principles – principles worthy of our best times and of our most distinguished statesman – which now govern this country in her foreign policy.

The change of government in 1830 emphasized how much liberal had become an attribute of Whig reform policy. It is obvious that the Whig ideal dominated the meaning of what liberal stood for: Francis Baring defined both the terms Whigs and liberals as a body of men connected with high rank and property, bound together by hereditary feeling and party ties, as well as higher motives, who in bad times keep alive the sacred flames of freedom, and when the people are roused, stand between the constitution and revolution, and go with the people, but not to extremities.

This was a classic definition of a Whig identity, now transferred into the semantics of the concept liberal. But in spite of this application it is not possible to reduce its semantic spectrum to a mere Whig notion. The Edinburgh Review continued to use liberal not only to label the moderate Whigs' campaign for the Reform Bill but also to characterize the political position of Robert Peel regarding the emancipation of the Catholics or the Corn Law question in opposition to Wellington's and Aberdeen's course:

He has become a distinguished and most valuable votary of liberal principles. He had taken ... to reform the criminal law; he has heartily supported the reformers of our civil jurisprudence. He is a friend of a liberal policy in commercial matters; and, probably, no adherent to the false views of arbitrary power, cherished by the Wellings and the Aberdeens in respect to foreign affairs ... That such conduct has justly recommended him to the chiefs of the liberal party, is as certain as that it has destroyed his whole personal weight in the country.

The Edinburgh Reviewers made a clear difference between the high Tories who were also called ultras in parallel to the French conservatives, and the “liberal Tories”: 
When we speak of Tories, — we use the name for shortness, and to express the ultra principles of that party ... We are far, indeed, from holding that the liberal Tories and their views are in the same disrepute among us.51

**Liberal**, in contrast to the semantic structure of continental political language, did not constitute a deep polarization based on a different **Weltanschauung** between ministry and opposition, or **Tory** and **Whig**. Since there was no such antagonism between state and society like, for instance, in Germany, **liberal** did not easily serve as a semantic weapon against the government. Nevertheless the take-over by the Whigs intensified the use of **liberal** in public discourse. Contemporaries were now used to speak of **liberal views** or the **Liberal Ministry** of the Whigs,52 of stating a **liberal policy**, **liberal principles**, **liberal opinions** or **liberal colours**.53 **Liberal party**, too, became a common concept in the political public,54 but it did not easily replace the expression **Whig**.

On the other hand the persistence of the Whig definition of **liberal** must not be overemphasized. The small but ideologically influential group of the Philosophic Radicals, especially the young John Stuart Mill, developed a different definition of the reform-label **liberal**. In comparison with the pragmatic application of **liberal** by the moderate Whigs, Mill gave **liberal** and **liberalism** a much more anthropological dimension. For him, **Toryism** meant “that it is good for man to be ruled; to submit both his body & mind to the guidance of a higher intelligence & virtue.” **Liberalism**, on the other hand, seemed the incarnation of the responsible individual:

[Toryism] is therefore the direct antithesis of liberalism, which is for making every man his own guide & sovereign master, & letting him think for himself & do exactly as he judges best for himself, giving other men leave to persuade him if they can by evidence, but forbidding him to give way to authority; and still less allowing him to constrain him more than the existence & tolerable security of every man's person and property renders indispensably necessary.55

Mill's definition of **liberalism** went far beyond the Whigs' historical meaning of the concept: Whereas **liberal** for the Whigs seemed as an additive concept to prove their advanced reform-strategy, to renew the semantic agenda of their self-styled political identity as **friends of**
**Jørn Leonhard**

**liberty**, Mill focused on the individual and his natural rights that could only be restricted by the equal right of security and property of others – a classic notion of the Enlightenment.

The slow adaptation of *liberal* up to the beginning of the 1830s led to the long-term replacement of the term *Whig* until the 1840s. *Whig* became a concept denoting a more anachronistic political opinion within the *Liberal party*. Nevertheless this replacement, indicating the shift from an aristocratic definition of party to a middle-class concept, was not a sudden change but a long-term semantic transformation that is reflected in the history of *liberal*. The change from the revolutionary import into the Tory invective of the 1820s did not stop with the political self-definition of the reform-oriented Whigs. The disappointment of the Philosophical Radicals with the Whigs' policy after the First Reform Bill found its expression in a criticism of the concept *Whig* that appeared more and more outdated. It made a definition of *liberal* necessary, now being no longer the attribute of progressive Whigs but of a middle-class oriented radical reform-policy. In 1836, Mill stated, that the Whigs were

... a coterie, not a party; a set, confined to London and Edinburgh, who commanded a certain number of seats in Parliament, and a certain portion of the press, and were accepted by the Reformers as leaders, because they offered themselves, and because there was nobody else.56

In contrast to the Whigs who appeared to be of no principle than that of maintaining power under all circumstances, who aimed at dominating public opinion only by seemingly confessing *liberal opinions*, Mill characterized the *liberals of the empire* as thorough reformers, motivated by the *public good* and the ideal of *good government*. That meant a policy against aristocratic interest and prejudice or the privileged classes and required a new sort of politician open-minded enough to carry on the reform-projects:

This position [of the Whigs] the Liberals of the empire have never chosen to participate. They did not repudiate the Whigs; but as little did they repudiate what the Whigs repudiated. They were neither Whigs nor Radicals; they were Reformers. They had not predetermined how far parliamentary reform should go; but they were disposed to carry it as
far as, on trial, should be found necessary for obtaining good government. They were not for the ballot, or annual parliaments, because the opinion did not generally prevail among them that nothing less would suffice; but they had no prejudice against either, if an extension of the suffrage, with septennial or triennial parliaments, should fail to give them a government of which the pervading spirit should be a regard to the public good.\(^57\)

Mill identified the *liberals* no longer with the Whigs, but with a new kind of *movement party* led by the Philosophic Radicals and articulating the new demands of the Middle Classes growing both in mere numbers and political influence. The semantic transformation of *liberal* from the Whig reform label into the political Middle-class attribute accompanied the complex transition from the *Whig* to the *Liberal party* in 19th-century Britain on the level of political language.

**Towards a Comparative History of the Semantics of Liberalism**

Both in Germany and in Britain there existed pre-political meanings of the concept *liberal* before the beginning of the 19th century. But whereas *liberal* in England had either a more aristocratic connotation in expressions like *liberal gentleman* or *liberal education* or was used in the religious sphere, *liberal* in Germany indicated, at least since the late 1750s, an individual quality of an advanced enlightened *Gesinnung*, a concept which is difficult to translate because of its various overlapping implications: it does not only mean a cast of mind or a basic conviction, but also denotes a moral quality. *Liberale Gesinnung* pointed to the fundamental idea of the responsible individual who was of higher moral and ethical value on account of his unprejudiced state of mind. This semantic structure persisted in the later history of the political concept *liberal*. It is obvious that the moral quality of the *liberale Gesinnung* or *Liberalität* goes far beyond mere political denominations. Kant's difference between *liberalitas sumptuosa*, mere munificence in the tradition of the Roman emperors' *liberalitas*, and *liberalitas moralis* as an unprejudiced state of mind
and independence of one's own opinion, deeply influenced the later history of *liberale Gesinnung* in Germany.\(^{58}\)

A *liberal* in Germany was, according to contemporary definitions, someone who thought and acted in accordance with the natural progress of history and reason.\(^{59}\) If history was nothing but the progress of reason, the reasonable man as a *liberal* represented at the same time the avant-garde of history as such. Moral quality, mental maturity and the self-esteem to act in accordance with the progressive forces in history came together in the label *liberal*. In the light of this idea it becomes clear why many definitions claimed that every man, guided by reason and enlightenment, would quite naturally become a *liberal*. *Liberal* stood for an unbroken belief in the power of history which was understood as a continual and progressive path towards the realization of reason and humanity, thus fulfilling the secular *Heilsgeschichte* of the Enlightenment.\(^{60}\)

Whereas the English denomination of parties originated in the 17th century and made it possible to slowly integrate the new concept *liberal* into an already existing political nomenclature, in Germany the semantic import of *liberal* coined by the French revolution and Napoleon was essential. The *idées libérales*, first developed by Bonaparte in his proclamation of the 18th Brumaire 1799,\(^{61}\) were, after 1815, translated into *liberale Ideen*, now indicating the overall demand for both national unity and constitutional progress in Germany.\(^{62}\) A similar development took place in Italy.\(^{63}\) For Metternich this concept could be nothing but a revolutionary label. The public confidence in the "*Liberalität der Regierung*", the government's liberality, became more and more reduced after the change in the political atmosphere after 1819/20.\(^{64}\) When it became clear that there would be no further constitutional compromises offered by the German governments, *liberal* became an opposition-label, defining the progressive and backward forces in society.\(^{65}\) The use of the term reflected the deep gap between state and society, for which there is no equivalent in the history of the English concept *liberal*. At the end of the 1820s, *liberalism* in Germany signified the uncontested belief in the progress of reason while the restorative governments represented nothing but backwardness and out-dated forces in history. The *liberal party* could be nothing but a *movement party*, symbol of natural progress in history.\(^{66}\)
In contrast to this ideological optimism, the early definitions of liberal in Germany reflected a specific uncertainty with regard to the political and social implications of a concrete program. Wahrer Liberalismus, true liberalism, had to be defended against radical forces in the tradition of the terreur of the French Revolution. At least until the July Revolution in France, the history of liberal in Germany is at the same time a history of the interpretation of the French Revolution, whereas in England the import of the new concept cannot be understood without an understanding of the experiences of the 17th century. On the continent, the Napoleonic occupation led to a direct confrontation with the French idées libérales as Napoleon's programmatic formula of the results of 1789. Napoleon's invention of the idées libérales became part of the short-lived but influential imperial ideology. As the “héro des idées libérales” he proclaimed to be both the only legitimate heir and the only one who could guarantee the positive results of 1789, thus fulfilling the legitimate objects of the French Revolution. This imperial understanding of 1789 was coined in the idées libérales, and the concept even survived the emperor's defeat in 1815.

In contrast to Germany or Italy, where the direct import of the idées libérales resulted in a translation and direct application of the French concept to express the demands for national unity and constitutional reforms after 1815, the confrontation with the new concept in England was rather indirect. With regard to the Spanish liberales or the French libéraux, the new political adjective was used to describe the political situation in the continental countries. Both the Torys' use of it as a derogatory label for their political opponents and the Philhellene movement contributed to the diffusion of liberal. However, for a considerably long period of time liberal retained an un-English tone because it represented political movements and groups in countries other than Britain. Only when the reform-oriented Whigs of the Edinburgh Review accepted liberal as a term with which to label their own position and political strategy, liberal for the first time became a positive and progressive semantic indicator in English political language, replacing the traditional semantic oppositions between Court/Country, Whig/Tory and Jacobin/Loyalist. But whereas the label in Germany reflected the deepening gap between a restorative state and the growing opposition movements and served as a
polarizing Weltanschauung, a Gesinnung, in England it was also possible to denote progressive and reform-oriented Tories like Peel as liberals. The concept did not mark a clearly defined border between ministry and opposition but reflected the difference between reform-oriented forces in the public and the political status quo. The Whigs' adaptation of liberal, by linking the traditional pre-political meaning with a new political understanding, finally provoked the opposition of the Philosophic Radicals. Mill's definition no longer reflected an aristocratic but, rather, a new middle class understanding. For him the Liberal party in contrast to the old Whig party was based on middle class interests.

Nevertheless, liberal in English political discourse lacked the ideological polarization of its German equivalent, including the moral disqualification of the illiberal opponent who did not act in accordance with reason and the progressive forces in history. The adaptation of liberal by the moderate Whigs underlined a gradual evolutionary reform strategy and until 1832 delayed the development of far reaching ideological conflict lines in political discourse that was so significant for the use of liberal in Germany. The uncertainty of what liberal stood for, led to an inflation of definitions of wahrer and falscher Liberalismus, true and false liberalism until 1848. Ideological frontiers were anticipated by the history of concept. But in spite of the growing demand for reliable definitions, the semantic half-life of such definitions became shorter, underlining the dynamicism of political discourse in pre-March Germany.69

The battle of concepts in Germany, between liberal and radical, at the same time compensated for the lack of concrete political participation and led to a fight between different Weltanschauungen, which served as political religions, whereas in England the semantic adaptation of liberal took place in the context of already existing channels of political participation. Liberal implied reform within the existing political and social system. It did not indicate an insurmountable blocking of reform or a fundamental opposition between political forces and government. In Germany liberal also stood for an enlightened Gesinnung, a moral quality deeply connected with academic education and serving the identity of the Bildungsbürgertum on the one hand and a more and more heterogeneous opposition movement on the other, including radical groups that
were critical towards a mere parliamentary reform strategy. The impact of the July Revolution in Germany laid open these different opposition strategies, stretching from Honoratioren in the existing state parliaments like Baden, Hesse or Bavaria to much more radical circles in the context of the Hambach Festival of 1832.

All these different groups could be labeled as liberal or called themselves liberals, but the definitions varied and made blurred the concept for many contemporaries. On the one hand it represented the broad cultural criteria of the Bildungsbürgertum, coined in the ideal of liberale Gesinnung that could not be linked to the idea of an organized party, but stressed the independent individual with his own opinion, the social network of Honoratioren, with equal experiences in education, university and associations. On the other hand, liberal stood for political opposition directed against restorative governments, which included different strategies in order to end the blocking of political and social reforms. The broad connotation of liberal as movement and progress in history allowed the integration of these different meanings for a certain period of time. But the lack of real political participation, the antagonism between state and society in pre-March Germany, reinforced by the federal structure of the Confederation, led to a disintegration of the meaning of liberal. The strategies and social forces that stood behind the label became too heterogeneous to be integrated by a single concept. The political landscape was marked by new denominations, for instance radical or conservativ.

The ideological explosives that characterized the debates about the concept in Germany were a consequence of the fight for political institutions that were about to be reformed in England at the same time. In Germany the discussion about liberal and liberalism went with the foundation of a political landscape with different political groups that later would become political parties whereas in England this landscape already existed, though marked by traditional party denominations. The evolutionary transition of this landscape was anticipated by the transformation from Whig to liberal, announced by Mill's antagonism between an aristocratic Whig and an utilitarian middle class understanding of liberal. In Germany, on the other hand, the attempt to hold on to the concept liberal as the expression of reasonable reform in spite of revolutionary action overshadowed the
real split of the opposition movement. The lack of political participation postponed the outbreak of this conflict until 1848, but the semantic border line between liberal and radical already anticipated the different strategies. In spite of the optimistic meaning of liberal at the end of the 1820s, it was no longer possible to integrate all political interests of a society in transition under this label. The Weltanschauung of progress in history and political reason as an enlightened response to 1789 did not fill the widening gap between political and social interests. This led to a far reaching ambivalence in the history of the concept in Germany: Enlightened optimism and the belief in natural progress on the one hand and the actual defense of liberal/liberalism in the face of conservative and radical groups on the other were overlapping.

This simultaneous overlapping of non-contemporaneous semantic aspects crystallized the transformation of political language and the zones of faction within this process in pre-March Germany. The history of the concept liberal thus reflected the developing pluralism of interests and the subsequent conflicts in modern bourgeois society. Ideologies, Clifford Geertz has written, are cognitive maps "of problematic social reality". The European variations of the history of the concept liberal in different historical contexts offer, like a map, a representation of different historical landscapes, based on specific experiences of the past and expectations of the future. The fascination of such a semantic map lies in the chance to perceive the change of historical meanings in time, something of a third dimension that invites travel. It presupposes a concept which contains and unites in itself all semantic transformations. Such a concept evades any definition. Or, as Nietzsche put it: "definable is anything that has no history".

Notes


16 See Francis Jeffrey in an article for the Edinburgh Review in 1808, in id., Contributions to the Edinburgh Review (London 1853), p. 245: “... neither liberal nor gainful pursuits can be carried out with advantage where there is no political freedom.”


27 See for example *Quarterly Review* xv (1816), p. 69.


29 See the letter of F. Lambs to Lord Castlereagh from Munich (4th January 1820), *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh*, vol. XII, ed. C. Vane (London 1853), p. 169; see also *Annual Register* (1819), pp. 171-2, 178 and ibid. (1820), pp. 221, 239.


31 *Memoirs and Correspondence of Viscount Castlereagh*, vol. XI, p. 438.

32 [Leigh Hunt] ‘Preface’, in *The Liberal, or Verse and Prose from the South* i (1822), pp. VIII-IX.

33 [William Gifford] *The Illiberal! Verse and Prose from the North!! Dedicated to My Lord Byron in the South!! To be continued occasionally!! As a supplement to each number of ‘The Liberal’* (London [1822]).


43 Ibid., p. 421.
44 Ibid., p. 431; Lord Holland, who identified himself with the Whigs of the 18th century, in a letter to Lord Grey dated 21st December 1826 described how the traditional Whig-concept was more and more overshadowed by new conflict-lines dominated by new political and economic antagonisms: “Political parties are no more. Whig and Tory, Foxite and Pittite, Ministers and Opposition have ceased to be distinctions, but the divisions of classes and great interests are arrayed against each other – grower and consumer, lands and funds, Irish and English, Catholic and Protestant”, quoted in Keith Graham Feiling, The Second Tory Party 1714-1832 (London 1938), pp. 401-2.
46 Ibid., p. 432.
52 Ibid., pp. 231-2.
54 Ibid., p. 185.
57 Ibid.

60 See the first detailed definition of the new political term [Johann Christoph Freiherr von Aretin] ‘Was heißt Liberal? Zum Theil mit Benützung eines französischen Aufsatzes in dem Nouvelliste Français’, Neue Allemannia i (1816), pp. 163-75.


65 For the adaptation of liberalism during the 1820s’ political discourse see Wilhelm Traugott Krug, Geschichtliche Darstellung des Liberalismus alter und neuer Zeit. Ein historischer Versuch (Leipzig 1823) and the subsequent critical response Liberalismus – Antiliberalismus: oder ein Wort über die Schrift des Herrn Professor Krug in Leipzig (Neustadt 1824); see also ‘Über Ultraismus und Liberalismus’, Neue Monatsschrift für Deutschland, historisch-politischen Inhalts xv (1824), pp. 112-28.

68 Mémoires de M. de Bourrienne, ministre d'état; sur Napoléon, le directoire, le consulat, l'empire et la restauration, vol. III (Paris 1829), p. 28.

Bibliography

1. Primary Sources

a) British Sources

Annual Register (1819, 1820).


[William Gifford] *The Illiberal! Verse and Prose from the North!! Dedicated to My Lord Byron in the South!! To be continued occasionally!! As a supplement to each number of ‘The Liberal’* (London [1822]).

[T.C. Hansard] *The Parliamentary Debates from the Year 1803 to the Present Time*, published under the Superintendence of T.C. Hansard. First Series (1803-1820), vol. XXXVII.


[Francis Jeffrey] ‘Wat Tyler and Mr. Southey’, *Edinburgh Review* xxviii (1817).


Quarterly Review xv (1816).

Leicester Stanhope, *Greece, in 1823 and 1824; being a Series of Letters, and Other Documents, on the Greek Revolution, Written during a Visit to that Country* (New Edition, London 1825).
Leicester Stanhope, *The Earl of Harrington on the Maine-Law; on the Law of Libel, as Opposed to the Declaration of Truth and the Defence of Character; and Other Subjects* (Derby and London 1858).

b) German Sources


Wolfgang Menzel, *Die deutsche Literatur. 2 Theile* (Stuttgart 1828).


2. Secondary Literature


Terence Ball / James Farr / Russell L. Hanson (ed.), Political innovation and conceptional change (Cambridge 1989).


Malcolm Kelsall, Byron’s Politics (Brighton 1987).
Jörn Leonhard, "1789 fait la ligne de démarcation": Von den napoleonischen idées libérales zum ideologischen Richtungsbegriff libéralisme in Frankreich bis 1850', in: Jahrbuch zur Liberalismus-Forschung, xi (1999), pp. 67-105.


Rolf Reichardt/Eberhard Schmidt/Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (eds.), *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820* (Munich 1985 [beginn of publication]).


Hans-Christoph Schröder, *Die Revolutionen Englands im 17. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/Main 1986).


