



## Book Reviews

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**Rolf Steltemeier**

**Liberalismus**

**Ideengeschichtliches Erbe und  
politische Realität einer  
Denkrichtung**

**Nomos Verlag, Baden-Baden 2015**

Rolf Steltemeier's book *Liberalism – The Legacy of Ideas and the Political Reality of One Way of Thinking* was published by Nomos Publishing House in 2015. Unquestionably, this was a megalomaniacal project that seeks to show one un-systematized and open doctrine, as the author repeatedly points out, in a systematically and closed form. Openness and incompleteness is visible in the presentation of a different authors, ideas and thoughts, in the period from 17th to 21st century, with the aim of finding a common denominator known as liberal doctrine.

Along with the author's preface and the list of literature presented at the very end, the book consists of six chapters. The structure of the book is very complex (both in content and form) because it includes complete history of liberal ideas, methodology, and the vision of the presented ideas in the future. The second chapter is the largest of all chapters. It has more than 500 pages and contains a representation of 36 theoreticians that can, but do not have to, be regarded as liberal theorists. In this chapter Rolf Steltemeier presents authors like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, 19th century authors of liberalism, 20<sup>th</sup> century political and economic theorists (Amartya Sen, Hernando de Soto and Wolfgang Kersting), 20th century political-philosophical theorists (John Rawls, Robert Nozick), and the notion of liberalism as a "reflective form of political modernity". In other chapters, the author offers a typology related to the idea of liberalism, methodological and conceptual explanation, and ends with

a chapter that analyses the future of liberalism.

The author tried and succeeded in his mission not to present this extensive work in a form of a historical display, which is itself valuable yet it does not bring new and original ideas, but to present liberal ideas in an original way. He achieved that with the unusual structure and scientific approach to systematization of ideas, in which they are not accepted *ad hoc* but are processed and systematically presented.

In the chapter that represents the historical development of liberal thinking, Steltemeier wanted to show the developmental path, the broadness, and the incompleteness of liberal thought. At the very beginning, the author argued:

"Liberalism is not an ideology in the sense of dogmatic secular religion, but an open and unfinished doctrine that adapts to reality, requiring from reality to change itself, for which reason there are very different attitudes and great differences of opinion among the liberals."

The meaning of the sentence is "what is liberalism (open and incomplete idea), that is what liberalism advocating."

Although liberal thought has been known earlier, it became a political concept and a concept of hope in the late 18th century, firstly in France, and then throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Consequently, we had the American Declaration of Independence and the French Revolution that propagated liberal ideas before liberalism developed as a political doctrine.

What does the term 'liberal' really mean? All those who believe in ideals and institutions of constitutional democracy? Is modern liberalism a secular form of Western democracy? The concept of liberalism, as stated, refuses to be a precisely defined, thus its application will encompass different meanings relevant to different contexts. This terminological confusion is further strengthened by the national features of liberalism – what is considered to be liberalism in one state, does not have to be understood as liberalism in another. It is also

the case that politicians, who are not liberal and who have nothing in common with liberalism, use the term ‘liberalism’ as a guideline or as a signpost.

The author unquestioningly warns that the liberals have consistently refused the definition and the finished doctrine of liberalism during the last two centuries. However, the mark of affiliation to liberal thought was evident in a resistance to any form of moral, religious, economic, and political authority that hampers individual freedom. In that spirit, liberalism has successfully influenced the development of parliamentarism, rule of law, decentralization, market economy, and as such, it is now inevitable in the political arena. Today, liberal democracy can be understood as a political form that has to be filled with different (liberal) ideological content. Therefore, as the Steltemeier states, Sartori describes it as an empty doctrine or as the “most basic experience of the Western man” because political thought in the West can be understood as liberal doctrine. Against this, it is difficult to fight especially because liberalism often identifies as the bearer of political culture, not political ideology. This is especially evidenced at the beginning of the 21st century, when political liberalism was fully identified with the political culture of liberal democracy.

For a review of the development of liberal thought, Steltemeier begins with T. Hobbes and J. Locke. They are theorists who represent liberal thoughts before the Enlightenment or, more so, before liberalism. From them, the main ideas of liberalism are individual protection and property protection. Following their overview, we can read about theorists after the Enlightenment, theorists who developed the liberal thought such as Montesquieu, J.-J. Rousseau (between liberalism and totalitarianism), Adam Smith (freedom and market), I. Kant, T. Jefferson, and finally W. von Humboldt.

In the next chapter, we can read about theorists who have worked during the French Revolution (Nicolas Caritat, de Condorcet and Sièyes). Their ideas relate to an attempt to develop human rights over a dominant state. Under the chapter title “Liberalism in the nineteenth century”, the author presents theorists such as B. Constant, R. von Mohl (relationship between the individual and the strong state), A. de Tocqueville (supporter of the liberal constitutional state), and finally J. S. Mill who gives the strongest arguments for individual freedom and freedom from the state. After this period, according to Steltemeier, there is a period of political liberalism that he identifies with the work of R. Cobden,

C. F. Bastiat, E. Richter, and F. Naumann, who is presented as a national social liberal. In the 20th century, we can distinguish two approaches to liberal ideology – a political-economic and political-philosophical approach. Political-economic theorists are: L. von Mises (he writes about the relationship between national economy and liberalism); F. A. von Hayek (the right-wing liberal); W. Eucken, J. M. Buchanan and M. Friedman (free market is the source of freedom and prosperity). The second approach – the political-philosophical has extremely diverse theorists who, apart from the common denominator ‘liberal’ and main idea ‘freedom’, do not share almost anything else. Theorist are: J. Rawls, R. Nozick, K. Popper, I. Berlin, and R. Dahrendorf. In the chapter titled “Contemporary Thinkers and Discussions”, Steltemeier cites authors advocating egalitarianism (A. Sen and R. Dworkin), those who do not accept egalitarianism as the starting position (A. Krebs and H. Frankfurt), and lesser-known authors such as M. Yunus, H. de Soto, J. Norberg, and D. Doering. This extensive chapter ends with an analysis of liberalism in the postmodern period where liberalism can be depicted as a reflexive form of political modernity.

Having presented the diversity of theoreticians and their ideas, the author tried to articulate what are key common features that make a theory a liberal theory. At thirty pages, Steltemeier offers a tabular presentation that includes theoretician’s name, civil rights view, economic theory, social policy and attitude on external and European politics. Based on these four areas Steltemeier, using Max Weber model, offers an ideal-type model of liberalism, that is, what has to be the ideology of liberalism.

In this way, Steltemeier tries to offer ‘the hard core of liberalism’. His ‘hard core of liberalism’ or ‘the core of liberal thinking’ is the result of the revolution of ideas that is depicted in this book from T. Hobbes to the postmodern period. It encompasses the idea of an individual as the absolute starting point of liberal opinion, political freedom and private property. To those ideas, Steltemeier adds the market as the backbone of personal freedom, the role of the minimal state as a protector of economic freedoms, but also the political rights and freedoms that make citizens equal.

The liberals formally agree on those ideas or liberal forms, but disagree in content that fills those forms around these areas. The result of this process is pluralism of liberalism. Steltemeier manages to avoid narrowing the picture of liberalism, because liberalism should not be dogmatic and restrictive, but free-minded and open. However, ideology should set the

boundaries and guidelines. The differences between what is and what is not liberalism are most evident in the political practice on which Steltemeier refers.

Contemporary liberal theorists, along with individualism (individual who have own self-determination and autonomy), are now increasingly referred to the community or culture. W. Kymlicka, for example, points out the compatibility of individualism and community value which he calls societal culture. Steltemeier thus lists a number of different forms of liberalism. It is about early, late, radical, conservative, individualistic, collectivist, revisionist, British, continental, European or American liberalism, or continental variant of liberalism, Anglo-Saxon vision of liberalism, classical political liberalism, economic liberalism or libertarianism, social liberalism, etc. Liberal parties, in turn, base their programs on the political framework and commit a flexible understanding of liberalism.

The history of liberalism, as well as history of any ideology (the author has mentioned conservatism and socialism), is not unison, simple, and unidirectional. For example, conservatism advocates aristocratic ideas and status quo, and socialism, from the historical context, exemplifies the necessary need for 'liberation' from the feudal / aristocratic historical legacy. With regard to freedom and property, conservatism goes along with liberalism, while the liberal component is present in socialism in advocating equality and freedom of all people. Socialism is also perceived as a reaction or continuation of the true movement of the liberation from modernity, bourgeoisie, and it includes the abandonment of absolutism. During the history, ideas of liberalism were appropriated both by aristocracy and by working class. Because of all this, it becomes clear why the position of liberalism is extremely problematic in theory and in practice.

However, the author agrees with Thomas A. Spragens, a political theorist, who claims that there is no liberalism yet there is a family of liberalism. Asking the question *What is the unchanging core of liberalism?* and offering an answer or ideal model – ideal type of liberalism – Steltemeier achieves the cohesiveness and systemativity of the book. In the book, author has described in detail and extensively presented the ideological-historical foundations of the development of liberalism. Thus, he encompassed all diversity in the emergence of liberal thoughts in the Western world. This diversity has been synthesized and evoked to what he calls 'the core of liberal thinking'. It includes: the broader concept of freedom, political freedom, economic freedom and the

freedom of the constitutional state. Today that 'core' (freedom of the individual, rule of law and market economy) became the foundation of modern democracy.

Political liberalism is extremely heterogeneous, both in Europe and in the rest of the world. Every state, every political party has their own version and vision of political liberalism. The author thinks that he as a theoretician of political thought needs to find in liberal heterogeneity common liberal values that can be used for saving liberal ideology and, in a way, for saving liberal democracy. For example, those values that did not allow Europe to fall totally into the totalitarian ideas but still was not strong enough for resistance. In that context, the author raises the questions: 'Where was the constitutional state, if the idea of a free citizen society did not apply in everyday life?' or 'Where is the connection between free market and high level of economic inequality?' After the Second World War those challenges have led to the link between political and economic liberalism, the intervention of the state and the development of social liberalism in Europe and the United States. Today, the ideology of liberalism differs in the United States and Europe. While in the United States is talking about neoliberalism, Europe is still talking about so called social liberalism. Yet both belong to the family of political liberalism.

According to Steltemeier the 'hard core of liberalism' is a minimum of condition for political parties and party structures if they want to be understood as liberal party. For example, the question "How does party Y look at the relationship between the state and the individual?" Answer to this question can be found in a program of the party, but it is crucial to know what can be accepted as an answer if a party wants to present itself as a liberal party.

The author emphasizes that the liberal political options that are constantly invoked and based on the core of liberalism in the long run achieve more success on the elections than those of so-called liberal political parties who, given social trends, give up the hard core of liberalism. Author ended book with the question "What is the perspective of liberalism today?". The answer is optimistic. Liberal freedom remains, as the main idea, because "this requirement does not have an expiration date". The author is insisting on the hard core of liberalism, because it is something permanently and unalterably, and can be understood as a core value of modern a democratic political order or a standard for political parties. Although liberalism is dynamic and not dogmatic, it must protect all those values that today make Western culture, but should not

allow to be used by other ideologies for manipulative purposes.

The book gives us a detailed, systematic, and clear view of liberal thought – from the most liberal ideas to those that might not be, in every moment, categorized as liberal. The author attempted to encompass liberal thought from the economic left to the economic right, holding thought on the idea of political liberalism.

It is unquestionable that liberalism as an ideology has a future. It is a political standard that has no alternative. However, it is necessary to recall from time to time to the values that make that standard because those values are the hard core of liberalism.

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