

Liberal and/or Conservative?

It has become quite fashionable to assess the antagonistic Left/Right pattern customarily applied to economic and society-related disputes as being rather outmoded. Under the influence of Tony Blair and the Schröder/Blair paper „The Way ahead for Europe’s Social Democrats“ a „New Center“ as well as „Third Ways“ are sought not only by Social Democracy but also by other political parties, in the aim of casting aside weltanschauung-type philosophies in favor of *pragmatic* politics. However, the observers of real-life election or voting campaigns arrive at the conclusion that the concepts of Left and Right still serve their purpose - at least whenever any real or would-be political adversary is to be blackened.

In contrast thereto, liberalism has correctly to be understood as an open-minded economic and societal system which never fitted into this categorization. It is also correct that there do exist further politically relevant labels - or should we call them compartmentations? - such as progressive, liberal, conservative, reactionary, revolutionary, reformational, socialist or communist, only to mention some of these terms mainly originating from the 19th century. It is also correct that these positions and tendencies are by no means confined by parties’ borderlines. For example, there are progressive and conservative people in all political parties, and almost every one of us has at least once become aware of harboring several such tendencies within himself, too. Despite considerable difficulty to interpret and define the opalescent ambiguity of these antonyms, it certainly makes sense to clarify first of all the underlying intellectual fundamentals.

In this respect, a particular challenge is presented by the search for the uniting and the separating elements between liberalism and conservatism. The delimitation against socialism has always been easier to formulate; and after the elimination of the Iron Curtain, the search for and development of autonomous profiles inside the „bourgeois“ camp has simultaneously become more important and more difficult. Three great thinkers of this century, Friedrich August von Hayek and Wilhelm Röpke, both of whom would have completed their hundredth anniversary in 1999 (Neue Zürcher Zeitung of 8 May 99 and of 9/10 Oct. 99) as well as the French social philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel, younger by four years, may act as mentors in this search, because their thoughts continue to be fully valid.

In a famous essay „Why I am not a Conservative“, Hayek has tried to express his interpretation of the two positions. According to his opinion, the attitude vis-à-vis to *innovations* certainly is different, but not wholly antagonistic. Conservatism is marked by a fear of changes, liberalism on the other hand trusts in the spontaneous forces and capabilities of innovations. Nonetheless, liberalism also truly appreciates also time-honored values which have stood their test during a long process of evolution, thus differentiating it from revolutionary constructivism. Liberals, too, hold in due esteem our precursors and ancestors, but are also characterized by keen interest and open-mindedness toward anything innovative. That’s why they are looking for rules ensuring peaceful and voluntary coexistence, without presupposing any determinate results in terms of contents (such as an even distribution of income) necessarily produced by the said rules. Consequently, they are far from identifying with those conservatives who know precisely what the truly ideal society should look like. As a matter of course, they are likewise opposed to the tenets of the structural conservatives who vehemently defend the existing status quo and are inclined to favor an excessive nationalism and protectionism in the fields of agriculture and trade.

The trust in the future, expressed in the open-mindedness toward everything new, is closely linked to the tremendous *optimism* apparently being an essential part of liberalism. That does not mean any lack of solid „rootedness“ in the ground but merely a renunciation of resigned pessimism. To cite an example taken from present-day Swiss politics: such an optimism is wholly dissimilar from the provocative utopianism of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) demanding tax relief measures apparently beyond anything reasonably attainable, but it is also far removed from the rather faint-hearted pragmatism of Switzerland's Free Democratic Party (FDP) as evidenced in its "initiative" proposing a tax stop. On closer inspection and due to its many exceptions, the latter resembles rather a proposal to slow down tax growth. A more realistic and simultaneously more optimistically ambitious alternative would consist in a moderate and phased tax-lowering program, showing, for example, how the tax burden could be reduced by 5% within a five-year period.

To be sure, liberalism endorses *gradualism*, for example with respect to the regulatory framework and any other renewal or innovation, repudiating thus both a total shake-up of the existing order or an outright blockade. This notwithstanding, such a reform-minded advancing does not preclude opposing a clear „No“ to the *State's* freedom-restricting aspects. Rejecting anything and everything contrasts with liberal thinking, whereas saying „No“ to a State levying even more taxes and further tightening regulations is compatible with liberal thinking. In this area, the liberal citizen is clearly different from a conservative one, who more strictly respects authority and the State, deeming unnecessary any restriction of the government's powers, as long as the latter are exercised by capable and worthy citizens. In this light, the catchy slogan „More Freedom - Less Government“ („Mehr Freiheit - weniger Staat“) of the Swiss Free Democrats - later extended to the demand for more self-reliant responsibility - was not only very successful, but essentially correct in its tendency. Indeed, when the specialist in constitutional law, Kurt Eichenberger, invoked thirty years ago the concept of a „*restorative revolution*“ aimed at reducing the State's powers and restrictions as well as containing it within more exactly defined limits, he precisely meant the same thing - even the liberal citizen must be able to act as a brake and say „No“ whenever areas of freedom are in danger of being restricted. Despite appearances, this is by no means a conservative stance.

The most interesting point of contact between conservatism and liberalism probably consists in a society's *basis of values*, although libertarian fundamentalists may not see any correlation. As Röpke expounded in a truly exemplary manner, most economists clearly realize that a liberal political and economic system merely prepares the groundwork for the pertinent ethics, but is only able to generate such an ethical behavior to a very limited extent. To many liberal citizens virtues such as fairness, honesty, respect of his fellow men, family-mindedness, self-discipline, sense of justice, civic spirit, disposition to solidarity or courage are as important as they are to conservatives, and they try to live accordingly. However, liberal citizens will always nurture personal doubts and skepticism about the *universal validity* of the standards which they advocate, reserving the possibility that other delimitations between Good and Evil might be possible. And for this very reason they will not try to enforce and implement their notions of ethics by means of laws and social control, taking instead care of allowing everybody to live according to his/her own ideals as long as he/she does not impair the private autonomy of his/her fellow citizens.

But what is to be done, as formulated by de Jouvenel in a rhetorical question, if the society of well-meaning citizens, which is the objective of every type of liberal politics, cannot stand up in the long run to the socialistic Leviathan without entering into preventive conventions? If the steadily increasing atomization and individualization undermines and eliminates society's fundament whereby it is supported and amalgamated? If the free society coupled with free enterprise already bears within itself *the germ of its own destruction*? As a comparatively narrow-minded liberalism cannot give an answer to these questions, a considerable number of liberal citizens are also attached to a *conservative set of values*. "Whoever sneers at this attitude and suspects it to smack of 'restoration' and 'reaction'" (according to Röpke), should consider that this very linkage may serve to compensate to some extent a certain inherent "anemia" of liberalism. People expect exponents of liberalism to explain to them the system of values and guiding motifs they advocate. Due to its extreme rationalism and respect of rules, liberalism overtaxes the comprehension of many people, both in terms of ethics and of common sense. Moreover, the concept of freedom as the sole or merely as the supreme value probably exercises rather limited attraction, especially in the present historic context. Though clearly realizing this fact, the exponents of liberalism – in distinctive contrast to the conservatives – are on no account willing to impose on society their individual preconceptions of "good" citizens by using force of any type. They will only endorse and support such a "good" system which will allow people to develop into "good" citizens of their own free will, and where they *are also able* to behave accordingly.