

Liberalism Against the Nation: A False Hypothesis of Historical Analysis

The main objective of this essay is to offer an answer to the following question: Is there a scientific ground for the theory of the historical opposition between liberalism and the nation? In order to answer this question, this essay is organised in three parts. The first part identifies the position of the nation within the classical liberal discourse; the second identifies the crucial moment of the 1950's as the precise period in which a major change in the relation between liberalism and the nation took place; the third one identifies the moment of the nation's restoration within the contemporary liberal discourse.

The main conclusion of this essay is that, except for a brief though noteworthy period (which explains the actual apparent consensus concerning the opposition between the liberal and the national theories), the nation was a fundamental component of the liberal discourse and of the liberal political practices rather than a result of an opposing political vision.

Numerous researches of political science and contemporary historiography – which one may consider as being within the overarching framework of a *scientific trend* – have formulated and consolidated the theory that the nation, as it is encapsulated within the concept of the 'nation state', was and still is a political idea which finds itself far from the liberal ideology (e.g. Holmes 1999; McMahan and McKim 1997). Moreover, such research has created the impression that there is a historical opposition between the liberal and the national political positions and, in other words, between liberalism and nationalism.¹ In this essay I will try to sketch some general arguments in order to invalidate the thesis of the conceptual incompatibility between liberal and national principles and in order to demonstrate that the theory according to which national liberalism was and still is possible is sustainable by at least as many arguments as the theory of the opposition between the nation and liberalism. The usefulness of such a demonstration is considerable, not only for researchers concerned with conceptual clarifications, but also for those who are interested in studying the relations between the ideological dimensions and the practice of politics.

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In the following pages I will first show that the two conceptions –liberal and national – do belong to the same modern and democratic vision of societal organisation, as they mutually share constitutive ideational elements. Then, I will demonstrate that the thesis of an opposition between the two political concepts is based upon the exclusive consideration of only one historical period and on the extrapolation from the judgements made concerning that period to the whole existence of the two concepts. Finally, I will argue that the actual period is mainly dominated by ‘alliances’ between the two discourses, as liberal pan-Europeanism is based on a willingly established federation of national liberalisms.

On the Historical Possibility of a ‘Liberal Nation’

Taken into consideration from a civic perspective, national identity is a political component of a wider general conception of identity which contains, in a cumulative manner and in an ascendant succession, all the positive social identifications of the individuals.² The political dimension of this collective identity, which the individual participates in, is represented by the national component. Such a definition of the nation – as a collective identity – is consistent with both social theory and social practice and allows us to explain the persistence of the national structure – the only type of socio-political organisation that has demonstrated its institutionally stable vocation. Hence, in the light of this theory, the nation is an identity that was collectively assumed within the integrative perspective of the political rights and duties.³

In other words, what else is classical liberalism⁴ but the ideology that pursues the foundation of a social and of a political order based on the principles of human rights? Defined in an extensive manner, classical liberalism means precisely the political theory and practice which supports the application of the principles of the Enlightenment at the level of the state, offering in this way the fundamental elements of the modern and civic nation. By the middle of the 19th Century, the liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill explained that the national framework of identity was necessary so that the liberal order of the plurality of interests and ideas may be imposed (Mill 1946: 294-5). On the level of political practice, the historical evolution from the late 17th to the 19th Centuries showed that, despite the regional differences, liberalism not only was not opposed to the building of the European and American nations, but, in a majority of cases, found in nation building its main political reason. It is without any doubt that, for instance, in the early 19th Century, the politically conservative forces backed by all means the stability of multinational empires, whereas the liberal parties were actively involved in independent national movements.

A major objection to the arguments quoted above is that, in the form that preceded the expansion of nationalism, liberal discourse did not encapsulate the nation. The adepts of the theory of the opposition between liberalism and the nation stress the fact that early liberal discourse did not mention the nation but, on the other hand, did mention that the liberal values should be universally spread. This is seen as proof of the very contradiction between the national and the liberal options (e.g. Flathman 1989: 52-4). Moreover, the supporters of the theory of the incompatibility of liberalism and the nation hold that if liberals complied with the national principle, they did it either by

opportunism (as the national discourse could have brought the support of the sizable electoral capital of the emerging middle class), or by a less conjectural but still not naturally based necessity – to sustain the consolidation of the nation states (which implies a ‘nationalisation’ of political discourse). Even if these two argumentations do contain some elements that might be considered as being valid, they both fall into the same trap of self-contradiction: if liberalism is fundamentally for – or even opposed – to the national idea, how was it possible for liberalism to fully capture the national discourse and, furthermore, to win its essential political capital by using the national discourse in the public sphere?

The supposed ontological contradiction between nation and liberalism does not here find its supporting arguments, but on a contrary, its counter-arguments. There remains the task of discerning the place of the nation within classical liberalism. The observations presented above according to which liberalism is based on a discourse that favoured universalism are obviously correct. On the other hand, the supposed contradiction between the universal and the national principles is wrong. According to the liberal perspective, the universal values need *a political space* or a *political sphere* – in other words, a geographical, a demographical, and a cultural framework that limits the application of those values – in order to make liberalism possible. Is such a limitation opposed to the classical liberal principles? From a contemporary perspective, the contradiction between the ideal of universalism and spatial, demographic, and cultural constraints might seem obvious. But this contradiction did not represent a preoccupation for the ‘founders’ of liberalism, precisely because of the fact that the need for the ordination and the limitation of universalism perfectly corresponded to the ideal of the establishment of civic and political

relations at the communitarian level. As an implicit consequence, the modern nation is founded by the liberals as a universal political space. Hence, the national dimension of the liberal discourse is not a result of the spatial and cultural constraint, but a practical consequence of the liberal trust in the necessity of the foundation and of the development of a universal political space. The political nation appeared, then, as a universal political space *en miniature* which was in a continuous process of change, having the vocation of virtually apprehending the entire planet (Schnapper 1994: 29). The first modern nation-states, animated by liberal ideas, assumed that their political legitimacy is exportable beyond their frontiers, within the colonies; however, due to practical constraints, the application of those ideas was drastically limited (Schnapper 1994: 29-30).

An Explanation of the Monist Perspective of the Opposition Between the Liberalism and the Nation

What is the reason for the rise of an advanced convergence among numerous researchers with respect to the alleged opposition between liberalism and the nation? I argue that the main reason is the an-historical positioning of those scientists: liberalism is seen only through the prism of the advanced neo-liberalism and of the libertarianism of the second half of the 20th Century. In other words, liberalism is analysed only from the perspective of those types of liberalism that reject, in a liberalised world, any limitation of individual freedom, including the national framework, which is perceived as being such a limitation by its very existence⁵. This

relatively recent development within liberal currents has engendered a galvanisation of the intellectuals and of the politicians who have taken for granted the fact that the nation state was 'dead' for the liberals. Within this framework of discourse, the nation becomes a founding element of the reactionary establishment, whereas, apparently, the mission of liberalism has been the fight against all kinds of *Réaction*, including the nation.

The fundamental change of within the liberal discourse must be placed within the historical context of the metamorphosis of the nation state into the welfare state. This transformation led to the decay of the classical liberal discourse and to the narrowing of the traditional liberal basis within most of the European states that became Welfare States. The basis of the liberal discourse may be found in the very essence of the fight against what seemed then to be an ideological *alliance contre la nature* between the conservatives/Christian-democrats and the socialists/social-democrats, an alliance made around the project of the welfare state and joined by a majority of the 'half-liberal' forces.⁶ The identification of the nation with the redistributive state determined the counter-reaction of the radical liberals who began not only to plead for eliminating the nation from the liberal discourse, but also to attack the nation itself, based upon the assumptions that I've presented above.

Therefore, one may observe a structuring of the radical liberal discourse, under the influence of the globalisation process and, at the same time, as a consequence of the impact of the consensus concerning the Welfare State that the other parties seemed to have reached – a powerful kind of state that the liberals have always condemned. The liberal affinity towards the global dimension and, moreover, the need for political survival have determined the option in favour of the 'denationalisation' of the liberal discourse from the beginning of the 1950's. In this period of the passing to

the 'mass modernity' (Maffesoli 2000: 30-8), we may identify the pinnacle of inflection within the entire history of the liberal discourses on nation or even on the whole history of the liberal reflection on nation. The idea of the conflict between individuals and the state is the theoretical foundation of libertarianism, a current that found a deep echo mainly in the Anglo-Saxon academia, but also in some European intellectual circles (Fines 1995).

The a-historic perception of the national component of liberalism through the sole glasses of the libertarian principles, which were opposed to the nation, is the very key to understanding the structural opposition between liberalism and the nation. The echo of this thesis within the scientific community was based also on the development, within the period mentioned above, of the anti-state and anti-nation currents that became popular among the non-communist left-wing intellectuals. They thought that the 'annexation' of liberalism could have represented an *acquis* of respectfulness and a source of legitimacy, as it was joined with a multicultural, anti-racist and anti-sexist discourse. The image that was created in the literature reinforced the idea that the opposition between liberalism and the nation is fundamental and permanent, whereas in fact, this opposition is specific only to a well determined period that began in the 1950s and ended in the 1980s.

For a Contemporary Possibility of the Liberal Nation

The temporary character of the opposition between liberalism and the nation is underlined by the liberal critique on the anti-national discourse. The existence of the 'liberal nationalist'⁷ current, which may be identified in the resurgence of the right wing liberal orientation since the mid-1980s, demonstrates the very fact that the anti-national period was simply a parenthesis in the history of the liberal thought. The main expressions of the political pendant of this current – the 'liberal

conservatism' – were the radicalisation of anti-communist discourse and the acceptance of 'state capitalism' as a way of development (for instance, in Southern and Eastern Asia), which shows precisely that a new inflection that restores a rather traditional type of liberalism is being observed. According to this last form of liberalism, a nation is far from being a reactionary community that must disappear. On a contrary, the nation is the community that allows the individual to fully reach the civil and political rights and freedoms. If compared to classical liberalism, for which the nation was simply the right framework of citizen's accomplishment, national liberalism put the nation in the privileged position of being the only viable solution for the democratic societal organisation. Why? Because the nation is the sole community that is capable to federate individuals – by the fact that people communicate in a common language and build consistent relations and a prospective idea of their common existence – in a liberal and democratic political structure (Walzer in Peterson 1999: 532-56).

The nation is thus perceived as an essential means of individual emancipation from the other communities that he or she belongs to and as the only form of social organisation that is able to institutionally guarantee the democratic character of the human society. This guarantee is operated by the mechanism of checks and balances – which supports the institutional framework of the manifestation of the rights and freedoms by all the citizen-members of the nation. The political sphere – as accomplished in the national framework – becomes a democratic and a modern social linkage of the individual autonomy and relies on a contractual foundation. National liberalism preaches the protection of the nation as the unique instrument which is historically legitimated and capable of organising the public space so that respect for citizen's rights is ensured. It is

important to notice here, as Will Kymlicka does, that not only a certain nation, but all the nations that are based upon those principles are endowed by liberal nationalism with the same degree of legitimacy.⁸ According to this vision, the nation is not only 'recovered' but also fully integrated within the pantheon of liberal concepts, where it assumes a privileged place. Liberal nationalism puts forward its two dimensions and refuses to consider the nationalist component (in its large sense) as a 'necessary compromise', as, for instance, certain forms of civic nationalism do (Rizescu 2001: 1099).

What was the practical effectiveness of this national liberalism? First, national liberalism concretised itself on the political level by the return, in the 1990s, of the liberal parties to some salient political positions – the American Democratic Party, the British Liberal Democratic Party, the French Republican Party⁹, the liberal parties in the Benelux and the liberal, the civic-liberal or the liberal-democratic parties from the former communist countries. The reanimation of this type of discourse and the appropriation of the European themes within its framework (as the European citizenship is taken by the liberals not only as entirely compatible with the national citizenship, but also as an extension of it¹⁰ explains the political progress of the liberal forces at the end of the 1990's and the in beginning of the new millennium. In spite of the appearance of contradiction, the national and European political identities found their necessary coherence in contemporary liberal discourse, as this discourse is referring to the same fundamental set of values. Supported by the liberal discourse, the European identity is based on national identities, whereas the European federation – an idea that seems more and more productive – is built on the common will of the nation-states. I will not try to evaluate the chances of such a political construction; I

only stress the fact that, once more, the thesis of the incompatibility between the two types of political discourse –national and liberal – is practically invalidated.

Conclusions

Far from being two political concepts that belong to fundamentally opposed sets of values, liberalism and the nation have succeeded in finding themselves within the framework of one political theory and practice. The nation offers the optimal political framework for the *mise en oeuvre* of liberal principles, whereas liberalism is a theory that allows the constitution of the modern political nation. Except for a brief but very ‘vocal’ period, when the major trend of liberalism was the opposition to or even the fight against national discourse, it is difficult to identify the traces of any liberal opposition to the political principle of the nation. On a contrary, there is a whole series of analyses and observations that guide us towards the conclusion that we can discern the existence of a profound historical correspondence between the liberal theory and the national paradigm. If this article tended only to stress some arguments in order to invalidate the thesis of the fundamental opposition between the liberal conceptions and the national discourse, further research will have to determine, in a more precise manner, the nature of the relation that has been established between the two and to study the results of this determination in specific practical cases.

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Notes:

- ¹ This last concept must be understood in its widest meaning.
- ² Within the identity theories that belong to social psychology, 'positive identification' means the sum of the markers that correlate with the points of references, whereas negative identification means the sum of the markers that do not correlate with the points of references. (Lipiansky 1992, 2-6)
- ³ Explaining our theory of the nation as a collective identity is not the purpose of the present article. For such an explanation, see Mişcoiu 2004 (a).
- ⁴ By 'classical liberalism', I refer to the proto-liberal and to the 17th and 18th Century liberal theories that belonged to, or that were close to, the English school of thought (Manent 1997).
- ⁵ The most relevant author is Robert Nozick (Nozick 1974).
- ⁶ I refer mostly to the groups that were constituting, at that particular time, the 'social-liberal' current.
- ⁷ See Tamir 1993. I place under the same label what may seem to be two different currents – liberal nationalism and national liberalism, as, for instance, Will Kymlicka does (Kymlicka and Norman 2000).
- ⁸ "...liberal nationalists are universalistic, in the sense of according to the other nations the same rights - subject to the same limitations - which they demand for themselves. They do not try to impose their national identity on the other nations either within or outside their borders" (Kymlicka in Kymlicka and Opalski 2001 : 90).
- ⁹ A former component of the Union pour la Démocratie Française, transformed in Démocratie Libérale and now a component of the Union pour la Majorité Présidentielle.
- ¹⁰ See, for instance, the discourse of Valéry Giscard-d'Estaing on the European and national dimensions of liberalism at www.lymec.org