

# The last politeia?: A short(er) history of liberal democracy



By Hugo Bonin

Democracy is a word that hardly comes alone nowadays. An ongoing project at the University of Canberra has listed more than [3500 adjectives](#). Some are quite straightforward: *direct, global, local, representative*, etc. Others, such as *consociational* or *deliberative*, are a bit more technical and will be familiar to political scientists mostly. A few are rather arcane: one wonders what

exactly *expresso* or *solvent democracy* implies. One, however, that might not raise eyebrows at first is *liberal democracy*.

Since the beginning of the 2010s, this notion has become increasingly common, both in political discourses and academic circles. In countries with widely different relationships to the word 'liberal', such as France, the United Kingdom, and Canada, various calls to '[claim](#)', '[defend](#)', or '[save](#)' 'liberal democracy' can be found. Major research institutions are funding projects into the '[future of liberal democracy](#)', [foundations are asked to pitch in](#), and parliaments are also [looking into the question](#).

However, if we take a step back, this quasi unanimity around 'liberal democracy' can be puzzling. Especially since, from a conceptual point of view, the notion is a bit oxymoronic. There is a tension between the (absolute) exercise of popular power implicit in democracy, and in liberalism's goal of limiting the state's power. Most political theorists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century clearly recognised this duality. Historically, liberals were quite wary of democracy's 'tyrannic' tendencies, while for socialists and anarchists, fulfilling the democratic promise meant going beyond a limited state, usually in order to achieve social equality.

So if such tensions between liberalism and democracy were explicit, how do we explain the current popularity of 'liberal democracy'? When—and how—were the two concepts reconciled? A few suspects come to mind immediately. Maybe, [as argued by Duncan Bell](#), after 1918, with the twin rise of fascism and communism, 'liberal democracy' emerged to rally the United Kingdom, France, and the United States under a common banner. Or, more probably, in the midst of the 1950s, 'the West' took up the mantle of 'liberal democracy' against the 'people's democracies' of the East? In this narrative, the victory of the former in 1989 signified 'the end of history' and the

universalization of '[Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government](#)', as Francis Fukuyama famously put it.

Approaching the question with a perspective inspired by conceptual history yields a different picture. If we treat language '[as an indicator and a factor of political reality](#)', we need to pay attention to the specific words used by past political actors as well as their intellectual context. As part of a larger ongoing project at the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) analyzing [political representation in a historical perspective](#), we have been studying the different redefinitions of 'democracy' since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, focusing especially on parliamentary debates—a type of source whose popularity in intellectual history is [growing](#). Indeed, parliaments can be seen as [nexuses](#), that is, spaces where competing power relations and discursive formations are expressed. With records going back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century for several European countries, they enable both long-term diachronic analysis and comparative synchronic studies. Of course, these sources have some biases and should be studied together with other corpora (newspapers, books, pamphlets etc.). Nonetheless, these debates being available through various interfaces means that methods and tools from digital humanities can be used, [helping researchers to quantitatively back up their claims](#), while proving interpretations based on qualitative analysis and secondary literature.

As an example of the possibilities of this perspective, I chart below the course of 'liberal democracy' in France and the United Kingdom, two countries with very different intellectual traditions regarding liberalism, with two contrasting models of representative institutions, as well as distinct partisan configurations. Doing so helps me to shift the focus of both French and Anglophone histories of liberalism, as well as challenge previous interpretations on the story of 'liberal democracy'. While I only deal with

English and French here, a similar approach could be applied to a range of languages (and countries).

Investigating the uses of '*démocratie libérale*' in France transforms the periodization from the get-go. During the Second Empire (1852-1870), especially in its 'liberal moment' of the 1860s, one can find the first attempt to fuse explicitly democratic and liberal principles. In a crucial period of [self construction and tradition building](#) for French liberalism, under the pen of figures such as [Eugène Pelletan](#) and [Jules Simon](#), '*démocratie libérale*' emerged as a way to defend freedom within the (allegedly democratic) Empire. But this early birth proved short-lived: during the Third Republic, the prevalence of a republican language within a parliamentary framework favored alternative notions. In Westminster, most of the uses of 'liberal democracy' before the 1920s actually refer to the Liberal party leading the democracy (as in the working-classes), in contrast to a 'Tory democracy' and thus has not much to do with contemporary understandings of the notion. Looking at the 1920s and 1930s closely further complicates things. While there was an intense discussion of the 'crisis of parliamentarism', this was not particularly framed as a question of 'liberal democracy': in both British and French parliaments, representatives barely used the terms. The exception that confirms the rule is to be found in a few speeches of Winston Churchill, which did portray France and Britain as '[the two surviving liberal democracies of the West](#)'. In the public sphere, those who did talk of 'liberal democracy' were usually critical of it. Between 1918 and 1940, one of the French newspapers that wrote about '*démocratie libérale*' the most was the royalist *Action Française*, and it was not to endorse it. In a similar fashion, the first British book to use 'liberal democracy' in its title is Claude W.H. Sutton's *Farewell to Rousseau: A Critique of Liberal-Democracy* (1936), a Platonist and Nietzschean pamphlet in favor of an 'Authoritarian Popular

Aristocracy'. Thus, by the end of World War II, if 'liberal democracy' had been in use, its position was far from hegemonic within British or French political discourse.

Writing a conceptual history of democracy and liberalism after 1945 can seem like an impossible task. With a rise in transnational networks (from UNESCO to the Mont-Pelerin Society), the academization of certain disciplines (such as political science and sociology) as well as ideological fragmentation, the intellectual fogs are rather thick. This is where focusing on parliamentary debates is useful: they provide a compass, between high end theorists and mundane uses of concepts, which allow us to discern trends and ruptures.

In both the French and British parliament, 'liberal democracy' did gain traction in the 1950s, mostly in geopolitical discussions. Some references were made to the struggle between '[oriental totalitarian Communism and the forces of Western liberal democracy](#)', but these types of antagonistic views proved rare. Rather, it is decolonization that proved crucial: 'liberal democracy' became something the newly independent States should strive towards (as Foreign Minister Pierre Mendès France recommended that [Tunisia do so in 1954](#)) or a legacy of colonialism (for Baron Strang '[the rule of law, the heritage of a great literature, the freedom of the individual and an instinct for liberal democracy](#)' were amongst what the British left behind in India).

Even outside of parliaments, 'liberal democracy' was not where we might expected it. For Jan-Werner Müller, [fearful liberals](#) such as Isaiah Berlin or Karl Popper focused on tolerance and moderation as central values, leaving democracy out of their investigations. Those who did not tended to be outside of anglophone circles. Jacob L. Talmon's idea of a Rousseauist '[totalitarian democracy](#)' was built in contrast to its liberal counterpart, but he

left the latter unexplained. Raymond Aron might talk of 'liberal democracy', but tended to prefer his more technical '[constitutional pluralist regimes](#)' in opposition to the monopolistic party regime. In the neoliberal constellation, the issue was clearly to '[restrict the people](#)' in order to preserve the 'free market' but there was no embrace of 'liberal democracy'. Even by 1965, Maurice Cranston's *A Glossary of Political Terms* could avoid any use of the term, while deeming it necessary to include a separate entry on 'People's democracy'.

The following years saw a plethora of critiques, both theoretical and practical, of the '[stable democracies](#)' of Europe and North America. While some activists saw the rise of 'direct action' [as opposed to \(representative\) liberal democracy](#), others, like C.B. Macpherson, hoped for a [renewal of liberal democracy](#) through more participation. By 1975, the famous *Crisis of Democracy* report, (while it did not mention 'liberal democracy' specifically), worried about a 'democratic overload' and problems of 'governability' in the West. In Westminster, Conservative Lord Monson shared similar concern about a '[shift from Parliamentary to trade union power \[which\] has turned Britain into arguably the least free of the small group of liberal democracies](#)'. In both parliaments, the transition of 'liberal democracy' from a geopolitical concern to a domestic category thus took place in the 1970s. As a reaction to the 'spirit of '68', parliamentarians were increasingly concerned by imposing limits on the reach of the State (especially in the economy) while channeling political energies. In France, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing defended '[an advanced liberal society](#)', while liberals launched a [counteroffensive in the intellectual sphere](#).

The 1980s witnessed an explosion in the use of the notion. In Westminster, Lord Chalfont, a former Foreign Minister, would warn against external threats ('[totalitarianism](#)', [international terrorism](#)) but also internal menaces to liberal

democracy such as 'Marxists', and '[growing public expenditure](#)'. In the National Assembly, Alain Madelin, a rising-star with ties to neoliberal networks, would use 'liberal democracy' to refuse [any regulation on press conglomerates](#) or to argue for [constitutional restraints on majority rule](#). By the end of the 1980s, the notion finally found its way into textbooks. Philippe Bénéton's *Introduction à la politique moderne: Démocratie libérale et totalitarisme* (1987) and Barry Holden's *Understanding Liberal Democracy* (1988), while widely different, both took 'liberal democracy' as a basic category of political science. The intellectual reconfiguration went beyond academia: the Liberal-Democrats adopted their name in 1989, while Madelin would go on founding the party *Démocratie libérale* in 1997. More broadly, the '[third wave of democratization](#)' saw the creation of a number of 'liberal-democratic' parties, especially in post-communist states.

By the 1990s, the whole 20<sup>th</sup> century was now read by scholars and politicians in the light of the struggle of 'liberal democracy' against competing forms of social organization. Both France, the United Kingdom, and countries outside 'the West' could simply (re)described as 'liberal democracies'. Which usually meant a limited democracy, with guaranteed individual rights, a free market economy and an elected representative system. Broader than the 'parliamentarism' of the 1930s, less technical than the 'constitutional-pluralistic regimes' of the 1950s, more appealing than the critical epithet of 'bourgeois democracy', 'liberal democracy' became, [to paraphrase Samuel Moyn](#), the last *politeia*, the ultimate form of human government. At least for two decades or so, since as stated in the introduction, it is now deemed in need of saving.

What does this 'short history of liberal democracy' mean for us today? First, it shows that it is not the East-West antagonism itself that anchored the notion in political discourse, but rather the West's 'victory' that recast the

struggle in an opposition between liberal democracy and totalitarianism. It is not only that history is written by the victors: it is also conceptualized by them, with ideas that might have been foreign to their forebearers.

Second, it reminds us that most of the locutors of the notion have been more concerned by its 'liberal' element, and less so about its democratic credentials. Especially from the 1980s onwards, this meant limiting the state's intervention in economic and social affairs, with little concern for the democratic credentials of such politics. From an example for postcolonial states to a model to be preserved from participatory pressures from below, 'liberal democracy' has increasingly turned into a geopolitical weapon and an ossified form with fewer and fewer supporters. Instead of the various calls to defend or protect it, one might rather ask which adjectives we need to add to democracy so that it can live up to its promises.



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*Featured Image:* DreamStudio AI produced image of "liberal democracy", courtesy of the author.