Three main traditions of liberalism:

differences, significance and implications

Keynote speech - dinner preceding the general assembly of ELF –

September 19, 2013 - Brussels

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Thank you, Felicita, Susanne and the ELF bureau, for inviting me to deliver this speech. Tonight, I could tell you a story about the traditions of liberalism in the various member states of the European Union. After all, each country has its own specific political traditions as well as its own form of liberalism. And broad lines can also be drawn in that area. To give just one example: it would be possible to elaborate on the contrast between Latin-European countries and some northern countries in terms of the degree to which liberalism is marked by anti-clericalism. Although this would perfectly fit in the ELF context, I will nevertheless focus on *political-theoretical* traditions.

Against the EU background, it would be tempting to fasten onto the contemporary theoretical discourse that makes a distinction between *cosmopolitan* liberalism and *national* liberalism. I put that topic to one side as well, but perhaps there will soon be another opportunity to elaborate on that subject. That would allow me to put a final stop to the misapprehension that nationalism and liberalism should by definition be at odds with one another.

Before embarking on the main theme, I would like to mention that I will also *not* go into two much-discussed theoretical traditions. First of all, I will leave *libertarianism* alone. In my opinion, there are sufficient grounds for upholding the idea that minarchism, as expressed for example by Robert Nozick, can be attributed to the liberal family. However, there is no way that right-wing anarchism can be tagged as liberal any longer. The latter variant of libertarianism is related to

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liberalism just as - in mirror image - communism is juxtaposed to social democracy. Secondly, I will not go into what is called *neo-liberalism*. The reason is that 'neo-liberalism' does not exist, at least not in the sense that is attributed to this concept nowadays. This so-called 'neo-liberalism' is nothing more than a fallacy of the left, who think of it as a right-wing conspiracy against the welfare state. 'Neo-liberal' is a term of abuse that includes a hotchpotch of left-wing prejudices and reproaches in relation to the free market.

Now let's get on quickly with the main theme. In political-theoretical terms it is customary to compare classical liberalism with social liberalism. Later I am going to elaborate a little on both traditions. Furthermore, I would like to argue particularly that there is a third liberal tradition; one that is often erroneously identified as social liberalism, whereas this third tradition is in fact an authentic form of liberalism with regard to its principles and, thus, its essence. In crucial respects, this form is fundamentally opposed to social liberalism. I am talking about what is called in Dutch *ontplooiingsliberalisme* and which, in the absence of an appropriate and exact English term I will indicate by means of its German equivalent: *Bildungsliberalismus*.

Let's first examine *classical liberalism*. It may be assumed that - hopefully - this concept is largely known in these circles, although quite a few of the member-organisations of ELF are themselves *not* rooted in the classical liberal tradition. I would like to provide a few catchwords: emphasis on so-called 'negative' freedom, the freedom *from;* and much room for *laissez faire*, although among classical liberals, the state definitely plays a much larger role than the caricatured 'night-watchman state'. Procedural legislation (for example property rights) is of paramount importance; with a role for the state in its economic capacity as overviewer of market rules and - last but not least - having responsibility for some aspects of 'the public good' such as road construction and education.

　　Tonight I would like to draw your attention to the classical liberal conception of the human being. For the sake of wider recognition, I would like to

refer to British thinkers such as John Locke, David Hume and Adam Smith. Characteristic of, and also quite distinct from, hitherto prevalent Christian thought, yet also from mainstream classical Greek thought, classical liberals treat man the way he is, not the way they would like him to be. So classical liberals based their reflections on the individual in all respects, that is including all desires and other emotions, without immediately passing negative judgement on them. Consequently, the individual does not have to restrain his emotions, as opposed to the precepts of Christian thought or some other forms of liberalism. This means that the individual does not have to subject his impulses to reason. Among classical liberals, reason operates first and foremost in an instrumental way.

Individuals will seldom manage to satisfy their wishes and needs in isolation. To be able to achieve more, people work together, conduct trade with one another; or in a nutshell, between them they build 'society'. The reproach of 'atomism' - a belief that individuals are totally solitary and lead their own separate lives - which often befalls liberals, definitely does not apply to classical liberalism. Quite the contrary. For classical liberalism, the individual is an outstandingly social being. Of course, not in a socialist sense, that he or she should be forced to give money to the state for re-distribution. No, social in the real sense of the word; of their own accord, individuals address others from a perspective of their own desires and needs. Society, not just the economy, is the result of a process of spontaneous development. And that works down to even the smallest structures. Contrary to what is often claimed, the classical liberal does not look upon individuals as beings who only use other people for their own benefit. No, man is a being who normally likes to live with others. Men and women do not become a family to use one another, but because they want to be together.

As I said before, reason works predominantly in an instrumental way among classical liberals. However, on reflection it shapes our morality as well. This is clearly shown in the book *The theory of moral sentiments* by Adam Smith. In this work, the author analyses morality not as something of a higher order but as a result of human contemplation about living together. Just like goods in a free market (in a material sense) morality does not require a guiding hand from a higher sphere. Morality comes about automatically in society. Therefore, the state - or the

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church - does not need, for the most part, to interfere with us; individuals themselves will manage together, provided they are given enough room to do so.

Social liberals often consider classical liberalism to be the basis of something of which they themselves have made an improved version. Historically, classical liberalism would have fulfilled an important role, but by the end of the nineteenth century had become moribund. Looked at this way, social liberalism is modern liberalism, and for classical liberalism, Schiller's statement would apply: *Der Mohr hat seine Arbeit getan, der Mohr kann gehen.* I myself think that the opposite is true. For example, classical liberal views are particularly useful in combating religious claims for *the* just morality, and their claims on knowledge of absolute values and standards. And where the role of the state is concerned, classical liberal principles may matter perhaps more than ever before. In our 21st-century societies, with their collective sectors that have become heavily overweight, classical liberal principles may help us to get *back to basics*. On the basis of classical liberal principles, we can roll back all kinds of unnecessary and harmful interference by the state.

Now, let's take a closer look at *Bildungsliberalismus* and social liberalism. I may name them here in one and the same breath, but what I would like to do is to pull them apart, or rather, to ensure that they are kept well apart. Quite often, these terms are used indiscriminately, as if one and the same form of liberalism were involved. An example in the Netherlands is a thin booklet that D66 published in 2009 in an attempt to explain why this party should be termed social liberal. In this pamphlet we can read the following sentence, under the heading 'Moving towards a development society': 'Whereas a conservative (or neo- or neocon-) liberal - by the way, you will notice that simplistic abuse is not always confined to the socialist left - is averse to any kind of government interference, the social liberal will consider such interference necessary if the result is that as many people as possible are able to use their individual potential for development.' Are we talking here about individual development or about social liberalism in the historical theoretical sense? The party that expresses itself here does not seem to know this itself.

I will try and provide more clarity, first of all on the meaning of what is called *ontplooiingsliberalisme* in Dutch, and *Bildungsliberalismus* in German. To my knowledge, there is no English word that does justice to this expression, and this may contribute to the confusion in Anglo-Saxon literature. If I were to devise an English expression, I think this one would come closest: *character-strengthening liberalism.*

Perhaps, while waiting for better suggestions, we should settle for *Bildungsliberalismus* for the time being. That term also fits the thinker who can be considered as the founding father of this tradition: Wilhelm von Humboldt. I would like to designate John Stuart Mill as the most famous other liberal thinker from this tradition. *Bildungsliberalismus* manifests itself in two main varieties. In the first variety, each individual has certain talents - sometimes uniquely combined - which he or she should be able to develop to the best of their ability. Here, the state has a minor role, and should keep out of the way as much as possible. However, if there is a role – or to put it a different way: if 'positive freedom' is at stake - then it is to provide education to children so that they can grow up to be independent adults. The second variety places more emphasis on character building (in the first variety, unique and personal characters are already there to be further developed), whereby certain individual virtues are connected with good citizenship. It is considered better for an individual to have certain individual virtues, rather than to lack them. In fact, the individual has a moral obligation - towards himself - to develop his talents and to shape himself into a man of character.

Bildungsliberalismus is inclined - to a greater or lesser degree - to distinguish between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures. As Mill wrote in *On liberty*, it is better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied pig. A *Bildungsliberal* is disgusted when observing a couch potato with his bag of crisps zapping from game shows to *soap operas*, night after night. And yet the *Bildungsliberal* is reluctant to interfere because at the same time he is convinced that other people and society's prevailing morality may seriously hamper the development of this individual's true nature. See how John Stuart Mill emphatically warns against the pressure on the individual to conform to his environment; that environment is reminiscent of the

ancient Chinese tradition of swaddling women's' feet so that their natural development is constricted. Thus, the adult woman will have tiny feet; to conform to the ancient Chinese ideal of female beauty. Mill considers it unacceptable that she should simply tolerate the associated pain and malformation.

Von Humboldt has shown us that *Bildungsliberalismus* may be combined with considerable reluctance for state interference, except for a role in education. Liberals can accept that role with relative ease because this is not about adults but about children who are not yet independent. Do not forget that a classical liberal such as Adam Smith also looked upon education as a task for the state. In addition, it can be observed within the *Bildungsliberale* tradition that some people would also like to see adults supported by the state. Its purpose is not to provide fixed support but to enable individuals to free themselves from the straight-jacket of group coercion. A good example of this is the prohibition of old trade union practices such as the 'closed shop'. A more contemporary example would be the measures aimed at assisting women who wish to break away from their traditional Islamic community in western countries, so that they can lead independent lives.

Nowadays, there won't be many liberals who do not draw - at least slightly - on the tradition of *Bildungsliberalismus*. Liberals of a right-wing tendency, however, will remain wary of an inclusive definition of the true meaning of the 'development' of an individual. After all, it should be possible to let the individual's development run its course; when there is pressure to meet externally imposed standards it becomes unacceptable paternalism. On the other hand, social liberals often shrink back in practice from what they consider to be an infringement of an Islamic subculture in society. For them, that would fail to show respect for other cultures.

For that matter, these social liberals do not necessarily defy the tradition of social liberalism - the third variety that I will be dealing with tonight. After all, social liberalism, in the way it had developed both in theory and in political practice by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, emphasized the importance of the community for individuals. Obviously, a social liberal – to be worthy of the name - is also concerned with the individual. But above all, that

individual is greatly affected and shaped by his environment. Using the words of a founder of this tradition, Thomas Hill Green: 'Without society, no persons; this is as true as that without persons… there could be no society as we know it.' According to Green, it is only thanks to society that we can be who we are.

You will immediately notice the fundamental difference from the *Bildungsliberale* tradition. There, the environment is a potential threat to the idiosyncratic nature of the individual. In contrast, Green makes this specific statement: 'it is only in the intercourse of men… having reciprocal claims, that we really live as persons'. Rights for the individual? Anyone only has such rights if, and when, other people acknowledge them. Reaping the fruits of your own merits? No, says the social liberal, your merits were made possible, for a large part, by others and by the institutions that have been shaped by society. Therefore, the state is allowed to skim off a part of your income as 'social interest'.

Green stood in the broader tradition of idealistic philosophy; in Great Britain he wanted to introduce the thought of philosophers such as Plato and Hegel that true knowledge is embedded within an abstract, metaphysical Idea and that it cannot be observed directly in the world around us. He was also, by his own reckoning, one of the initiators of a new but definitely liberal tradition. Nobody can be sure of the 'common good' that Green designated as the highest commandment for state intervention. Evidently, around the corner lurks the danger of abuse, by politicians who pretend that they do know what is good for the people.

However, Green and other social liberals felt that, essentially, there was not much chance of conflict between the interests of individual citizens and the actions of the state. If citizens could grow to better recognize their 'true' interests, they would automatically recognize that they had every interest in living in harmony with the 'common good' as represented by the state. Bernard Bosanquet, a pupil of Green, felt that the state epitomized 'our own mind extended… beyond our immediate consciousness'. On the other hand, in Bosanquet's view, the will of individual citizens is lazy and selfish.

We see how dangerous such ideas may become for those who cherish individual freedom. At the same time, the social liberal tradition approaches classical liberalism by an altogether different path. The point is that both traditions

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emphasize that there is a harmonious relationship between individuals and the community. But the classical liberal thinks that this relationship is the consequence of spontaneous social development under the wings of an aloof state. On the other hand, the social liberal affirms that the individual citizen who 'recognizes' his true interests will conform to the development that is closely supervised by the state, although not determined by it.

Liberal critics have often reproached social liberals for having placed society on the slippery slope towards socialism; or even, according to Isaiah Berlin, towards totalitarianism. Numerous social-liberal thinkers and politicians have moved towards social democracy themselves at a later stage; you may think of John Hobson and Richard Haldane. Most of the time, the association of social liberalism with other, 'right-wing' forms of community thinking - such as conservatism and the Christian tradition - is discarded. With Green, that close association is explicitly visible; he equated his higher Idea of 'the good' with an 'eternal consciousness', which he also called the 'divine mind' or 'God'.

The true value of the social-liberal tradition is in recognizing the reality of the degree to which individuals naturally lean on one another - of which the classical-liberal tradition is certainly aware - and on social traditions and institutions. Strangely enough, many social liberals consider themselves to be the most progressive exponents of liberalism, and they might even disparagingly label other liberal traditions as 'conservative', as we saw in the quote from the D66 pamphlet. However, in the face of that large-scale appreciation of existing traditions and institutions in society, it is especially the social liberals who cling to them most ardently. In that sense, social liberalism is inherently inclined towards conservatism; I do not express myself here in a pejorative vein, but strictly in a descriptive/analytical sense.

It would seem appropriate to me to finish this speech with the relevance of social liberalism to European integration. That variety of social liberalism which - like Green - is convinced of the existence of a 'higher' Idea can, and will often, believe that the higher 'objective' of European history is embedded in ongoing European integration. However, if people subscribing to this want to stay liberal, they should make it clear how we can prevent individual citizens from being

overlooked within this process, and within other forms of collective thinking. For how long can sustained European integration coexist with a lack of awareness among citizens that 'the common good' would indeed benefit from such integration? However, the variety of social liberalism that denies a metaphysical higher Idea of 'the Good' will attach more importance to historically developed traditions and institutions. In Europe, these definitely also include separate national cultures and nation states. I am curious how these social liberals hope to reconcile an awareness of the importance of these national communities with today's European integration process.

Thank you for your attention.