Twilight of the spectres: who's afraid of liberalism?

A spectre is haunting the world – the spectre of liberalism. All the powers have entered into an alliance against this spectre – because it is a suitable bogeyman for both the political right and left. Autocratic, nationalist, and traditionalist movements, for instance, evoke their conservative, sometimes culture-revolutionary potential in opposition to an allegedly egoistic, decadent and liberal form of life that has forgotten about its values. Some of these movements openly praise illiberal or authoritarian democracy as an alternative. Radically democratic, internationalist, and socialist movements, by contrast, stress the mechanisms of exploitation and impoverishment of the liberal social and economic order. They claim that talking about liberalism must entail talking about capitalism – and about the erosion of cultural and national ties; the fragmentation of society; the general moral dilapidation due to the alienation from family, work, and fatherland; and the unleashing of the markets and the economization of all areas of life. Liberalism is blamed for all of today's distortions and pathologies.

This evocation of a spectre, an enemy, is possible because various theories can be described as liberalism, such as rule of law liberalism, cultural liberalism, economic liberalism, social liberalism, and national liberalism. The term is also used for liberal philosophy, liberal movements, liberal parties, and liberal mindsets or lifestyles. The various forms of liberalism have changed since their beginnings in the 17th century – and so have their conceptions of the enemy. A historical phenomenology therefore shows a correlation between traditions in terms of ideas, politics, and law, but also contradictions and oppositions. Just as the anatomy of anti-liberalism and the direction of its criticism have historically changed – from socialism and

Marxism to communism, conservativism and nationalist populism – so have the *idées libérales*. This is hardly surprising given that it is the one political philosophy theory that has been more successful in practice than any others – as can be seen in the forms of modern democracies with their principles of the rule of law and the constitutional state, the separation of powers, parliamentarianism, and universal human rights. It is these historical changes and modifications, as well as the sometimes dazzling references in everyday language and popular science, that still render the question *What is Liberalism?* the subject of lively and constructive debates. These include a number of well-known publications that present new conceptions of liberalism.

Compared to these attempts at defending the liberal project against its many critics, conceptualising it in new, different, or alternative ways, or updating it in the face of contemporary problems, the present book is less ambitious. It is not supposed to be – nor is it suitable as – a travel guide for the current political landscape, but rather a map to the philosophy of liberalism. The book will first draw a general picture of the philosophical traditions, ideas, and concepts that, under the heading of *trio liberale*, serve as preliminary identifiers of liberalism. Then, the thematic and argumentative relationships and dependencies between these identifiers will be highlighted, in order to flesh out this picture and to specify the characteristic paths ("justification requirements") of liberalism. The main focus here will be the philosophical contexts of liberalism, i.e. the works that count as classics of liberalism and the philosophers who call themselves "liberal". This kind of contextual approach has the advantage that it can tie historical positions to a systematic interest. So this book is not simply another history of the ideas of liberalism, nor is it a (new) theory variation. It is rather an exposition of the conceptual and normative architecture of the different versions of liberal theory qua *liberal* theories. The final part of the book will sketch the limits of liberalism. The crises and criticisms of liberalism – the diagnoses and objections "from outside" that stem from philosophical opposition and competition – will be less important here. Instead, the problem of designing and realising liberalism will be discussed from an internal perspective. This will enable the philosophical map to also provide normative orientation within the controversies surrounding liberalism.

Concerning the individual chapters: one thing the various contexts and authors in the tradition of liberal theory have in common, is the *trio liberale* of individualism, freedom, and equality. The second chapter will address the interpretations and historical variations of these concepts, and their argumentative correlations. It will be shown that the historical and systematic

beginning of liberalism is a normative individualism that has taken a political turn. Assuming that any political order is a matter of convention, its legitimacy must be proven to every individual and by every individual. Hence, liberalism is grounding public authority and the legal order on a principal assumption of freedom. The latter guarantees an institutional, but also individual and civil constitution of freedom. Freedom from coercion, negative and positive freedom, and individual freedom rights represent some aspects of such a liberal constitution. Liberal freedom here always means the same freedom: *everybody* has the *same* claims to freedom. Equality, freedom, and individualism are thus essential characteristics of liberalism that cannot be reduced to each other. They are not only compatible with each other, but also entwined in a particular way.

On this basis, the third chapter will discuss the normative architecture of liberalism. Liberalism's justification includes normative premises, stipulations, and demands that specify the liberal demand for legitimacy. For instance, the concept of free and equal beings that need, and can provide, justifications is related to a political anthropology that abstracts – and specifies – the individual into a universal normative self. The objects and actions of liberal policy are determined by reference to the universal expectation of conflict – i.e. the fear of violence and cruelty that all individuals have in common – and are distinguished from the sphere of the non-political. With recourse to the rational individual interest in pacifying such conflicts, the necessity and rational and moral acceptability of the liberal rule of law is made plausible. Hence the reasons for political legitimacy can also serve as the source of a political (self)obligation in liberal democracy to abide by the law. The liberality of liberalism shows itself in a specific form of government, but also in a liberal form of life that includes civil loyalty as well as attitudes and virtues such as neutrality, impartiality, and tolerance.

The fourth chapter will address a contemporary challenge to liberal democracies by focusing on the fact and value of pluralism. In light of social pluralism, the question arises whether one can argue for a general and binding consensus over liberal norms, given the plurality and controversial nature of ideological, religious, and ethical beliefs. More recent liberal theories have reacted to this challenge by weakening their own validity claim. The idea is that liberalism now has to be political, ironic, but by no means metaphysical. This is allegedly the way to deal with the urgent problem of civil cohesion and social stability. By comparing old and new liberalism, this development towards a liberal-democratic subjectivism is critically evaluated. The demand for an epistemic abstinence – the avoidance of a validity claim – will be refuted.

The normative grammar of liberalism – in its conditions for success, its arguments, its basic concepts and its justifications – contains an objective validity claim. The latter cannot be satisfied by subjective opinions, individual beliefs, social or factual acceptance. It is therefore correct that liberalism is tied to a deep scepticism about absolutist claims to truth and certainty in politics. However, this scepticism does not imply a relativisation of political liberalism's validity claim.

If in doubt, liberalism is the right choice. The book concludes with this claim. It answers the question of what liberalism is and reacts to the evocation of a spectre, and enemy, by providing an adequate picture of liberalism. The aim is also to show what liberalism is *not*, and to which theories in political philosophy it is normatively superior. Overall, my explanations and thoughts are guided by the thesis of the normative attractiveness of liberal democracy. This core thesis is explicitly formulated in two sections of the book: at the end, in a concluding apology of liberalism against its many opponents; and at the beginning, in the overview over the historical success and contemporary crises of liberalism.