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Liberal Democracy From Oxymoron to Celebrated Concept: British and French Discourses of 1968–2001

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Abstract

In recent decades, the term "liberal democracy" has become increasingly prevalent in political and academic discourse. However, this widespread usage obscures the historical tension between democracy—understood as the exercise of popular sovereignty—and liberalism's emphasis on constitutional constraints and individual rights. While this contradiction was apparent to earlier political thinkers, the ideological battles of the 20th century led to the fusion of democracy and liberalism into a seemingly self-evident political ideal. To understand this transformation, this article examines the conceptual evolution of "liberal democracy" in Britain and France between 1968 and 2001, focusing on its use in parliamentary debates. It demonstrates how the concept was initially mobilized to counter participatory critiques of democracy in the 1970s, before gaining broader acceptance in the 1980s and culminating in cautious celebration after 1989. By the late 1990s, however, the term became increasingly contested, with both its liberal and democratic components facing scrutiny. Drawing from conceptual history, parliamentary studies, and democratic theory, this article historicizes "liberal democracy" as a constructed and politically charged category rather than a neutral descriptor of political regimes.

Keywords

democracy; France; history; liberalism; parliament; United Kingdom

1. Introduction

The concept of "liberal democracy" is everywhere. From politicians' speeches to pundits' op-eds, the concept has saturated the public sphere. Philanthropists and research agencies fund projects on "the future of liberal democracy" (European Commission, 2021; Walker, 2018). Indicators explicitly created to highlight the

"varieties of democracy" (such as V-Dem) have in recent years recentred their analysis on the measurement of "liberal democracy" and its decline (Wolff, 2023). Numerous voices are leading the charge in this battle for the defence of "liberal democracy" (e.g., Applebaum, 2020; Drache & Froese, 2022; Galston, 2018; Sedgwick, 2019; van Herpen, 2021).

As with most buzzwords, finding a working definition can be challenging. The authors of *The Oxford Handbook of Political Representation in Liberal Democracies* define "liberal democracy" in the following way:

> By liberal democracies we refer to the institutional practices as they have evolved in Western democracies since the early nineteenth century where periodic elections safeguarded by a canon of liberties and rights authorize representatives to make decisions for those residing within nation-states. (Rohrschneider & Thomassen, 2020, p. 1)

In *The Weariness of Democracy*, Obed Frausto, Jason Powell, and Sarah Vitale, while more critical, argue the following:

> Liberal democracy was originally defined as a form of government characterized by representation, the rule of law, and the distribution and balance of power. It became the foundational pillar of modern societies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. (Frausto et al., 2020, p. 3)

Two key components thus emerge: (a) representation through elections; and (b) the rule of law and constitutionally protected individual rights. But a third historical element is also present in the background of these definitions: Liberal democracy is an old ideal and practice, dating back to at least the 19th century.

While such definitions can have their utility, they are not historically grounded—worse, they are downright anachronistic. Indeed, a hundred years ago, "liberal democracy" would have sounded like an oxymoron, since liberalism and democratic thought were not known for their affinities. Liberals were often quite wary of the "tyrannic" potential of democracy, while others, such as socialists and anarchists, saw democracy as transcending the liberal focus on individual rights.

Thus, the problem becomes not "how can we save liberal democracy," but "how did this notion of liberal democracy become so prevalent?" How did this reconceptualisation of the relationship between liberalism and democracy happen? Who were the actors at the heart of this transformation? Against what model(s) were they using this concept? To answer some of these questions, I focus here on French and British political discourses at the end of the 20th century, especially parliamentary debates, and their uses of "liberal democracy."

Through this case study, I argue that "liberal democracy" is a rather recent category in political discourse: Born in the 1930s, defined during the Cold War, it only became a model applicable to France and the United Kingdom during the 1970s. Before this, "liberal democracy" was mainly seen as something that other countries should aim at achieving. In the 1980s, the revival of East/West antagonisms, rule-of-law issues regarding political violence, and partisan reconfigurations led to a wider application of the notion. By the 1990s, with the collapse of the USSR, the discredit of postcolonial movements, and the rise of human rights discourses, "liberal democracy" became the new banner of those proclaiming the "end of history"—although this was a rather cautious celebration.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a brief discussion of the theoretical and methodological choices that underpin this research. In Section 3, I offer a quantitative view of the uses of "liberal democracy" in parliament and selected newspapers, highlighting the rather late popularity of the concept in these sources. Section 4 provides an examination of the late 1970s and 1980s when "liberal democracy" began to take hold in British and French political discourse as a result of a counter-offensive against participatory critiques and geopolitical shifts. Finally, Section 5 focuses on the 1990s, when the notion became central in French and British political imagination, albeit with some reservations.

2. Methodology

This research sits at the intersection of two strands of literature. First, the last decade has seen several studies in intellectual history of the uses of the word "democracy" in the modern period. While these works often differ in scope and cases, they tend to highlight the negative connotations that this term had in most Western polities until the beginnings of the 20th century (Innes & Philp, 2013, 2018; Kurunmäki et al., 2018). Second, recent scholarship on the history of liberalism has also underlined the importance of avoiding anachronistic uses of "liberal" (D. Bell, 2014; Freeden et al., 2019; Rosenblatt, 2018). These scholars explain how the term is often "retrojected" to political thinkers who never defined themselves in that way (John Locke being the prime example), or onto institutions with few of the characteristics of what we now call "liberalism" or "democracy."

Building on these investigations helps us to critically assess some of the claims regarding the history of "liberal democracy." Several of the above-mentioned works locate its origins in one of the revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries (Boix et al., 2020; Galston, 2018, p. 72; Russo & Cotta, 2020; van Herpen, 2021, p. 198). Such a perspective is both anachronistic and procrustean. Anachronistic because the historical actors of these events rarely use the terms "democracy" or "liberal" to describe what they were living through, let alone "liberal democracy." Procrustean because to see these revolutions as "liberal democratic" implies stretching both the concept and these political situations beyond recognition. The representative governments that came out of such revolutions were neither democratic nor liberal, owing much more to ideas of republicanism and the mixed constitution (Bonin, 2024; Innes & Philp, 2013; Kurunmäki et al., 2018). "Liberal democracy," both as a word and as a concept, was absent from the debates at the time. For much of the 19th century, most self-identified French and British liberals focused on limiting the extent of the state, while those in favour of "popular sovereignty" or "democracy" concentrated on the source of political power (Bourke, 2016; de Dijn, 2020; Rosenblatt, 2018).

In order to understand how "liberal democracy" became such a hegemonic notion while avoiding the above-mentioned pitfalls, I use the framework and methods developed by conceptual history. The starting point of this approach is that human beings create, define, evaluate, use, and reject concepts to construct much of their social reality. Yet the exact meanings of key terms in political, societal, and cultural debates are unavoidably contested. Given this, the researcher's goal is not so much to discover the "true" meaning of contested concepts like "democracy" or "liberty," but rather to reconstruct their different layers of meaning (Koselleck, 2002; Steinmetz et al., 2017).

To restrict the scope of the investigation, this article deals with only two national cases: France and the United Kingdom. While not systematically comparing the conceptual history of "liberal democracy" in the two countries (a process that would raise several issues; see Steinmetz et al., 2017, pp. 17–24), I use the

contrast between the two cases to decentre the analysis and avoid the issues associated with "methodological nationalism." The choice of France and the United Kingdom is justified by two elements. First, they are often hailed (with the United States) as birthplaces of representative government and/or modern democracy, and several works of political science build on this comparison (Bateman, 2018; Manin, 1997). Second, while both countries share an entangled history, their intellectual traditions differ enough to allow one to grasp specificities as well as commonalities. More specifically, the French case allows studying a country where republicanism has been an important ideological framework and where the label "*libéral*" has fared rather poorly. The United Kingdom, on the other hand, has a stronger liberal tradition and is more connected to wider anglophone debates. This last point raises a question: Why not include the United States and complete the above-mentioned trinity? Besides practical reasons, ranging from my lack of expertise in American intellectual history to the limits of what one can do in an article, it is worth pointing out that my goal here is not to be exhaustive, but rather, to recognise "the inescapable diversity of political thought," to aim for "the re-particularizing of its analysis" (Freeden & Vincent, 2013, p. 8).

Furthermore, to increase compatibility and further limit the scope of the investigation, I focus mainly on parliamentary debates. While parliamentary debates have often been used as sources in political history, the history of political thought has often sidelined them in favour of more canonical sources, albeit this is slowly changing (Skjönsberg, 2021). In order to multiply perspectives, I sometimes expand the corpus, mainly towards theoretical treatises, political pamphlets, or newspaper articles. To make a musical metaphor: Parliamentary debates provide the rhythm section of this investigation, while other mediums add their solos here and there.

Since most of these sources are digitally available in a text-searchable format, this article adopts a nominalist approach. While the core ideas behind "liberal democracy" can be expressed through other terms, what seems to be crucial to me is to understand why actors choose to voice them in those precise words. To take one example, while the expression "Western democracy" might share conceptual similarities with "liberal democracy" and might even be used interchangeably by some, this is something to explain rather than to take for granted. It is by being attentive to the precise words used by various historical actors that one can hope to grasp conceptual transformations and their impact on our current situation (Muto, 2022).

Taking advantage of the recent "digital turn" in intellectual history, I adopt digital methods and tools to support this analysis. More precisely, I used the interface People and Parliament, developed at the University of Jyväskylä, which contains the transcripts of the parliamentary debates of more than 10 countries, including France and the United Kingdom (Ihalainen et al., 2024). With this tool, I am able to pinpoint trends and ruptures and focus the analysis on key moments or actors. In this, I follow Jani Marjanen's suggestion that "the value of quantification can seldom be new interpretations, but rather empirical proof" (Marjanen, 2023, p. 50).

3. A View From Above

Adopting a quantitative perspective on "liberal democracy" in French and British parliamentary debates is useful in two regards. First, it makes the comparison easier. As a quick glance at Figure 1 indicates, "liberal democracy" (both in singular and plural) has been much more frequent in Westminster than in the French parliament since the 1990s. Second, it helps to locate peaks and rises in trends. Figure 1 demonstrates that

while the notion was present here and there in debates from the end of the 19th century, it did not become more widespread until the last third of the 20th century. This is particularly clear in the British case: Barely visible before the 1980s, the use of "liberal democracy" has exploded since then. As for the French case, while the progression is less linear, there was a stark increase in the use of the term after 1968.

These dynamics are not unique to parliaments. As demonstrated by Figure 2, in two British newspapers (*The Times* and *The Guardian*), similar trends to Figure 1 can be observed: some uses in the 1930s and a
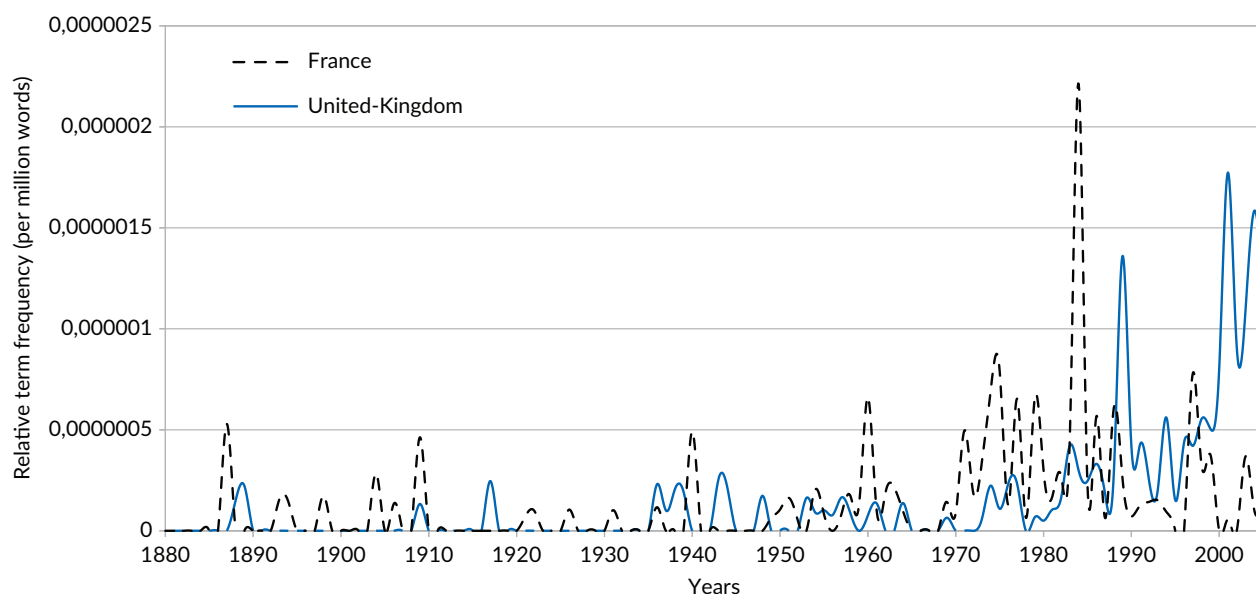
Figure 1. Relative term frequencies of "démocratie(s) libérale(s)" and "liberal democracy(ies)," French and British parliament, both upper and lower chambers, 1880–2005. Note: The low quality of the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) of earlier decades means that the search function might have missed some. Source: Author's own production based on data from Ihalainen et al. (2024).
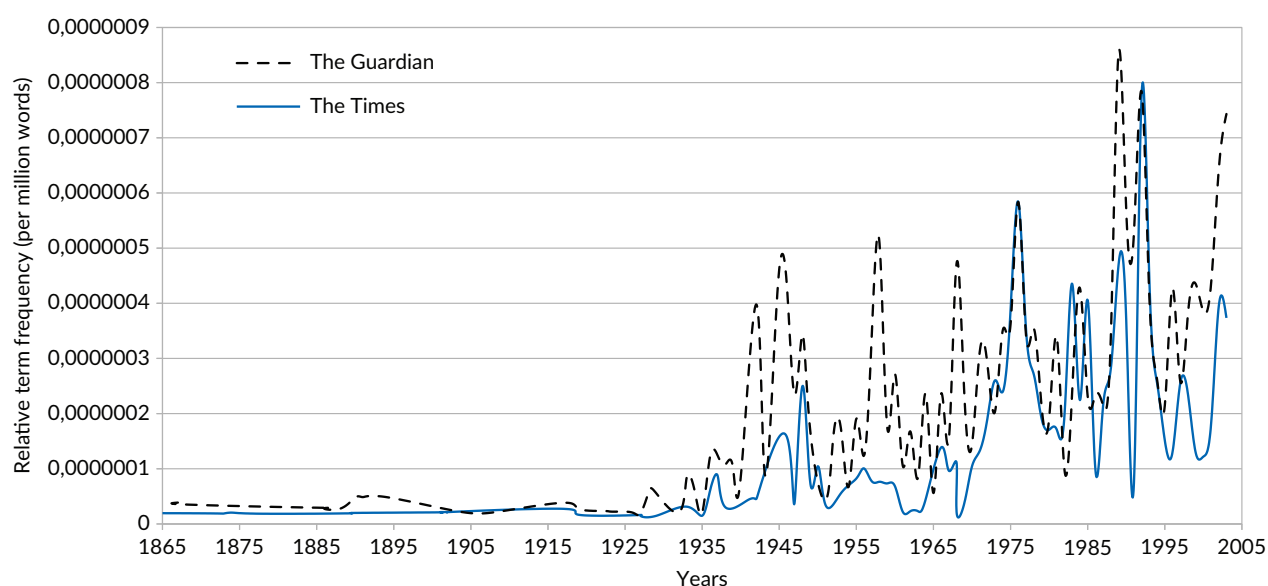
Figure 2. Relative term frequency of "liberal democracy(ies)" in *The Times* and *The Guardian*, 1865–2003. Source: Author's own production based on data from Research Software Lab (2023).

strong rise by the 1980s. In the French newspaper *Le Monde*, there is also a clear upward trend in the use of the notion in the 1970s (see Figure 3).
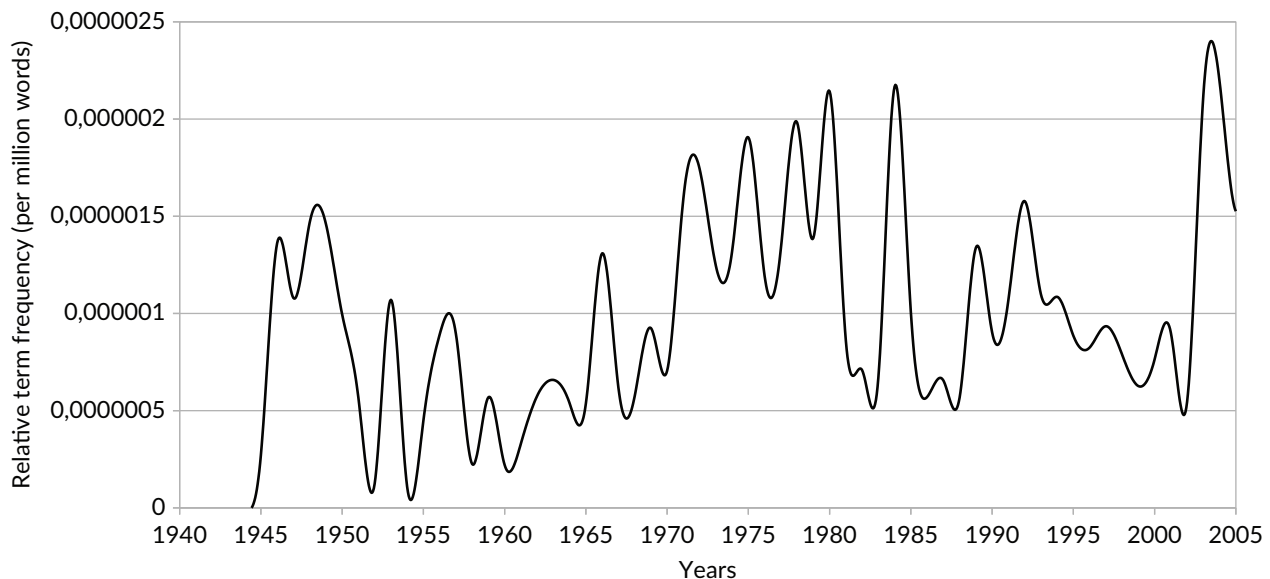

Figure 3. Relative term frequency of "démocratie(s) libérale(s)" in *Le Monde*, 1944–2005. Source: Author's own production based on data from Courson et al. (2023).

"Liberal democracy" was, quantitatively speaking, not a common expression in either British or French parliamentary debates for the first half of the 20th century. While one can find few positive uses in the 1930s, when it was used in juxtaposition with both fascism and communism, and in the 1950s, when it was used in juxtaposition with "totalitarianism," the notion certainly did not play a central role in the debates of the early Cold War. When the concept was used, it was mostly in discussions relating to foreign policy (Bonin, in press). Therefore, despite brief appearances of the term earlier, the current understanding and usage of the term "liberal democracy" should be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s.

4. The Counter-Offensive: 1968–1989

According to Martin Conway and Jan-Werner Müller, Western Europe adopted "stable" and "constrained" democratic regimes following 1945, with limited popular participation as well as strong technocratic and elitist components (Conway, 2020; Müller, 2011). From the 1960s onward, the institutions and the social norms which underpinned these regimes have been increasingly criticized across the West. In both France and the United Kingdom, the newfound popularity of "liberal democracy" appears to have been a response to these attacks, coming mostly from the New Left, in order to defend pluralistic regimes and a market economy. More precisely, while "liberal democracy" was still used often in geopolitical discussions, as something postcolonial states should strive towards, it also gained prominence in domestic debates. This reflects the fact that, as the famous Trilateral Commission report would put it in 1975, "democracy" was increasingly seen as being under pressure, not only from contextual and external threats, but from its own internal trends and intrinsic challenges (Crozier et al., 1975, p. 8).

In the British Parliament, the felt pressure of domestic problems was particularly explicit in the tensions between "parliamentary sovereignty" and "trade union power," or more broadly "out-of-doors" demands.

Without going over the historiography of the 1970s in the United Kingdom (Black et al., 2013), it is clear that various social movements, new and old, increasingly challenged the framework of the postwar "constrained democracy." Various MPs—especially Conservative ones—were keen to defend "liberal democracy" from "the streets." According to Nicholas Scott, a rising Conservative star defending the 1971 Industrial Relations Bill which limited the right to strike, the Labour Party should be cautious in its criticisms of Westminster:

> Some of the things that I hold precious are not so held by the other side, but parliamentary democracy and liberal democracy are, and some of the shouts from the other side of the House the other day about taking this battle on to the streets gives rise to something which I think hon. Gentlemen opposite should consider very seriously….It behoves every honourable Member in this House to beware of even appearing to threaten the fundamental principles of parliamentary democracy. (House of Commons Debates [HC Deb], 25 January 1971, vol. 810 col. 60)

This type of accusation underlined the (perceived) threat posed to representative institutions by social movements. As Conservative Lord Monson explained a few years later, the Labour Party had turned toward the "authoritarian Left," fuelling a "shift from Parliamentary to trade union power [which] has turned Britain into arguably the least free of the small group of liberal democracies still left in the world" (House of Lords Debates [HL Deb], 28 September 1976, vol. 374 col. 311).

Across the Channel, a similar process of polarisation over the role of representative institutions was at play. In the French context, the events of May 1968 were crucial. This moment sparked the "French liberal revival" of the 1970s, itself situated in a longer crisis of republican thought (Chabal, 2016a; Schulz, 2022). Shocked by the "events of May," but offset by the dirigisme of Charles de Gaulle, several political figures tried to develop a liberal third way. In the intellectual sphere, the rise of Raymon Aron and the "Aroniens" and their associated publications (*Contrepoints* [1970–1976] and *Commentaire* [1979–present]) was a clear indicator of this liberal revival (Châton, 2015). In the political arena, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's presidency (1974–1981) was another proof that French liberalism was on the rise. In his manifesto *Démocratie française* (1976), Giscard d'Estaing defended "a modern democratic society, liberal in the pluralist structure of all its powers, advanced by a high degree of economic performance, social unification and cultural development" (Giscard d'Estaing, 1976, p. 170). This "*société libérale*" could be seen as the foundation for a "*démocratie libérale*" (Chabal, 2016b). In the following years, his goal of a "*démocratie libérale avancée*" was sometimes echoed by MPs (Pierre Jourdan [Union pour la Démocratie Française, UDF], Senate, 10 June 1975, p. 1421; Aymar Achille-Fould [Centre démocratie et progrès, CDP], National Assembly [NA], 18 November 1975, p. 8561; Pierre Bas [Rassemblement pour la République, RPR], NA, 28 July 1979, p. 6480), or criticized and mocked by the Left (Henri Lavielle [Parti socialiste, PS], 16 April 1975, p. 1738; Robert Ballanger [Parti communiste français, PCF], 26 April 1977, p. 2139; Edmond Garcin [PCF], 11 October 1979, p. 8093).

More generally, in the French parliament "*démocratie libérale*" was tied to consultation and dialogue, as then-Prime Minister Jacques Chirac (RPR) expressed in his 1974 *Discours de politique générale*:

> Finally, through a renewed practice of consultation between all the players in economic and social life and, in the political sphere, through different relations between the majority and the opposition, the aim is to make French society an exemplary model of liberal democracy. (NA, 5 June 1974, p. 2491)

This adequation of "liberal democracy" with "consultation" (or sometimes "participation" in Gaullist discourses) clearly positioned the liberal-democratic regimes in contrast to the more radical democratic ideals (such as *autogestion*) of the times. Through its association with freedom, the notion was also raised with regards to judicial questions, and rights and liberties in general (Hector Rolland [RPR], NA, 4 June 1970, p. 2243; André Beauguitte [Républicains Indépendants, RI], NA, 27 October 1971, p. 4955; Jacques Duhamel [CDP], Senate, 3 December 1971, p. 12; Alain Peyrefitte [Union des démocrates pour la République, UDR], NA, 6 December 1977, p. 8708). On this topic, Interior Minister Michel Poniatowski (FNRI, centre-right) could argue that "democracy, in any case liberal democracy, to which the French people confirmed their attachment in May 1974, requires that citizens be granted the widest possible individual and political rights" (Senate, 7 October 1975, p. 2848).

This embrace of "*démocratie libérale*" as the guarantee of political freedom by right-wing political actors went beyond parliamentary debates. Around the same period, Raymond Aron could, in his *Plaidoyer pour l'Europe décadente* (1977), worry about the potential "self-destruction of liberal democracies," since these regimes had at their core a "contradiction…which postulates freedom for the enemies of freedom" (Aron, 1977, p. 356). Taking the French and Italian political situation as examples of countries where a strong communist party might soon take power and destroy the current regime, he pleaded for a reframing of the liberal values of tolerance, diversity, and self-criticism as strengths rather than weaknesses. Aron was not alone in this move towards a stronger embrace and explicit defence of the concept of liberal democracy. Philipe Malaud, an "independent republican" politician who would drift to the far right, could call for a "liberal revolution" to defend liberal democratic institutions against "collectivist ideologies" (Malaud, 1976, p. 4). But it is probably the publication of legal professor Francis-Paul Bénoit's vast *La démocratie libérale* in 1978 by the prestigious Presses Universitaires de France which is the most revealing of the codification of the notion and its increased prevalence. Projecting the notion back onto the English parliamentary system of the 18th century, Bénoit claimed that liberal democracy was a type of society characterised by "the will to freedom and government of the people by themselves" (Bénoit, 1978, p. 5). Seeing no contradictions between liberalism and democracy, Bénoit stressed their complementarity. As vice-president of the Association pour la liberté économique et le progrès social, a (neo)liberal think tank, he was well placed to push forward this renewal of liberal thought (Brookes, 2017). While an examination of the whole (neo)liberal constellation and its relationship with democracy is impossible here, Lars Cornelissen has shown how, for an intellectual network like the Mont-Pelerin Society, the solution to democracy's tendency to intervene in the economy was to impose constitutional limits on the state's expenditure and economic powers (Cornelissen, 2017).

While it may be surprising for a country so commonly associated with neoliberalism, these economic concerns did not dominate the uses of "liberal democracy" in Westminster. Instead, MPs seemed increasingly worried about issues such as the rule of law and freedom of expression in a liberal-democratic state. Patrick Duffy (Labour [Lab]) could thus mention how members of the Armed Forces had to sacrifice "the freedom of expression and political activity and the freedom to engage in public controversy—for this [was] the well-founded basis of the relationship between the Armed Forces and the rest of the community in a liberal democracy" (HC Deb, 5 April 1973, vol. 854 col. 732). Others might underline how, "as citizens of a liberal democracy," the freedom of the press was crucial for both MPs and the public at large (Peter Bottomley (Conservative [Con]; HC Deb, 21 January 1976, vol. 903 col. 1398). The question of individual rights on the international stage often turned to the emerging question of "human rights," which would come to dominate the global agenda in the late 1970s and beyond (Hoffmann, 2016; Moyn, 2010). Thus, Julius Silverman (Lab)

could express his doubts regarding the USSR's capacity to respect the 1975 Helsinki Declaration, considering that "it was not a liberal democracy" (HC Deb, 18 May 1977, vol. 932 col. 503). This association between respect for human rights and the liberal-democratic framework would grow in the following years.

Another topic which would plague parliamentarians was the question of political violence and terrorism. With "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland escalating in the 1970s, several MPs began to weigh options between liberty and security. As Kingston upon Hull Central representative Kevin McNamara (Lab) expressed, this was "the eternal dilemma of any liberal democracy: [When could it be] necessary to exclude people from the country or to intern them without trial and without the evidence being produced?" (HC Deb, 19 May 1975, vol. 892 col. 1126). A few years later, Philip Goodhart (Con) would complain that "interrogators" in Northern Ireland had to "cope with more restrictions on such matters as time available to question suspects [than] in most other liberal democracies" (HC Deb, 16 March 1979, vol. 964 col. 977). Indeed, the question of the relationship between terrorism and "liberal democracy" would only increase in importance during the 1980s—proof that MPs seemed to worry first about the "liberal" part of the notion.

For Nicholas Scott, now under-secretary of state for the Northern Ireland Office, it was clear that in Northern Ireland, "liberal democracy" was "under attack from vicious terrorism," which necessitated the granting of emergency powers (HC Deb, 26 June 1985, vol. 81 col. 1047). This echoes similar concerns over the Channel: In 1986, Jacques Chirac (RPR), newly elected prime minister, presented terrorism as "a challenge to liberal democracies" to be vigorously fought (Senate, 15 April 1986, p. 516). But the threat was not only internal. In Westminster, for Lord Chalfont, former Labour foreign secretary in the 1960s, but getting closer to the conservative side at the time of the following quote, it was clear that "international terrorism is nothing else than a form of low-intensity warfare conducted against the liberal democracies of the West" (HL Deb, 7 November 1984, vol. 457 col. 60). Chalfont had tried to raise awareness about the dangers facing "liberal democracies" for years, both inside and outside of parliament. In a 1976 column in *The Times*, he argued that "for many years the values and principles of liberal democracy have been under attack," both by "international communists" and "Marxists within the Labour movement," but the greatest threat was actually the "growing public expenditure" and "nationalisations"—a position with strong Hayekean undertones (Lord Chalfont, 1976). During the 1980s, Chalfont would go on and on about the defence of liberal democracy, but usually in the context of East/West discussions (HL Deb, 20 July 1981, vol. 423 col. 39; HL Deb, 16 January 1985, vol. 458 col. 1005; HL Deb, 5 February 1986, vol. 470 col. 1180).

If the most frequent user of "liberal democracy" in Westminster was a Labour-turned-Conservative Lord, in France, it was a street-fighting anticommunist-turned-politician: Alain Madelin. By the late 1970s, the growing liberal intellectual counter-offensive described earlier also had its political counterpart, mostly in what has been called "la bande à Léo": rising right-wing heavyweights François Léotard, Gérard Longuet, and Alain Madelin (Perrier, 2015). It is the latter that is of particular interest to us. MP from 1978 to 2007, with brief interruptions as minister of industry (1986–1988) and minister for economic development (1993–1995), Madelin is one of the few French politicians to explicitly claim the mantle of "*libéral*" and was clearly involved in neoliberal networks. While the beginnings of his political activism in the 1960s in the far-right group Occident have been covered by others (Charpier, 2005), it is his work as MP that is relevant here. Indeed, as shown in Figure 1, this decade proved pivotal for the uses of "*démocratie libérale*" in France. In that regard, Madelin clearly stands above other MPs: He is responsible for almost half of the 80 times the expression was uttered in the French parliament during the 1980s.

Tellingly, it is on the issues of freedom of the press and education, two crucial topics in 1984, that Madelin most often used the notion (see all in the NA debates; on the press: 27 April 1982, p. 1377; 16 December 1983, p. 6597; 25 January 1984, pp. 34, 71; 27 January 1984, pp. 190, 194, 248, 430; 4 February 1984, pp. 561, 573; 8 February 1984, pp. 729, 952; 18 June 1984, pp. 3435–3439; 2 July 1984, p. 3961; 4 July 1984, pp. 4029, 4036; on education: 3 June 1983, 3rd sitting, p. 2038; 22 May 1984, p. 2517). That year saw vigorous debates on a bill to encourage transparency and pluralism in media enterprises, as well as on private education. During those discussions, Madelin quite often linked "*démocratie libérale,*" freedom of expression, and "freedom of communication businesses," as well as retro-projecting the notion onto the French Revolution:

> Already, under the Convention, Lakanal considered...: "There can be no obstacle to the growth of communication enterprises because their purpose is to spread enlightenment that brings benefits to humanity." This was also the opinion of the founding fathers of our liberal democracy, of those who wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Man....Now it is to this dissemination of information, by whatever means—in this case the press—that you are imposing restrictions that we consider to be contrary to the spirit of liberal democracy, contrary to our constitutional texts. (NA, 19 June 1984, p. 3489)

What emerges from these speeches, and Madelin's later publications (Madelin, 1992, 1995), is an understanding of "*démocratie libérale*" which stresses the limitations of popular sovereignty, insisting on constitutionally protected rights for the individual. While not particularly original in itself, these uses of the notion stick out in French parliamentary debates as more developed and articulated than those of his colleagues. Madelin also stands as an idiosyncratic type of politician, since he was not afraid of quoting liberal thinkers in parliament as well as dipping into the intellectual sphere, through his links with the Association pour la liberté économique et le progrès social and the Nouveaux Économistes.

Alongside Madelin, French MPs who used "liberal democracy" in parliamentary debates during the 1970s and 1980s tended to sit in the centre or the right wing of the chambers. While in these two decades, few MPs on the Left might use the notion here and there in a neutral way (Roger Quilliot [PS], NA, 5 November 1977, p. 2584; Hélène Luc [PCF], Senate, 17 February 1988, p. 130), most uses on the Left tended to be critical. For example, communist MP Joseph Legrand described "liberal democracy" as "just an electoral advertising screen" (NA, 8 December 1977, p. 8295), while Senator Franck Sérusclat (PS) could declare that a "*démocratie libérale*" was a "*démocratie tronquée*" (truncated democracy; Senate, 7 November 1979, p. 4671). However, this type of critical use of "liberal democracy" would go on declining. This mirrors broader intellectual tendencies: Whether associated with the first or the second Left (the "*deuxième gauche*" led, amongst others, by Michel Rocard), French intellectual figures tended to steer clear of using the concept of "liberal democracy" (with two minor critical exceptions: Ellul, 1978, p. 83; Huntzinger, 1977, pp. 252, 282). This would change in the following decade.

By the end of the 1980s, a series of events illustrate the newfound popularity of "liberal democracy" in both countries. In the United Kingdom, the most important one is the creation of the "Liberal Democrats" party in 1989. In the early 1980s, a breakaway group of Labour MPs created the Social Democratic Party, which would negotiate an electoral agreement with the Liberal Party and gain a certain momentum as "the Alliance." As both parties lost seats in the 1987 general election, calls for a merger grew. Initially named the "Social and Liberal Democrats" (SLD) in March 1988, the party adopted the name "Liberal Democrats" the following

year (while being briefly named the "Democrats" in between; Cook, 2010, p. 202). According to Matthew Taylor, Liberal MP and chair of the party's communications at the time, this was due to a lack of recognition of the SLD name, as well as the will to preserve "liberal beliefs" as a core identity (Taylor, 2007, p. 26). More broadly, this reflects the dominance of the Liberal Party in the merger: As historian Mike Finn explains, it is clear that "by the mid-1990s the party was emphatically rejecting the language of social democracy as that of a bygone age, and redefining itself exclusively in 'liberal' terms" (Finn, 2020, p. 268). Regarding the concept of "liberal democracy," while the 1990s would see an increase in its popularity in Westminster, the Lib-Dems do not appear to be the main cause: Labour and Conservatives MPs would continue to use the notion as well, meaning it did not acquire a specific partisan connotation.

In France, the larger embrace of "*démocratie libérale*" in the intellectual sphere was seen in the use of the notion in textbooks and other student-oriented publications. While in the 1960s, the recommended handbooks for the *collège* and *lycée* history classes might mention it here and there (Bloch-Morhange, 1963; Crouzet, 1961), the notion became commonplace by the 1980s (Heffer & Launay, 1980). This was not uncontroversial: In 1980, Communist MP Colette Privat could attack "a textbook that contrasts the liberal democracy of Pinochet's Chile with the communist dictatorship of Vietnam" (NA, 24 October 1980, p. 3097). For historian of education Marie-Christine Baquès, the 1980s witnessed several important changes in *lycée* history textbooks, including a "turnaround in interpretation" of the USSR (from positive to negative) and "a positive view of the United States [replacing] the negative view of the 1970s" (Baquès, 2007, p. 147). This was not limited to secondary education: In 1987, Philipe Bénéton's *Introduction à la politique moderne*, a textbook for university students, explicitly framed the main issue of politics as the struggle between liberal democracy and totalitarianism (Bénéton, 1987). In the United Kingdom, the publication of a political science textbook entitled *Understanding Liberal Democracy* (1988) can also be seen as revealing of the changing zeitgeist. From a rather arcane term used in historico-philosophical discussions, "liberal democracy" was now presented to students as a basic category of analysis of contemporary politics. The author, University of Reading Lecturer Barry Holden, defined "democracy" as "a political system in which the whole people...make, and are entitled to make, the basic determining decisions on important matters of public policy" (Holden, 1988, p. 8). From this, he argued that "liberal democracy" had a more controversial meaning but that it could be understood as a "limited democracy," one in which the people "are only entitled to make such decisions in a restricted sphere" (Holden, 1988, p. 17). Once again, the key characteristic of the liberal-democratic regimes was its "liberal" element, that is in its limitations on the state's power.

5. The Cautious Celebration: 1989–2001

While we should be cautious about overstressing ruptures, it does seem that with the fall of the Berlin Wall, a levee had broken regarding "liberal democracy" both in British and French politics. The notion became increasingly frequent in parliamentary debates, gained traction in the public sphere, and was generally used with triumphalist undertones. In the second edition of *Understanding Liberal Democracy*, published in 1993, Holden could now write in the preface that while the book was initially published during the Cold War, the events of the last years "support the view that liberal democracy is now unchallenged" (Holden, 1993, p. ix). This echoes the thesis of one of the most infamous essays in modern politics: Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History" (1989). While a full study of Fukuyama's ideas falls beyond the scope of this article, there is good reason to think that Fukuyama is one of the main innovative ideologues to have influenced the popularity of the concept of liberal democracy in the 1990s.

Although there is a vast literature on the question of the "end of history," the important point from my perspective is that Fukuyama argued that we were witnessing "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of *Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government*" (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 4, emphasis added). In his 1992 book, Fukuyama quietly dropped the "Western" part, aiming at a more universalist tone, and recounted how in his essay he "argued that liberal democracy may constitute the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' and the 'final form of human government,' and as such constituted the 'end of history'" (Fukuyama, 1992, p. ix). More precisely, Fukuyama presented the Hegelian-inspired thesis of Alexandre Kojève, for whom, following the French Revolution, "the basic *principles* of the liberal democratic state could not be improved upon" (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 5, emphasis in the original). Such a state was liberal "insofar as it recognizes and protects through a system of law man's universal right to freedom," and democratic because it existed "only with the consent of the governed" (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 11). Juridically-backed individual rights and consent (mostly understood as elections) in the political sphere, and free markets in the economic one—this was Fukuyama's final trinity.

Fukuyama's ideas were widely discussed and criticised in the following years, in France, the United Kingdom, and beyond. His original essay was published in *The National Interest* in the summer of 1989, and it was translated into French (by the Aronien review *Commentaire*) in the fall. As proof of the dissemination of his ideas in France, one can note that by the end of the year, the essay had been quoted by two different MPs in the French parliament. One of them, Emile Koehl (UDF), actually asked Prime Minister Michel Rocard (PS) his views on the article (NA, 25 December 1989, p. 5615). Rocard's answer was that it was not the PM's job to comment on philosophical debates, but that "freedom and democracy remain achievements that it would be dangerous to regard as irrevocable in any event" (NA, 29 January 1990, p. 434). This cautious view echoes the reception of Fukuyama's ideas in the intellectual sphere. Commentators, from Pierre Nora to Jean Baudrillard, generally took a critical stance on the "end of history" thesis, reflecting a deeper resistance to any notion of historical closure and a continued commitment to the unfinished and open-ended nature of political struggle (Marks, 1994). But once again, the debate focused on whether the "end of history" had arrived, not necessarily on what "liberal democracy" entailed.

While Fukuyama was not quoted directly in Westminster, his ideas were also widely discussed in the United Kingdom. In the pages of the *New Left Review*, Fred Halliday and Joseph McCarney highlighted the contradictory nature of "liberal democracy" and the ongoing challenges, from the ecological crisis to the persistence of authoritarian capitalism, it faced (Halliday, 1992; McCarney, 1993). For Halliday, British responses to Fukuyama varied "from the empiricist scepticism of the Right…and a Left divided between those who see him as just a capitalist ideologue…and those who seek to recruit him for a revisionist progressivism" (Halliday, 1992, p. 91). Typical of the former was Ian Crowther's conservative attack on the "liberal universalism" of Fukuyama, which argued that since "liberal democracy alone [was] not enough to guarantee a good society," then a common moral and religious culture needed to be defended (Crowther, 1990, p. 16). But again, most of the attacks on Fukuyama concentrated on whether history had ended, not on whether "liberal democracy" was an apt concept to designate the representative regimes of the West.

In a curious twist, it is thus not the Cold War itself but rather the victory of the West that enshrined "liberal democracy" in the political imagination of France and the United Kingdom. While the Cold War had been thought of through numerous oppositions (West/East, capitalism/communism, free market/planned economy, etc.), the end of the 1980s saw its reframing as a conflict between "liberal democracy" and

communism. As former President of the Republic and now Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (UDF) summarized this period, "from 1948 to 1990, world diplomacy managed the risk of a global confrontation between East and West, between communism and the liberal democracies" (NA, 28 October 1993, p. 5081). With the dissolution of the USSR, a new era was thus beginning.

While this embrace of "*démocratie libérale*" was thus not universal, several indicators suggest that by the 1990s a new chapter had begun. In France, several prominent scholars, from François Furet to Claude Lefort, began explicitly endorsing "liberal democracy." While Furet had steered clear of the concept in his work on the French Revolution, in his critical analysis of the idea of communism as it was perceived in public opinion, entitled *Passing of an Illusion* (1995), he would mainly use "liberal democracy" in opposition to both communist and fascist regimes. In a rather typical fashion for the era, he could write that after 1945, "the only antagonists left were capitalism and socialism, liberal democracy and 'popular' democracy, in their living incarnations as the United States of America and the Soviet Union" (Furet, 1999, p. 413). Lefort's intellectual trajectory exemplifies the liberal-democratic turn in parts of French political thought (Ghins, in press). Initially a Left-wing communist and co-founder of Socialisme ou Barbarie, Lefort later moved closer to liberal thinkers like Furet, Marcel Gauchet, and Pierre Rosanvallon. While his influential theory of democracy emphasized radical indeterminacy, it was not explicitly framed as "liberal democracy" until the late 1980s, when he began focusing on the opposition between populism and democracy, particularly in response to the rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen's Front National (Selinger, 2023). By the 1990s, Lefort fully embraced the term, stating in a 1994 conference that "what is modern democracy today—the one in the societies in which we live? It has a name: It is liberal democracy" (Lefort, 2007, p. 748). His gradual shift underscores a broader intellectual movement, as other thinkers, both prominent and lesser-known, engaged with the concept, oscillating between critical reflection and triumphalism. Even Rosanvallon's trilogy on universal suffrage, representation, and popular sovereignty (published between 1992 and 2002), while not dealing explicitly with democracy in its liberal form, did present the articulation of democratic and liberal thought as one of the main tensions of the modern era (Rosanvallon, 1992, p. 25). In 1997, nearly 20 years after Bénoit, Serge Berstein edited a massive historical investigation entitled *La démocratie libérale*, again published by the Presses Universitaires de France. While also recognizing in his introduction that democracy and liberalism had been at odds for most of the 19th century, Berstein argued that "*démocratie libérale*" had lived a "golden age" from 1880 to 1918 and endured contestations in the interwar period, before being "renewed" after WWII and finally becoming "triumphant" in the 1990s (Berstein, 1998, pp. 4–5).

Outside of the academic sphere, things were also changing. In 1997, Alain Madelin founded Démocratie libérale (DL), the first French party explicitly embracing the term "liberal democracy," following a broader post-Cold War trend in Europe (Sauger, 2002). Madelin, who had distanced himself from the UDF, sought to promote a vision of democracy rooted in constitutional limits and economic liberalism, opposing majoritarian rule. As he explained in a preface to a volume entitled *Aux sources du modèle libéral français*, "the liberal conception of democracy is based on the presence of constitutional limits delimiting the powers of the legislature and the government" (Madelin, 1997, p. v). Despite his efforts to present DL as modern and dynamic, the party struggled electorally and dissolved into the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (UMP)after Madelin's poor 2002 presidential performance. However, while DL failed as a political force, the concept of "*démocratie libérale*" gained traction in French political discourse, despite the persistent negative connotations of "liberal" in France compared to the United Kingdom.

The 1990s were the decade when "liberal democracy" broke through in Westminster. After the internal debates of the 1970s and 1980s, it was once again mostly used to discuss geopolitical issues, especially about post-Soviet countries and European integration. As in France, while some MPs celebrated the fall of the USSR, not all were that optimistic about the future. Some seemed to have doubts about the prospect of democracy in Russia itself due to its "historical record," as David Howell (Con), chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee put it (HC Deb, 22 February 1990, vol. 167 col. 1115; see also Archie Hamilton [Con], HC Deb, 1 July 1991, vol. 194 col. 43; Lord Chalfont, HL Deb, 12 June 1991, vol. 529 col. 1112). While Dianne Abbot (Lab) was worried that Eastern Europe could not "sustain stable, liberal democracies" due to economic difficulties (HC Deb, 2 July 1990, vol. 175 col. 723). Eventually, some came to have hope in other countries such as Slovenia, which for Baroness Lynda Chalker (Con) was "politically stable [and] has a pluralist liberal democracy" (HL Deb, 29 February 1996, vol. 569 col. 16002).

It is probably Peter Luff (Con) from Worcester who put best the mix of anxiety and hopefulness that MPs were feeling in regard to "liberal democracy":

> Communism was the common enemy by which we measured the health of our society. Its demise has robbed us of that powerful weapon. We are now forced to argue the details of how we run our affairs in Britain and in the rest of Europe without that overwhelming argument, based on the evils of the old, totalitarian alternative. The major failures of western liberal democracies, such as high unemployment, will be much harder for us to explain away when we cannot remind people of the unpalatable consequences of the only real alternative. (HC Deb, 18 March 1994, vol. 239 col. 1262)

In a rather straightforward manner, Luff outlined that the lack of an enemy made "western liberal democracies" more fragile to criticisms. He was echoed a few months later by David George Clark, then Labour shadow secretary of state for defence, who, in commenting on the new democracies of Eastern Europe, warned against reducing "liberal democracy" to the free market solely:

> Those of us in liberal democracies have to meet certain challenges. The market economy, unbridled, is not a liberal democracy. If one is not careful, one creates underclasses, which negate the concept of free democracies. We must avoid that in our country and we must avoid exporting it to newly emerging democracies. (HC Deb, 17 November 1994, vol. 250 col. 219)

Far from a naive celebration, we can see a certain critical understanding amongst certain MPs of the challenges that laid ahead for Western states in the post-communist era.

This echoes the sentiments of French MPs on geopolitical issues during the 1990s. For Bernard Stasi (UDF), the first Gulf War showed that "the almost universal victory of liberal democracy and the market economy" was not a guarantee of stability (NA, 8 November 1990, p. 4974). For Michel Rufin (RPR), it "was too early to talk about and bet on the final victory of liberal democracy in what was once the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" and thus defence budgets had to be maintained at a reasonable level (Senate, 26 November 1991, p. 4339). Thus, while there was a clear celebration from French and British politicians, it was a rather cautious optimism that dominated the scene.

Another area where MPs from both countries converged in their uses of "liberal democracy" was the question of European integration. Of course, parliamentarians had diverging positions on the necessity of European Community enlargement, but generally agreed that a liberal democratic regime and a free-market economy were prerequisites. In Westminster, as early as January 1990, Paddy Ashdown, leader of the Liberal-Democrats, defended a motion regarding Eastern Europe and the European Community. For him, the United Kingdom should welcome "recent progress towards liberal democracy in the countries of eastern and central Europe [and endorse] progress towards the political and economic integration of the European Community" (HC Deb, 31 January 1990, vol. 166 col. 323). There was a clear trans-partisan consensus on the first part. For Francis Maude, minister of state for Europe, the Conservative government also welcomed "recent progress towards liberal democracy in eastern and central Europe" (HC Deb, 31 January 1990, vol. 166 col. 333), while Joyce Quin (Lab), although critical of Ashdown's framing of the motion, was also supportive of this new democratic pluralism (HC Deb, 31 January 1990, vol. 166 col. 353). Although European integration would (famously) continue to divide MPs and British citizens in the years to come, "liberal democracy" was now taken for granted as a common denominator for members of the European Community and a sine qua non condition for integration (Roger Knapman [Con], HC Deb, 11 June 1990, vol. 174 col. 2083; Lord Eatwell [Lab], HL Deb, 10 March 1994, vol. 552 col. 1594–95). In France, during the debates on the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, Xavier de Villepin (UDF) argued that this treaty "aims to establish a liberal democracy and develop a market economy in all the countries concerned" (Senate, 10 June 1992, p. 1529). A few years later, Jacques Genton (Union du Centre, UC) could explain that the former countries of the USSR had to undergo economic reforms (from planned to market economy) and "fundamental political reform—moving from a totalitarian system to pluralist liberal democracy as we know it" in order to join the European Union (Senate, 19 April 1994, p. 1150).

Before moving to the conclusion, it is worth mentioning a last element, which falls outside of the scope of parliamentary debates but is crucial in considering our current conceptual landscape—the emergence, during the 1990s, of the notion of "illiberal democracy." While the term originated in a 1995 book on Southeast Asia (D. A. Bell et al., 1995), it is generally Fareed Zakaria's 1997 "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" article in *Foreign Affairs* which is credited as having introduced the notion to a larger audience. Zakaria's main point was that, while in the West the rise of democracy had been intertwined with liberty and the rule of law, this was not the case in the rest of the world. Worse, democracy and liberalism were growing apart, since while the number of democratic countries was rising, those respecting civil liberties were falling. Or as Zakaria put it: "Democracy is flourishing; constitutional liberalism is not" (Zakaria, 1997, p. 25).

Since the 1990s, "illiberal democracy" has been criticised by a number of scholars as a vague concept or as an oxymoron; some arguing that notions such as "competitive authoritarianism" or "plebiscitarian authoritarianism" are more precise ways of describing countries with elections but few other "democratic" characteristics (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Sadurski, 2019). Nonetheless, with political figures such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán explicitly endorsing "illiberal democracy," the notion has gained ground, both politically and scientifically, especially since the 2010s. Its birth in the 1990s is thus a testament to the sense of cautious celebration characteristic of the era: While "liberal democracy" had become the "final form of human government," deviations from it were still possible. But these "alternatives" were not thought of as standing on their own; they were purely antithetical to the liberal model.

6. Conclusion: The Disillusion?

By the late 1990s, a new chapter in the history of "liberal democracy" seemed to begin. The trope of a "crisis of democracy" was reactivated, but the focus was different. While politicians and academics had worried about a "democratic overload" in the 1970s, at the turn of the millennia it was the twin problems of mistrust and apathy which drew attention. A quarter century after its initial report, the Trilateral Commission issued a new assessment which argued that "public confidence in the performance of representative institutions in Western Europe, North America, and Japan has declined since [1975] and in that sense most of these democracies are troubled" (Pharr & Putnam, 2000, p. 7). While other scholars might have underlined the global support for democratic values, they also outlined how citizens were increasingly critical of political institutions such as parliaments, parties, and the judicial system (Norris, 1999). A growing electoral abstention began to raise concerns in Western Europe (Delwit, 2013). Critical theorists, worried about the hollowing out of representative institutions by global capitalism, began to talk of "post-democracy" (Crouch, 2000) or "the end of liberal democracy" (Brown, 2003).

The shock would come in the form of the 2001 September 11 attacks, which led to a reconsideration of the "triumph of liberal democracy" on the international scene. As French Senator Serge Mathieu (RI) expressed, "the countries of the West have been living for the last ten years in a state of euphoria," which led them to believe (quoting approvingly then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Dominique de Villepin [RPR]):

> That all the world's problems had been overcome, that we were in agreement on the principles, that everyone had the same references, and that we were going to make rapid progress towards the international community, towards a generalised market economy, towards liberal democracy. (Senate, 29 November 2001, p. 4)

This sense of disillusionment kept growing in the 2000s. But the rest of this story still has yet to be written.

To conclude, highlighting this short history of "liberal democracy" in France and the United Kingdom has three effects. First, by historicizing "liberal democracy," we are politicising it, showing its ideological genealogy which is far from neutral. Second, this short history reveals that "liberal democracy" is not as descriptive a category as it is usually thought to be: Its users are usually much more worried about the "liberal" part than the democratic elements. Finally, from a normative perspective, the history of the term also reminds us of the flexibility of representative institutions. Instead of defending "liberal democracy," it might be necessary to reform or adapt it to the current challenges and thereby avoid reifying the current concept of "liberal democracy."

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