

The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty: A View from Europe

By João Carlos Espada (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2016).

In the wake of Britain's recent vote to leave the European Union, Professor Espada's new book could not be more timely. For Espada argues persuasively that Europe benefits hugely from the example of British traditions of individual liberty and the rule of law. Although this book is a discussion of the ideas of a wide range of major theorists of political liberty, in his conclusion, Espada becomes an eloquent and passionate defender of Britain's remaining in the European Union—for the sake of Europe more than for any benefit to Britain. Espada fears the centripetal forces of European bureaucracy in the absence of a British voice for individual liberty and local government. Espada had hoped that reforms within the EU might just entice Britain to stay. Perhaps eventually he will be proven right.

As a study of modern liberal political theory, Espada's new book is unusually personal. He recounts some of his own experiences in fascist Portugal and his lifelong love of things British, which led him to the study of political theory at Oxford University. While living in England, Espada was able to meet or study with several luminaries of twentieth-century liberal political theory, including Karl Popper, Ralf Dahrendorf, Isaiah Berlin, and Raymond Plant. Espada also mentions his experiences teaching in the United States, which led him to appreciate the thought of Alexis de Tocqueville and James Madison as well as Gertrude Himmelfarb and Irving Kristol.

If an Anglophile is someone who loves Britain a bit more than she deserves, then Espada counts as an Anglophile. He loves Britain not only for her traditions of individual liberty and the rule of law, but also for what he sees as the English ideal of a gentleman. These two aspects of British social and political life are deeply interconnected: a regime of robust individual liberty is possible only in a society in which self-control, tolerance, and civility are internalized by citizens.

The Anglo-American Tradition of Liberty, however, is not a memoir but a critical appraisal of the contributions of these and other major theorists to the modern traditions of liberal political thought. Espada is not a philosopher but a genuinely political thinker. He understands the historical and institutional constraints upon what is feasible in political life. Of each theorist, Espada asks: how well do their ideals comport with what we know about human nature, political history, and existing institutions? Espada is wary of any political utopianism; he is resolutely—but not dogmatically—committed to moderation, incrementalism, and the very English “science of muddling through.” Yet even Espada's anti-utopianism is moderate. Although he is aware of the dangers of centralized state power in service to egalitarian ideals, Espada does not regard social democracy as “the road to serfdom.” Espada manages to be a fervent advocate of individual liberty without being a libertarian and a champion of democracy without being a populist.

The personal dimension of his new book might be distracting or annoying were not Espada's own journey not so paradigmatic of the history of modern liberal thought. For a book about the Anglo-American tradition of liberty, Espada focuses on many writers not English or American in origin, including Isaiah Berlin, Edmund Burke, Karl Popper, Ralf Dahrendorf, Raymond Aron, Leo Strauss, Friedrich Hayek, and Alexis de Tocqueville. Indeed, we might rightly say that the leading theorists of Anglo-American liberty are not themselves Anglo-American. What do all these theorists have in common? Like João Espada, all of these writers left repressive regimes in their native lands and travelled to England or America.

Espada is fascinated by what Karl Popper called “the British Mystery.” Popper did not use this expression to refer to the great tradition of English detective fiction, from Conan Doyle to P.D. James. Rather, Popper and Espada are referring to the puzzle of how Britain (largely) avoided the royal absolutism, totalitarian ideologies, and violent political revolutions that have racked the continent of Europe. But there is another “British Mystery.” As we have noted, intellectuals from all over Europe come to Great Britain and learn to appreciate the virtues of a tolerance and the rule of law. This tradition goes back to Voltaire and includes Benjamin Constant, Friedrich von Gentz, and Francois Guizot. Of course, fleeing to England does not guarantee a love for individual liberty, as we see in the cases of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx. Nonetheless, the British Mystery is that Britain largely depends upon foreigners to articulate and defend its own traditions of liberty. João Espada’s new book is the latest contribution to this remarkable tradition.

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