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Krzysztof Wociechowski/Jan C. Joerden (eds.): Ethical Liberalism in Contemporary Societies

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The title and subtitle of this edition of conference contributions are misleading. Neither does at least one of the articles deal with Eastern Europe, nor is their main focus on ethical questions. Yet the volume contains some valuable contributions to the definition of liberalism in modern societies. The first chapter under the heading "Liberalism, Politics and Globalisation" deals in three contributions with varying aspects of liberal theory as developed by leading thinkers,, ranging from Isaiah Berlin to John Rawls and from Hannah Arendt back to Thomas Hobbes. The second part contains two articles written by authors from the Mediterranean Area who develop interesting thoughts about the relation of liberalism and culture, in particular with the multiculturalism of our globalising times. The last section adds two somewhat disparate case studies, one about the question whether Wittgenstein was a liberal, the other describing the liberal aspects of the zapatista movement in Mexico. In toto, the volume presents an interesting guide to the philosophy of modern liberalism and its variations from social liberalism to the neoliberal fundamentalists.

Not misleading, but surprising: the conference out of which the texts in this volume emanated was held at the Polish-German frontier under the auspices of the Viadrina University, Frankfurt/Oder and of the Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan. Three Polish authors therefore account with their contributions for the first section. They present another surprise: Their sometimes critical, mostly affirmative descriptions of problems and possible solutions refer to "Western" authors only. Moreover, what liberalism can and should achieve in the formerly so-called "Third World" is not even mentioned. The Arab world obviously did not deserve a look, if only a short one, at its problems. Instead, the scarf worn by confessing muslimas in Western countries is being dealt with at considerable length. Obviously, participants of and contributors to the Frankfurt conference shared with almost all professional observers of the Islamic scene the inability to look deeper into the societies between Morocco and Indonesia and thereby to forecast or at least accompany the revolutionary changes that now go on there under our eyes.

At this point, a deplorable weakness of the road taken by most contributors, with the exception of part of the articles about culture and the zapatistas, comes to light: The deductive approach from metaphysics down to earth cannot unveil the developments going on under the surface of events. Instead, the reader is overwhelmed by an abundance of theoretical definitions, e.g. of tolerance and its many facets. Some of these definitions are just the result of an artistic game with words, as especially the article on a so-called "Three-quarter-liberalism" shows. This criticism is not meant to minimize the possible enlightenment of a reader who is not an expert but who is interested to be better informed about the theoretical foundations of the quest for liberty, tolerance and democracy in the world of

today. It is particularly refreshing to follow the description of the zapatista uprising and its ten theses presented by its leader "Subcomandante Marcos", and to realize that revolutions may have a liberal background and liberal aims, especially when directed against the discrimination of minorities. Moreover, if "ethical liberalism" has a chance to be redefined – and this is necessary more than ever – the considerations presented in this book especially by the Polish authors will prove to be useful. It might therefore be worthwhile to follow up to this volume by a second publication of this kind which however should try to bring the theoretical approach of social philosophers, dominating this publication, together with the results of empirical research by experienced social scientists, and with the pragmatism of politicians.

Bonn-Bad Godesberg

Barthold C. Witte