

## Europe's Headless Liberalism

"The Other Velvet Revolution: Continental Liberalism and Its Discontents" by Mark Lilla, in *Daedalus* (Spring 1994), Norton's Woods, 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

During the years between the world wars, it was hard for even the warmest advocates of European liberalism to imagine the whole of Western Europe living under stable liberal governments anytime soon. The future belonged to communism, fascism, socialism—anything but liberalism. Remarkably, observes Lilla, a professor of politics and French studies at New York University, liberalism has triumphed.

Yet it prevailed through "a revolution without ideas," he contends. Economic growth and an expanded welfare state eased ordinary citizens' acceptance of the new political institutions, but few intellectuals embraced liberalism. That liberal institutions came into existence anyway may show that ideas are not as important as economic growth and peace for establishing a liberal order. But in the long run, ideas do matter, and for that reason, Lilla finds it disquieting that the collapse of Marxism "has revealed persistent hostility to the liberal idea" in Europe.

In Italy, that hostility is rooted in the historical experience of government corruption. Liberals who sought reform either have been co-opted by the ruling parties or rendered impotent. Intellectuals who resisted this *transformismo* either joined the Italian Communist Party or, like the liberal philosopher-historian Benedetto Croce (1866–1952), withdrew from politics. The recent "Tangentopoli" ("Bribe City") scandals, Lilla says, confirmed what the Italian Left said all along about corruption. The aging liberal socialist Norberto Bobbio is the exception that proves the rule that most Italian intellectuals today continue to have "an instinctive suspicion of the liberal intellectual tradition." And that is unlikely to change, Lilla writes, "until the Italian state delivers something that looks more like liberalism."

In Germany, it is the Nazi past that prevents intellectuals from embracing liberalism. While the memory of German guilt rallied the general public to the liberal institutions of the

Bundesrepublik, it had the opposite effect on many intellectuals, Lilla observes. "For them, the rejection of the German past also meant the rejection of the German present, including the new liberal state meant to 'master' the past." They see the German nation as a source of evil. After the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, novelist Günter Grass and other intellectuals campaigned against German unification "on openly antinationalist grounds." Philosopher-sociologist Jürgen Habermas, perhaps Germany's leading intellectual, embraces what he calls the "Enlightenment project" but insists that it cannot be fulfilled by Western liberalism, and certainly not by German liberalism. The result of all this, Lilla says, is that German intellectuals remain at war with their own sense of national identity and cling to a variety of more or less utopian ideas.

The story is different in France. Starting in the mid-1970s, "world events that elicited little immediate response elsewhere in Western Europe—the translation of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, the butcheries in Cambodia, the flight of the boat people, the rise of Solidarity in Poland—suddenly set off a profound *crise de conscience* among the French." During the 1980s, French thinkers abandoned "the Hegelian, Marxist, and structuralist dogmas that nourished intellectual contempt for liberalism after the war," and in journals such as *Le Débat* and *Commentaire* began to bring about "a serious revival of liberal thought."

The question, Lilla concludes, is whether Italian and German intellectuals will follow the French example, or perhaps find some other way to make peace with their own liberal societies. If they do not, liberalism in Western Europe may find itself under challenge once again.

## Ireland's Own

"Ireland's Cultural Revolution" by Fintan O'Toole, in *Europe* (Apr. 1994), Delegation of the European Commission, 2100 M St. N.W., Ste. 700, Washington, D.C. 20037.

James Joyce, Sean O'Casey, Samuel Beckett, and a host of others made exile seem the normal condition for influential Irish writers and