French Liberalism and Imperialism in the Age of Napoleon III
Empire at Home, Colonies Abroad

Miquel de la Rosa
Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies

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For my family and my dear friends, the ones that keep me going
This book builds on the doctoral thesis I wrote at the European University Institute during some of the most exciting years in my life, both personally and intellectually. Thanks to the institutions that have provided me with fundamental financial support to carry on my research, especially the Spanish Ministry of Education, the EUI’s Department of History and Civilisation and the Erasmus+ Programme, I have been given the opportunity to enrich my work and myself in ways I had not anticipated: all the journey necessary to write this book has driven me through various countries and languages where I have met people from whom I have learned the real meaning of diversity, tolerance and out-of-the-box thinking.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AASMP  Archives de l’Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques
AMAE  Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères
AN   Archives Nationales, Paris
ASCL  Annales du Sénat et du Corps législatif
BNF  Bibliothèque Nationale de France
CRCL  Compte-rendu des séances du Corps législatif
DM   Département de Manuscrits
NAF  Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

So let us have faith in our overseas ventures;
started to avenge our honour,
they will end with the triumph of our interests
― Napoleon III, 1864.¹

The time of paternal monarchies has passed;
and so has the time of conquests and adventures
― Édouard Laboulaye, 1863.²

During the 1860s, French thinker Édouard Laboulaye, committed liberal theorist and admirer of the American liberal state-building process, made huge efforts to denounce the lack of freedom, and the existence of civil liberties violations, under Napoleon III’s rule. By the time he was running for deputy in parliament in the 1863 elections, he translated his political claims into a well-known publication that can be considered as the ‘bible’ of liberal thinking in the times of the French Second Empire.³ In his Le parti libéral. Son programme et son avenir, Laboulaye expresses his profound desire to promote the establishment of a new political system, much more committed to the defence of civil and individual liberties than Napoleon III’s regime. His concerns and ideas seek to discern how the situation could be improved with regard to domestic politics, though he neglects, or avoids, any reference to the Empire’s colonial expansion,
as if these two dimensions, national and imperial, were totally discon-
nected. Only a sentence in the book’s preface—the one by him that
opens this introduction—can be read from the perspective of an expa-
nsionist policy, for it suggests that the liberal thinker might be reluctant to
promote further ‘conquests’ and ‘adventures’. His position about colo-
nialism, expansionism and imperialism, like that of the alleged new ‘liberal
party’, remains unclear. If the attitudes towards the empire of such a cele-
brated liberal have gone unnoticed by historians of the Second Empire
and mid-nineteenth-century specialists in general, so too must those of
many lesser-known French liberal politicians, intellectuals and publicists
of the 1860s have been overlooked.

Departing from the insufficient scholarly attention paid to the liberal
response to French imperialism throughout the nineteenth century, this
book explores the interplay between imperialism and liberalism during
the French Second Empire in the 1860s—specifically from 1858 (when
French expansionism found a renewed impetus with the expedition to
Cochinchina) until the fall of the Empire after the Franco-Prussian War
in 1870—a period of great political uncertainty and intellectual transfor-
mation in modern France. This book explores specifically the republican
liberals’ rhetorical strategies of political branding and their translation
into a specific language with regard to colonial expansion. It also inves-
tigates the various actors and perspectives involved in the liberal political
discourse on imperialism in the 1860s, mainly expressed in parliament
and the press. The aim is to assess whether the domestic ideological
battle between republican liberals and Bonapartists affected their visions
on France’s expansionist policies or whether, on the contrary, there
was a political and social consensus regarding foreign affairs, over and
above ideological divides. The book also explores the foundations of
the liberal position(s) regarding the French imperial project in the late
1850s and the 1860s by assessing which intellectual outlooks and belief
systems informed these positions and how and by which means they were
expressed.

Answering these questions implies taking into account three main
conceptual domains: the realm of liberal ideas; the liberal social and polit-
ical networks; and liberal practices in the domain of both public opinion
and politics. These three domains are somewhat inseparable and define
the French liberal political culture of the 1860s. With this in mind,
this book explains how ideas about the Second Empire’s expansionism
shaped a particular liberal political culture, in continuous dialogue with
Bonapartism. Secondly, it clarifies the extent to which mid-nineteenth-century republican liberals sustained French imperial expansion. In doing so, finally, the book sheds light on the nature and long-term significance of the Second Empire, adding a new global perspective to the nineteenth-century French historical narrative. The 1860s was a period of great importance from a political and ideological point of view. With different degrees of depth and intensity, the struggle between liberal and conservative—or new conservative—forces was characteristic across Europe. The first decisive steps towards real democracies started to be made and a harsh fight for achieving all sort of liberties became a central issue in many political and parliamentary discussions. Furthermore, the 1860s was a decade in which the dramatic expansion of the press and the blossoming of hundreds of cheap publications and pamphlets enriched and shaped a new conception of public opinion and power relations in Western European societies.

This book focuses on three key imperial ventures: the renewed drive to colonise Algeria in the late 1850s and the 1860s; the expedition to and later colonisation of Cochinchina from 1858 onwards; and the expedition and later intervention in Mexico from 1861 to 1867. These cases demonstrate the global scope of Second Empire’s colonial project which perfectly fits in the general trends of French imperial ambitions in the nineteenth century. Algeria was the ‘jewel in the Crown’ of French expansionism in the 1860s, a project inherited from earlier times (the first French troops arrived in Algiers in 1830 under Charles X’s reign), but with which the French Second Empire engaged with renewed vigour. In Cochinchina, Napoleon III’s Empire sought to dominate the territory to create a fundamental economic and commercial place in order to counteract British power in the region. In Mexico, the Second Empire aimed instead to establish a client government that would facilitate the implementation of its economic and geopolitical interests in the region, related to the promotion of Catholic values and the counteraction of US power in Latin America. The three imperial projects were in the spotlight of contemporary parliamentary and media debates. The analysis of the liberal responses to Second Empire’s expansionism requires a clarification of the concepts that will guide the book throughout its geographically, chronologically-structured chapters, including in particular the concepts of liberalism, imperialism, the interplay between them and a specific reference to the political arena in which all these debates developed.
Liberalism has been a driving force of Europe’s (and the world’s) modern history. The world we know today would be unthinkable without the active involvement in politics of a powerful, influential assembly of individuals that considered themselves as ‘liberals’. Their deepest beliefs in the defence of individual freedom and a representative government, rooted in enlightenment values, came to be mainstream after the French Revolution. State-building processes, nationalism, democracy and the conquest of a wide range of social and political freedoms and rights are but a few remarkable examples of their political contribution. However, scholars agree on neither dating the origins nor providing a satisfactory definition of such a fundamental current of thought, which traditionally has been defined by its contradictions and heterogeneity.6

Despite the fact that liberal theoretical claims were aimed at being universal, namely addressed to all humankind, as Uday Mehta has observed, historical evidence shows that liberalism tended to adapt to its national context and to modify its theoretical postulates according to specific events.7 In this sense, Jon Parry has pointed out that, the defence of classical values of free trade and non-intervention aside, ‘the driving force of nineteenth-century liberalism was the desire to build an effective national political community and to develop the right virtues in the nation, rather than a particular attitude to the state’. 8 This attitude can surely be identified in the French members of liberal opposition in the age of Napoleon III. As the next chapters will show, republican liberals always struggled for providing the nation with greater and more efficient tools to defend its dignity, both at home and in the international scene. The ‘right virtues of the nation’ evoked by Parry were constantly under scrutiny by the republican liberal current of opinion when facing the Bonapartist project to expand France’s influence overseas.

In France, the new imperial regime inaugurated after Louis Napoleon’s 1851 coup d’état, so harshly contested by the opponents to authoritarian rule, began in the 1860s a timid process of internal liberalisation with the adoption of some measures providing the French people with more individual liberties. The reasons for this change are still unclear, although historians seem to agree that it was not produced because Napoleon III abandoned his own principles, pressured by the forces of opposition. Rather, the change took place as a natural evolution of the regime, given
that the initial authoritarian government was difficult to justify as the revolutionary threat diminished. The regime evolved towards a combination of the force of a personal Caesarist power based on an historical imperial legitimacy and the increasing social demand to place France at the same level as other consolidated liberal states. However, republican liberals still acted as a powerful current of opposition to the Empire, as their ideological foundations kept being profoundly different. The Empire may have experienced some signs of liberalisation, but it never became truly liberal. That being so, the interplay between republican liberals and Bonapartists had great repercussions for the conceptualisation of French expansionist ventures at the time. In order to tackle this interplay in a better fashion, it is first necessary to reflect on what the French liberal constellation was.

Broadly speaking, the word ‘liberal’ did not come into usage in France as a political term until the early nineteenth century. The words ‘liberal ideas’ and ‘liberalism’ began to be used pragmatically from 1815 to describe the parliamentary opposition to reactionary powers. In the central decades of the nineteenth century, liberalism can be separated from socialism, on the one hand, and conservatism, on the other. Unlike republicanism, that has always enjoyed from a clearer ideological identification, liberalism was a powerful ‘political tradition’ which operated in a less-organised way and whose ideological borders were more blurred at first sight. Yet it existed, with its contradictions, its incoherencies and constant interplay with other intellectual constellations. All in all, liberals were always in between two fronts, struggling to position themselves in the political centre and trying to avoid both revolutionary chaos and authoritarianism.

Pierre Rosanvallon has suggested that the history of ideas is senseless if it is not ‘historical’. In stating this, Rosanvallon stands for taking into account the importance of context—in line with the renowned Cambridge School—when analysing the generation and spreading of ideas in a particular time in the past. Ideas are far from being monolithic and immutable blocks, perdurable across time and space. Instead, they evolve according to the political, social, economic and cultural context in which they develop. They also mutate depending on the individual, or group of people, who produce, spread and defend them. And even more importantly, ideas can change or be shaped according to the inner changes and evolutions experienced by individuals in their current lives. In a context of censorship and a lack of fundamental liberties as Napoleon III’s regime
was, the defence of freedom of the press and freedom of speech was the way republican liberals found to channel and express their political claims, namely addressed to question the Empire and present themselves as an alternative political option.

It is probably common knowledge among students of the period that some of the emperor’s closest advisors professed great sympathy for liberal ideas when it came to defend economic interests and foster free trade measures. Michel Chevalier, the fierce promoter of the celebrated 1860 commercial treaty with Great Britain, can be identified as an economic liberal—someone who acknowledged the benefits of private property and free commercial competition that ended up making of Paris one of Europe’s most effervescent cities. However, he praised the benefits of free trade as a means to promote France’s influence overseas and consolidate peace in the European continent, but he never hid his enthusiasm for government intervention. And he surely was not a defender of individual liberties as other prominent liberal deputies were. This is the reason why this book’s main focus is on the deputies that can be identified as liberal in both the economic and social dimensions, those who equally praised the ‘progressive reduction of public expending’ and the conquest of new rights aiming at enlarging the citizens’ freedoms. The so-called Group of Five, especially Émile Ollivier, Jules Favre, Alfred Darimon and Ernest Picard, was the most active in discussing the Second Empire’s foreign and domestic policy. This reduced group of deputies played an important part in the Empire’s parliamentary life, and its utterances and standpoints can be considered as representative of the contemporary liberal mindset. Moreover, the visions by eminent Orleanist deputies such as Adolphe Thiers are also categorised as ‘liberal’. During the Second Empire, liberal ideas were principally expressed in parliament, which requires some consideration about the functioning of the Corps législatif and its place within the Second Empire’s institutional structure. The national sovereignty exercised by the representatives of the people was never questioned in principle by Napoleon III, although the emperor limited from the beginning its constitutional expression. The new 1852 imperial constitution introduced tricameralism, which in practice limited the Corps législatif’s powers, and shared them with the Senate and the Council of State. Moreover, the members of the Corps législatif were no longer called representatives of the people, as it was the emperor—who kept the right to control legislation together with his government—who
was the sole representative of the nation. The number of deputies was reduced from 750 to 261.\(^{17}\)

Throughout the 1860s, liberals and republicans pressured the regime to adopt liberal political and social measures, which it did progressively. This was the decade in which Adolph Thiers gave his celebrated speech asking for five ‘needed’ freedoms in 1864, and in which other liberal intellectuals such as Édouard Laboulaye and Lucien-Anatole Prévost-Paradol published their major political works inspired by British and American models.\(^{18}\) Economists such as Jules Duval were likewise prolific in their intellectual production on French expansionism. Liberals also profited from the possibilities, though limited by censorship, that the press provided them with to channel their ideas. Some of the columnists and contributors that centre the analysis of this book were less known than their parliamentary counterparts, making it more difficult to categorise them individually, as biographical accounts on these individuals are often inexistent. In these cases, I depart from the assumption that the points of view of authors writing in liberal media can be considered equally liberal. There is wide agreement among scholars that the *Revue des Deux Mondes* and *Le Journal des Débats* were the liberal media in 1860s France for their defence of free trade, parliamentarism and religious tolerance.\(^{19}\) *Le Temps*, founded by Auguste Neffrzer in 1861, rapidly became a true representative of liberal thinking, too. This newspaper was deeply influenced by the liberal, protestant philosophy of its founder and indeed was an example of business success—its readers almost quadrupled in just eight years since it was launched.

As is always the case regarding journalistic sources, an important aspect to be taken into account when evaluating their impact on public opinion is the numbers of copies sold or distributed. In relation to the papers mentioned above, some studies highlight the fact that they were ‘successful’ publications. The *Journal des Débats* sold some 7,000 copies per day in a context in which to sell between 7,000 and 8,000 copies was considered an achievement. The *Journal* gained prestige because of the quality of its contributors and its intellectual debates, its selected readers and economic supporters. In the late 1820s, the *Journal* became the organ of liberal opposition, and in later years, it was committed to the Orleanist regime, linked to the values of moderation, freedom and order. With around 9,500 copies sold in 1858, the *Revue des Deux Mondes* had an ‘almost hegemonic’ position as a publication in the Second Empire due to the quality of its contributors, its sales numbers and economic gains.\(^{20}\)
Of course, one does not have to consider only the number of copies, but also the plausible diffusion of such papers, whose reading was expanded through libraries, public readings and private clubs, among others.\textsuperscript{21}

It is important to make some considerations on the theoretical framework in which these sources, especially the press, have to be framed. It is widely known that the notion of ‘public sphere’ was theorised by Jürgen Habermas, who presented it as an arena of social life where discursive relations take place as a sort of social theatre for debating and deliberating.\textsuperscript{22} Habermas’ work has influenced the works of students of media theory since it was published, as it treated for the first time the development of the media as an integral part of the formation of modern societies, arguing that the circulation of printed materials and the articulation of critical public opinion played an important part in the transformation of modern democratic life. His account has been complemented by more recent studies, which tackle in more depth the importance of the media’s symbolic dimension.\textsuperscript{23} The power of symbolic activity is thus crucial, as it is ‘a fundamental feature of social life for individuals are constantly engaged in the activity of expressing themselves in symbolic forms and in communicating with one another and exchanging information and symbolic content’. Symbolic power, which ‘stems from the activity of producing, transmitting and receiving meaningful symbolic forms’, needs to be considered as relevant as economic, political and coercive ones.\textsuperscript{24} The issue of how this symbolic dimension really affected public opinion would require an analysis of the processes of reception which, as Thompson recalls, are far from unproblematic. It is thus necessary to abandon the idea that citizens are inclined to absorb uncritically the messages and visions transmitted through the media.\textsuperscript{25}

Finally, it is important to make some comments on the use of the press as a valid historical source. Given its intrinsic characteristics, the historian needs to take precautions when analysing it, that is, to problematise its genesis and reception and keep in mind that the press’ structural changes can have an impact on the processes of communication themselves. The basic rule would thus be to avoid reading the information provided by the press uncritically, as a sort of indisputable truth. On the contrary, it is the historian’s duty to contextualise the information taken from the press and consider aspects such as the author’s personal background, the group of interests to which he or she belongs and the political affiliation of the journal’s owner, among others. The press is undoubtedly one of the most precious sources to analyse nineteenth-century political and social
dimensions, for it had the power to echo public opinion and be a privileged testimony of daily events. When analysing the press for academic purposes, and this also applies to parliamentary sources, one has to take into account that as important—if not more—as what is said is how it is said. In this sense, the vocabulary, expressions and references employed by the authors to express their ideas become key containers of cultural meaning that need to be carefully tackled.

**Empires and the Imperial Imaginary**

The literature on imperialism has considerably grown since the study of empires became the central focus of recent historiographical trends, such as global and world history. Empires have not only been tools for political and economic domination, but also complex structures for cultural, political and economic exchange, in the line of Robinson and Gallagher’s celebrated consideration of empires as icebergs from which one has traditionally tended to see but the surface. Indeed, the study of empires and imperialism has become the first great milestone from which traditional historiography based on nation-state-centred and Marxist-structural approaches has begun to be overcome. And recent research has shown how the imperial powers exercised their influence in the colonial context not only relying on a single mode of domination but rather through a wide range of sibylline ways. Yet, beyond the vast field of study focused on imperial practices, the history of modern empires remains inevitably connected to the way in which contemporaries saw, imagined and conceptualised them. Empires thus must be tackled as something more than intangible machines of expansion and domination of overseas territories, to a certain extent disconnected to the everyday political, social and economic functioning of the metropolis. This book relies on the assumption that the force of empires in the nineteenth century lay not only in their practical power of coercion, but also in their ideological strength, built over different values and belief systems depending on context. As the next pages will show, liberals and Bonapartists in the 1860s played an important role in the configuration of the French imperial imaginary needed to justify military actions abroad and, more importantly, to rally public opinion around a certain idea of national greatness.

A difference needs to be made between ‘imperialism’, which refers to a form of political, economic domination, and ‘empire’, seen as a potentially legitimate form of political order. This difference was already made by
contemporaries in the late nineteenth century and it still remains valuable. I will therefore use ‘imperialism’, and its derivatives, such as ‘imperial’, to refer to any form of expansionism, whether formally (through the foundation of stable colonial settlements and the establishment of permanent forms of economic and political domination) or informally (through the implementation of mechanisms of indirect control or domination). The concept of ‘Empire’ (in capital letters) will be used to refer to the political regime that emerged from the 1852 coup d’état and that, led by Napoleon III, lasted until 1870. The term ‘empire’ (in small caps) will be used instead to describe French domination overseas.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND IMPERIALISM

The relationship between the concepts of liberalism and imperialism is one of the most controversial of both nineteenth-century politics and political thought. Historians and political scientists alike have questioned for decades how the liberal ideals of freedom, individualism, openness and self-fulfilment, which have so contributed to the achievement of democracy in modern European societies, could match with a system of power based on domination and control over peoples as well as the way in which those who claimed to be liberal came to justify, support and even encourage such domination.

When bringing together the concepts of liberalism and imperialism, the British imperial project emerges immediately. There is a strong consensus among scholars in considering Great Britain as the liberal empire, especially during the Victorian period in which a clear ‘liberal mission’ ruled all British internal and foreign policies. Uday Mehta and Jennifer Pitts’ noteworthy contributions have broadened the ways of understanding why liberalism, which had been very critical of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century European imperial expansion, came to adopt a supportive position with regard to European imperialism by the mid-nineteenth century. Focusing on the figures of Locke and John Stuart Mill, Mehta argues that liberalism over the course of the nineteenth century found in imperialism ‘the concrete place of its dreams’, a space where to test its reaction to otherness and the ‘unfamiliar’. The truth is, Mehta argues, that whereas liberalism claimed to be universalist, in the end, it proved parochial, for it was unable to accept difference and rather tried to ‘align or educate the regnant forms of the unfamiliar with its own expectations’. Thus, liberalism would be an imperial
ideology from its origins. All those who did not share European mores and customs were rapidly labelled as backward. Jennifer Pitts broadened Mehta’s analysis by considering liberalism as a ‘complex ideology whose exemplars share family resemblances rather than any strict doctrine’ and as an ideology which is able to both justify and combat imperialism. Pitts detects a flourishing period of anti-imperialism in the late eighteenth century, followed by a ‘turn of empire’ some half of a century later, when, according to her, there were ‘no relevant liberal thinkers in Europe questioning the justice of European empires’.

These contributions are iconic examples of the history of political thought, based on the analysis of the works of main thinkers and philosophers. Their approach to a ‘textual’ history of ideologies lacks wider notions about the ways in which these ideas, these texts, were connected to their political and social context. First, instead of using the term ‘liberalism’, which entails a serious risk of falling into too conceptual an abstraction, I stand for using the term ‘liberal’ or its plural ‘liberals’, to refer to those individuals claiming themselves to be liberal, or to share, at least regarding a particular topic, liberal values. This book therefore seeks to understand how the ideas, points of view, utterances, perceptions and attitudes of these liberals were created and evolved depending on particular events related to the Second Empire’s expansionist project in Algeria, Cochinchina and Mexico. Instead of being an example of the history of political thought, this book embraces the approach and methods of the history of political culture, leaving aside any individual-centred analysis to focus rather on groups of people sharing values and interests, acting in the same political or professional sphere, and their efforts to make them visible and influential in society. Keith Baker’s work on French political culture in the times of the Revolution has been inspiring to understand politics and the political experience as ‘the activity through which individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement and enforce the competing claims they make upon one another and upon the whole’. To Baker, political culture would thus be ‘the set of discourses or symbolic practices by which these claims are made’. It is precisely in the realm of discourses and the political imaginary that this book is framed. For our purpose, the discussion and debate per se are more important than the act of decision-making itself.

The interplay between liberalism and imperialism has been tackled from diverse perspectives regarding different ‘national’ contexts, mainly the British. Such accounts, however, have tended to neglect a crucial imperial