

# **The constitution of “liberalism” in the twentieth century international thought: the burden of being opposed to reality in the discipline of IR**

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In the lexicon of international politics, the concept of “liberalism” has acquired a very peculiar meaning through the twentieth century, one that almost seems to be in contradiction with the significance of the concept in other main areas of study and practice, such as economy or national politics. If in those areas “liberalism” is often associated with orthodoxy, progress, order, equilibrium, empirics, and so on, in the newborn discipline of International Relations liberalism was deeply associated with the lack of a realistic sense, with irresponsibility, wishful thinking, bigotry, pre-scientific standpoint, sometimes just naïvety itself, but most of the times, treachery with hidden interests. For sure, liberal-inspired approaches to the international questions were never the only targets of those self-proclaimed realists of the interwar years who consolidated the discipline in the United States. Socialists, jingoists, and even were accused of mismanaging international affairs after the Great War, paving the way to an even deadlier conflict two decades later.

Though that semantical content, it can easily be argued, has been surpassed with the refinement of liberal approaches to international relations, relocating the idealist lot – which clearly has remained – to other newer, more radical trends, the language of foreign policy debates still has in the division between realism vs idealism, the most comprehensive and effective political rhetoric, not only in the US but in many other Western, and even non-Western countries.

The semantic structure made up by the asymmetrical counterconceptual relation between realism and idealism well fit Gallie’s notion of contested concepts. Who are the idealists, anyway? Conceptual history shows that idealism has once been a dear concept, one that could really empower the political agent. Constructed as a negative conception, now one is expected to try to evade the label. But how much is the concept of idealism still

referring to liberal perspectives on international politics today. Besides briefly constructing the history of the concept of “liberalism” in the twentieth century international politics, the empirical effort of this paper is to check the use of the realism-idealism opposition and how liberalism in foreign affairs is associated to them in the current American presidential race.