

New Perspectives on the French Liberal Renaissance, University of London Institute in Paris, December 2013.

A day conference exploring 'New Perspectives on the French Liberal Renaissance' was held at the University of London Institute in Paris on 7 December 2013.

Organised by Dr Iain Stewart of the School of History at Queen Mary with Dr Anna-Louise Milne of ULIP and Professor Stephen Sawyer of the American University in Paris, the event gathered established and early career scholars from the United States, Great Britain and France to reconsider the revival of liberal thought in late twentieth-century France.

In the historiography that developed on this subject following the fall of communism in Europe, the French liberal revival tended to be explained as the by-product of an 'anti-totalitarian turn' in French intellectual politics during the mid-to-late 1970s. All of the participants in this conference attempted in different ways to revise this explanatory paradigm, stressing both the heterogeneity of France's liberal renaissance and its pre-1970s origins.

In his opening remarks, Professor Stephen Sawyer discussed the influence of French liberalism before the much publicised liberal revival of the 1970s, indicating the importance of critically interrogating the rhetoric of crisis and renewal which accompanied the liberal revival. Professor Jeremy Jennings returned to this theme in his paper on 'The Constant moment', which emphasised the often underestimated influence of Benjamin Constant's writings in post-war France prior to the canonisation of Constant in the early 1980s. The diversity of the liberal revival was apparent in papers from Professor Michael Behrent and Mr Daniel Steinmatz-Jenkins, which respectively considered Michel Foucault's influence on the left-leaning liberal revivalism of Pierre Rosanvallon, and the links between the conservative liberal Julien Freund and the German New Right. New interpretations of figures more commonly associated with the French liberal revival, such as Raymond Aron, and François Furet, were offered by Dr Iain Stewart, Professor Michael Scott Christofferson and Dr Gwendal Châton, while the legacy of the liberal revival for anti-capitalism in contemporary France was discussed by Dr Emile Chabal.

The international character of the conference made for a particularly lively exchange of ideas, and The French speakers at the event, including Professors Serge Audier and Jean-Fabien Spitz, warmly welcomed the opportunity to debate a subject that remains somewhat understudied in Francophone historiography. All the participants agreed that the conference had been a considerable success, and plans are currently in place to produce an edited collection based on the proceedings.