



Lao Tsu

(6th century B.C.)

Who says that liberalism is just another word for euro-centrism? There are good reasons to believe, that the very first liberal thinker of all times was a Chinese, the Taoist philosopher Lao Tsu. His work „Tao Te Ching“ is one of the greatest classics of Chinese literature. In this book Lao Tsu develops a cosmology in which the harmony of two opposites („ying“ and „yang“) is postulated. Today this cosmology seems to attract rather the sectarian esoteric kind of people, and not liberals of the more rationalistic kind. Therefore it is often overlooked that this pluralistic cosmology leads to an equally pluralistic political philosophy with strong liberal undertones. Lao Tsu was extremely sceptical about governmental power and those who exercised it. Not brutal power, but freedom does secure peace, he says: “The people are difficult to keep in order, because of those above them interfere.”

Or: “I dig the well for water; I plow the field for food: What use do I have for the emperor's power!”

What Adam Smith and others only found out more two millennia later, Lao Tsu already knew, viz. that interventionism stifles the economy: “The more prohibitions there are, the poorer the people will be.”

And, of course, he knew that high taxes produce misery and endanger prosperity: “The people starve because those above them eat too much tax-grain. That is the only reason why they starve.”

All this is as true as it was more than 2500 years ago.

Literature:

- Lao Tsu: *Tao Te Ching*, transl. Gia-Fu Feng, New York 1997
- Arthur Waley: *Way and Its Power a Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought*, New York 1998 (originally publ. in 1934)

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