

# 5th Political Science & Political economy Conference Titles and Abstracts

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## *Liberal Revolutions and National Identities: Revisiting Classical Theories of Nationalism*

**Abstract:** Since the contributions of authors such as Gellner, Hobsbawm and Anderson, the canonical theory of national identity formation emphasizes the concept of national identity as a cultural construct linked to (generated by) some dimension of the process of modernization (industrialization, print-capitalism, etc.). After revisiting that canonical account (in its different varieties), I first point out its conceptual and empirical deficiencies. I then offer an alternative account that emphasizes the role of ideational and structural components that, together, explain both the wide appeal of a national identity and the territorial fragmentation of different national projects.

The emergence of a modern conception of nation was coterminous with the construction of an emancipatory (and universally attractive) political project: a “liberal” or “liberal-contractarian” order that presupposed and emphasized citizen equality. As such, the modern “liberal” project (in both its nineteenth-century bourgeois and its twentieth-century socialist version) implied the destruction of the corporatist model of Ancien Régime societies. The varying power of the liberal project (and its supporters) also accounts for the territorial fragmentation of national identities that followed. In those states where a “liberal” revolution succeeded, the old world of monarchical courtiers, corporate interests, and social estates disappeared, replaced by an abstract society of politically equal individuals. It was there that political borders became congruent with national identity. By contrast, in those states where the liberal revolution failed (or happened late in time), the preservation of spatially defined barriers (inequalities) led to a break between the (old) center and one or more national peripheries. The paper concludes offering a tentative empirical test of the theory. It first provides a sketch of how different (political) transitions into modernity affected a broad set of cases – from revolutionary France to twentieth-century colonies. However, because those cases differ in their pre-modern, pre-liberal features and in the timing of the transition to particular national identities, it explores the impact of liberal revolutions (or their absence) on the national consciousness of populations with a very similar background: the Jewish people in North America, Western and Central Europe, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa region.