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What is liberalism? That is the central question Helena Rosenblatt sets out to answer in *The Lost History of Liberalism*. Rosenblatt's book could hardly have come at a better time. Talk of 'liberals' and 'liberalism' is definitely trending. Ever since the *annus horribilis* of 2016—which brought us both the election of Donald Trump and Brexit – the liberal world order triumphant since 1989 seems to totter on the verge of collapse. The global rise of populism and authoritarianism has sparked a new and urgent sense of crisis. Does liberalism need to be protected against this assault—or does it perhaps need to be replaced by something altogether different? These and similar questions have sparked acrimonious debates in the United States and Europe that tend to rapidly devolve into even more acrimonious disputes about what liberalism actually *is* and how it relates to things like 'progressivism' and 'socialism.'

In order to answer these questions, it might be helpful to start by getting to know, as Rosenblatt puts it, “what we talk about when we talk about liberalism”¹—and the best way to do so, she claims, is to look backwards to its past. Of course, Rosenblatt is by no means the first scholar to try to explain the meaning of liberalism by examining its history. A few years ago, in 2013, the political philosopher Alan Ryan published his *The Making of Modern Liberalism*, in which liberalism's main tenets are illuminated by a reading of canonical thinkers ranging from Thomas Hobbes to John Rawls. Similarly, the history of liberalism has been the subject of recent books by Paul Starr, Domenico Losurdo, and Edmund Fawcett, to name but a few.²

Rosenblatt's approach, however, is radically different from that of these earlier scholars. In their accounts of the history of liberalism, Ryan, Starr, Losurdo, and Fawcett focus on a number of thinkers or schools of thinkers designated as archetypical liberals and try to distill a timeless, liberal philosophy from them. Rosenblatt, by contrast, engages in what she herself describes as a “word history” of liberalism (3)—which means that she traces different meanings given to the term over time. In order to do so, she draws on very different kinds of sources from the ones privileged by philosophers such as Ryan. While a supposedly canonical liberal thinker like John Locke does make an appearance in her book, it is a brief one—after all, Locke did not describe himself as a liberal nor was he routinely thought of as such by others until the middle of the twentieth century. Instead, Rosenblatt introduces us to a very different cast of characters, such as the nineteenth-century Prussian philosopher W.T. Krug, who wrote the very first history of liberalism – and thereby played an important role in defining early usages of the term. Rosenblatt also makes creative use of sources that are often strangely neglected by intellectual historians, such as historical dictionaries and encyclopedias.

One major takeaway from Rosenblatt's rollicking history is that terms such as 'liberal' and 'liberalism' have been employed to mean an awful lot of very different things. As she recounts in a fascinating first chapter, “What It Meant to Be Liberal from Cicero to Lafayette,” before the term 'liberal' became a political label, it was used in various European languages to denote a certain moral attitude, “a selfless, generous, and grateful disposition” (10). In the eighteenth century, new meanings were added. Being 'liberal' now came to be associated with religious toleration as well as generosity. In a sermon on “liberal things,” for instance, an eighteenth-century Dissenting minister declared that being liberal meant standing up to bigots (28).

In the wake of the French Revolution, the term became politicized; it increasingly came to denote support for specific political institutions or positions. It was also around this time that the noun “liberalism” was invented—Rosenblatt dates its

¹ Helena Rosenblatt, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Liberalism,” *Boston Review: A Political and Literary Forum*, 12 September 2018. <http://bostonreview.net/politics/helena-rosenblatt-what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-liberalism>.

² Alan Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Paul Starr, *Freedom's Power: The True Force of Liberalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2007); Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011); Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

first usage to 1811 (42). French and German politicians, journalists, and philosophers played a particularly important role in the invention of liberalism. Thus, liberals in many different European countries as well as in the Americas took their cue from the Swiss-French thinker Benjamin Constant, who quickly gained a reputation as the ‘choir leader’ of liberalism. Far from being the quintessential Anglo-American tradition, Rosenblatt reminds us, liberalism was invented on the European continent.

But even after this political turn, the meaning of the term ‘liberal’ did not become set in stone. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, self-proclaimed liberals disagreed on many issues, such as whether they favored a constitutional monarchy or a republic, who should be allowed to participate in politics, and whether to plot insurrections or not. Rosenblatt is in particular at pains to show that, from the beginning, liberals were divided over economic questions. While some of them propagated *laissez-faire* economics, very few did so dogmatically—and, Rosenblatt points out, many rejected it altogether, even during the heyday of so-called ‘classical liberalism’ in the nineteenth century.

So what conclusion are we to draw from *The Lost History of Liberalism*? After taking Rosenblatt’s roller-coaster ride along 2,000 years of thinking and talking about what it means to be ‘liberal,’ how are we to define this elusive tradition? One plausible take-away might be that ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’ have over time acquired so many different and contradictory connotations that these terms are basically meaningless; that “liberalism” is, to quote Judith Shklar, “an all-purpose word, whether of abuse or praise.”³ In that sense, Rosenblatt’s book might be thought to reinforce a lesson drawn by political theorist Duncan Bell from his own, much shorter study of the history of liberalism; namely that we should call “into question the general utility of ‘liberalism’ as a category of political analysis.”⁴

But, it is important to note, that is not Rosenblatt’s own view. For all her alertness to the semantic bendiness of the term ‘liberalism,’ she does seem to think that some forms of liberalism are intrinsically better or more authentic than others. Indeed, as the very title of her book announces, her main goal is not to argue that liberalism is a label with many different meanings; it is to recover a “lost” form of liberalism. In particular, Rosenblatt is keen to redirect our attention to the nineteenth-century French and German thinkers who invented liberalism in the first place. These thinkers are often neglected in less historically savvy accounts of liberalism—Benjamin Constant, for instance, merits just a few brief allusions in the over 600 pages of Ryan’s *The Making of Modern Liberalism*. By focusing on these nineteenth-century thinkers and the crucial contribution they made to the development of liberalism, Rosenblatt is capable of sketching a very different picture of this tradition than the one we have become familiar with.

Indeed, once we turn away from the more traditional focus on Anglo-American thinkers such as John Locke, liberalism is revealed as a political tradition centered on the common good rather on individual rights. As Rosenblatt puts it: “Most liberals believed that people had rights because they had duties, and most were deeply interested in questions of social justice. They always rejected the idea that a viable community could be constructed on the basis of self-interestedness alone. Ad infinitum they warned of the dangers of selfishness. Liberals ceaselessly advocated generosity, moral probity, and civic values” (4). It was only relatively recently, after World War Two, Rosenblatt argues, that liberals came to drop such lofty talk and instead came to privilege the protection of individual rights over and above any other commitments. She leaves little doubt that this reconfiguration of liberalism was a turn for the worse. By redefining liberalism as an individualistic and rights-centric tradition, “its goals were downgraded” (271) and liberalism became vulnerable to the communitarian critique that it is a “selfish” doctrine.

Rosenblatt’s book, one might argue, is therefore not just a word history. It also has a more normative goal: by redirecting our attention to the nineteenth-century French (and to a lesser extent) German thinkers who invented liberalism in the first

³ Judith Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in Shklar, *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.

⁴ Duncan Bell, “What Is Liberalism?,” *Political Theory* 42 (2014), 705.

place, it aims to make their ideas available to today's liberals. As such, however, this reviewer finds Rosenblatt's arguments somewhat less persuasive. Yes, nineteenth-century liberals talked a great deal about their devotion to the common good, civic mindedness, and social justice. But their commitment to these lofty ideals came with a whole lot of unattractive baggage, for it went hand in hand with a strongly elitist, antidemocratic bias, as well as with a tendency to moralize social issues.

Rosenblatt, it is important to note, makes no attempt to ignore or whitewash these less appealing aspects of nineteenth-century liberalism. But she depicts these as momentary lapses, a failure to live up to the liberals' core ideals. And yet, it is easily demonstrated that the elitism and moralism so characteristic of nineteenth-century liberalism followed directly from their rejection of individualism and their commitment to the common good. The example of François Guizot illustrates as much. A contemporary of Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville, Guizot has been more or less forgotten today. But in his own time, he was a celebrated liberal intellectual and politician, with a European-wide fame that rivalled that of Constant and Tocqueville.

Guizot was indeed a moralist—and in that sense, he fits Rosenblatt's narrative very well. Guizot strongly believed that a political community did not simply exist for the sake of the protection of individual rights, but that it had to have an ethical project. He saw individualism and atomism as major social threats and believed that the state should help foster the moral character of its citizens. But these commitments led him to embrace a highly antidemocratic agenda. For Guizot was *also* convinced that only a tiny proportion of the population was capable of discerning which policies were in the "common good." Hence, he strongly denied that adult individuals had an automatic right to vote. Only those "capable" of discerning what was best for all, he believed, should be able to participate in communal decision-making.⁵

This attitude was widely shared by other liberals. Indeed, as Alan Kahan has argued, a case can be made that a limitation of the suffrage to those deemed "capable" was one of the dominant political commitments of nineteenth-century liberals.⁶ Thus, when self-styled liberal parties came to power in France and in Belgium in the wake of a series of revolutions in 1830, they extended the vote to respectively less than 1% and 2% of the adult population; similarly, liberal constitutional reform in the Netherlands in 1848 gave the vote to around 10 per cent of the adult male population—leaving the other 90 per cent disenfranchised.⁷ In all of these cases, the introduction of these highly elitist political regimes was justified on the grounds that only those wise enough to discern what was truly in the interests of all should be allowed to vote.

Similarly, liberal moralism encouraged a tendency to privilege ethical rather than more structural solutions to pressing social problems. Many liberals, as Rosenblatt rightly points out, worried about the growing misery of the masses in the nineteenth century and railed against the emergence of a new "aristocracy of money" (114). But they tended to reject more radical solutions to these problems, such as the proclamation of a 'right to work' (as was advocated by socialists and laborers' movements in 1848). Instead, liberals—in particular those on the European continent—argued that the blatant social problems of their time were caused by a lack of moral character; hence they used their political energy for increasingly hare-brained schemes to re-moralize the people, for instance by attempting to bring about a religious reformation.

To the extent that this kind of liberalism – elitist, paternalistic, and moralistic—is lost, is there anything to be regretted about that? To this reviewer, at least, the answer to that question is a resounding 'no.' If there is anything to be learned from

⁵ For a clear statement of these views, see, for instance: François Guizot, *The History of the Origins of Representative Government in Europe*, trans. Andrew R. Scoble; intro. Aurelian Craiutu (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), 56-65.

⁶ Alan Kahan, *Liberalism in Nineteenth Century Europe: The Political Culture of Limited Suffrage* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).

⁷ Peter Flora, Alber Eichenberg, J. Kohl, et al., *State, Economy and Society in Western Europe: A Data Handbook*. vol. 1: *The Growth of Mass Democracies and Welfare States* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1983), chapter 3.

the history of nineteenth-century liberalism, one might argue, it is that embracing lofty values like the common good is not enough. As the intellectual career of men like François Guizot makes abundantly clear, a professed concern for the common good and social justice can easily become a fig-leaf for an elitist kind of politics; similarly, it can divert away attention from the social and economic causes of poverty and other social problems.

But that does not detract from Rosenblatt's major achievement. In *The Lost History of Liberalism*, she gives her readers a virtuoso overview of the history of liberalism in all its glorious, confusing, messy detail. As a reminder of the sheer multiplicity of meanings that have been historically attached to the term 'liberalism' Rosenblatt's history is unparalleled—even though its attempt to unearth a forgotten and more attractive form of liberalism is, ultimately, less persuasive.