

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXI-4

Helena Rosenblatt. *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. ISBN: 9780691170701 (hardcover, \$35.00).

20 September 2019 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-4>

Roundtable Editors: Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

Contents

Introduction by Gianna Englert, Southern Methodist University.....	2
Review by Annelien de Dijn, Utrecht University.....	5
Review by Bryan Garsten, Yale University.....	9
Review by Daniel Gordon, University of Massachusetts Amherst.....	13
Review by Shannon C. Stimson, Georgetown University.....	17
Review by Cheryl Welch, Harvard University.....	19
Response by Helena Rosenblatt, the Graduate Center, City University of New York.....	24

 INTRODUCTION BY GIANNA ENGLERT, SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

For every present-day outspoken critic of liberalism, there are plenty of defenders quick to rush to its aid. But many of liberalism’s advocates suffer from the same problem as its detractors: we are divided over what the term really means—at least, we have not defined it precisely. The result is a series of stale academic debates about a still-elusive term, and more importantly, a lingering uncertainty about what our common life ought to look like. Can and should we rely on an ill-defined term like liberalism to provide our principles and guide our public life? Do liberal ideas and institutions actually promote freedom and equality? Is there a more clearly-seen North Star by which modern nations should navigate the political, social, and economic problems they face? Instead of holding fast to a term we appreciate but cannot define, maybe the answer to our problems is to let it go in the search for something better.

In *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*, Helena Rosenblatt engages in conceptual history to see through the “muddle” that liberalism has become (1). Though the book aims neither to defend nor attack liberalism (2), Rosenblatt suggests that the term—understood through the minds of those who originated, used, and developed it—ought not be abandoned without at least first being understood. To tell liberalism’s untold story, she begins with the *liberalitas* of Cicero and Seneca that signified a “disposition” toward selflessness and concern for the common good (9-10). In its modern political manifestations, Rosenblatt reminds us that the term “liberalism” was invented after the French Revolution, and that its greatest exemplars were those thinkers who sought a moral foundation for politics and economics: Benjamin Constant and Germaine de Staël in France, Wilhelm Roscher in Germany. By complicating the familiar story of Lockean Anglo-American liberalism, Rosenblatt argues that liberalism has strayed from its moral origins. Instead referring to a doctrine associated with compassion, generosity, and self-sacrifice, contemporary liberals argue in terms of individual rights without ethical foundations (265-267). With this conclusion, she admittedly comes close to the claims of liberalism’s critics. The long-standing caricature of liberalism as individualistic and morally bankrupt—a caricature Rosenblatt aims to refute—has actually manifested in contemporary American liberal thought.

This attention to the development of liberalism across time and place is one of the strengths of this thoughtful book. But as all of the reviewers note, it also leads us to question whether the life of liberalism can be told in a unified story. Daniel Gordon highlights the potential pitfalls of doing conceptual history. Gordon worries that the liberalism’s “semantic sprawl” in the nineteenth century has rendered it simply a “plastic word,” easily molded to fit its user’s own purposes. If liberalism is all things to all people, it cannot unify a fractured political culture that is divided over its meaning.

Shannon Stimson articulates a similar critique: as we follow *The Lost History of Liberalism*’s varied cast of liberals and multiplicity of liberalisms, we might conclude that the term lacks “one central core.” Moreover, by trying to capture many liberalisms under a single heading, Stimson maintains that Rosenblatt has overlooked an important one. Without sufficient engagement with British political economy through Adam Smith and Francis Hutcheson, Stimson claims that we cannot rightly understand how French liberalism, the heart of Rosenblatt’s history, developed as it did.

Cheryl Welch continues this line of argument. While wishing to hear more about “the very long shadow that England cast on the history of liberalism,” Welch also questions Rosenblatt’s interpretation of contemporary American liberalism. Though Rosenblatt seeks to understand Constant, Staël, and other modern liberals on their own terms, Welch notes that her characterization of contemporary liberalism comes “mostly from its enemies,” who dismiss it as selfish and individualistic. Given this take on contemporary liberalism, readers have to wonder if Rosenblatt’s argument has fallen prey to the same impulses she set out to resist.

Both Annelien de Dijn and Bryan Garsten underscore the book’s normative dimensions. As de Dijn writes, there is an implicit normative purpose behind uncovering liberalism’s lost history. By discussing the sociability and morality of French and German liberalisms, Rosenblatt hopes to “make their ideas available to today’s liberals.” But de Dijn focuses on the darker side of those liberalisms, and questions whether they ought to be praised as potential resources for current politics. Though Rosenblatt does not whitewash the complicated role of elitism, exclusion, and paternalism in liberal thought, she

presents them—to use de Dijn’s phrase—as “momentary lapses,” or failures to live up to liberal ideals. For de Dijn, however, we cannot so easily disentangle liberals’ faults from their first principles. The varied history of liberalism, she argues, ought to serve as a cautionary tale rather than as a resource for our own time.

With liberalism’s complications in mind, Garsten looks toward “next steps” beyond the word history that Rosenblatt has provided. Inspired by Rosenblatt’s earlier work on religion, Garsten urges us to “evaluate the adequacy of the answers” that liberals gave to questions surrounding commercial society, religious toleration, and civic community. *The Lost History of Liberalism*, he suggests, can aid in our evaluations. Garsten praises Rosenblatt for showing that liberal religion was not simply a spiritual defense of selfishness, but he argues that we should take this historical point further. A complete defense of liberalism, armed with the resources from the past that this book offers, will need to add philosophy and religion to the framework of intellectual history.

In her response to the reviews, Rosenblatt discusses how the apparent plasticity of the term liberalism actually inspired her methodology. By studying the word history of liberalism, or what the word meant to those who used and developed it over time, she wished to avoid imposing a single definition of the term onto her story. She also hoped to “reset” how we think of liberals, not as “great minds” within a monolithic tradition, but as thinkers who wrestled with their unique political circumstances and argued for certain core values—including generosity and toleration—in response.

Each of these excellent reviews shares Rosenblatt’s concern to get liberalism right—not for the sake of winning academic arguments, but to look critically at the moral and political principles by which we claim to live. By tracing the lost history of liberalism, we hope to recover lost insights for ourselves.

Participants:

Helena Rosenblatt is Professor of History at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. Her many books and articles include *Rousseau and Geneva. From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), *Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day*, edited with Raf Geenens (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and *Thinking with Rousseau: From Machiavelli to Schmitt*, edited with Paul Schweigert (Cambridge University Press, 2017). She is presently working on an intellectual biography of Madame de Staël.

Gianna Englert is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Southern Methodist University. She has research interests in the history of political thought, French liberalism, the history of political economy, and the growth of democracy. Her work has most recently appeared in *Modern Intellectual History* and *The Review of Politics*. She is currently completing a book manuscript, titled “Capacity for Democracy: French Liberalism and the Language of Citizenship,” that traces the idea of “capable citizenship” in nineteenth-century French liberalism.

Annelien de Dijn holds the position of Professor of Modern Political History at Utrecht University. Her research focuses on the history of political thought in Europe and in the United States from 1700 to the present. She has a particular interest in the fraught and contested history of freedom and in liberal and republican political thought. Her first book, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society*, was published with Cambridge University Press in 2008 (paperback edition October 2011). She is currently finalizing a book manuscript on the history of freedom from Herodotus to the present, tentatively titled “Freedom: An Unruly History,” which is under contract with Harvard University Press.

Bryan Garsten is Professor of Political Science and Humanities at Yale University. He is the author of *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Harvard University Press, 2006) and the editor of Robert Wokler, *Rousseau, the Age of Enlightenment, and Their Legacies* (Princeton University Press, 2012). He is now completing a book on nineteenth-century liberalism called *The Heart of a Heartless World: Liberal Religion and Modern Liberty*.

Daniel Gordon is Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. His publications include *Citizens Without Sovereignty* (Princeton University Press, 1994), *Candide With Related Documents* (Bedford Cultural Editions, 1998/2017, editor and translator), and *The Anthem Companion to Alexis de Tocqueville* (Anthem Press, 2019, editor and contributor).

Shannon C. Stimson is Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Chair in the Foundations of American Freedom and Professor of Government at Georgetown University. Her books include *After Adam Smith: A Century of Transformation in Politics and Political Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2009, 2011), and T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, the complete 1803 edition together with five critical essays (Yale University Press, 2018).

Cheryl Welch is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Government at Harvard University. Her teaching and research interests are in the areas of the history of political thought (especially nineteenth-century France and Britain), liberal and democratic theory, and the history of human rights. She is the author of *Liberty and Utility: The French Idéologues and the Transformation of Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1984) and *De Tocqueville* (Oxford University Press, 2001), and the editor, with M. Milgate, of *Critical Issues in Social Theory* (Academic Press, 1989) and *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). Welch has also published numerous articles on liberalism, on nineteenth-century conceptions of social science, on utilitarianism, and on the works of Alexis de Tocqueville. She is currently working on two projects: an edited book on reading Tocqueville in the twenty-first century and a study of the fate of utilitarianism in nineteenth and twentieth-century francophone thought.

REVIEW BY ANNELIEN DE DIJN, UTRECHT UNIVERSITY

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 than 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.

REVIEW BY BRYAN GARSTEN, YALE UNIVERSITY

What happened to American liberalism? Was it inevitable that after 1945 and 1989, once it had defeated fascism and outlasted Soviet Communism, it would decay into its worst form? Does the glorification of global markets known as ‘neo-liberalism’ only reveal what was, all along, the true impulse of all liberalism? Was liberalism always, at its heart, an excuse for self-interested individualism and materialism, an alibi for unrestrained capitalism and the material inequalities it produces? Is liberalism therefore fated to degenerate into neglect for the common good, for public spiritedness and morality?

The goal of Helena Rosenblatt’s excellent new history of liberalism is, I think, to help liberals resist these conclusions by reminding them of their own past. The book offers a ‘word history’ demonstrating that people who described themselves and their politics as “liberal” were often arguing against the sufficiency of self-interest, in favor of civic virtues and the common good, and from a moral perspective that was often deeply informed by religion.

Rosenblatt’s book departs from other intellectual histories of liberalism by emphasizing the French origins of some liberal ideas and language. She points out that writers did not use the word ‘liberalism’ until much later than the political theories of Hobbes and Locke—not until after the French Revolution.

I have learned a lot from Rosenblatt’s earlier work on French liberalism, and have followed along some of the paths that she has blazed.⁸ I find the liberalism that emerges in the writings of Benjamin Constant, Germaine de Stael, and the political thinkers around them to be a mode of thought at least as rich as that found in Anglo-American liberalism, more psychologically self-conscious and subtle, and more accepting of what Constant called “the religious sentiment,” the human dissatisfaction with materialism, its desire to experience enthusiasms of one kind or another.⁹ The continental thinkers writing after the Revolution were also particularly attuned to the political problem of usurpation that democratic principles of legitimacy introduced, and they grappled with the institutional problem of representation honestly and creatively.

In contrast with that tradition, the version of liberalism that emerged in the late twentieth-century, most obviously in the philosopher John Rawls’s theories, was impoverished.¹⁰ Rawls’s earnest approach was an effort to appeal to utilitarian philosophers on their own terms, and it therefore conceded too much to the economic mode of thinking that many early liberals such as Constant and de Stael had explicitly opposed. Rosenblatt’s epilogue puts Rawlsian liberalism in its historical context, that of a Cold War generation of liberals who, frightened of idealism in politics, put forward a deflationary, disillusioned, supposedly clear-sighted realism, a thinned-out liberalism, turned into procedural fairness alone. They offered a hedge against cruelty and an encouragement to focus on establishing the “low but solid” ground of comfortable peaceful co-existence, without imagining new republics to build on that ground.

Rosenblatt suggests that this Cold War rights-and-interests liberalism unwittingly accepted many of the caricatures of liberalism that had been put forward by its critics, especially its Catholic critics, during its earlier history. Once the Cold

⁸ See especially Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749-1762* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁹ See, for example, Benjamin Constant, *On Religion, Considered in its Source, Its Forms, and Its Developments*, trans. Peter Paul Seaton, Jr. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2018), introduction.

¹⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

War was over and the immediate enemies vanished, we were left with an understanding of liberalism that was too morally and religiously emaciated to resist being co-opted into the market ideology of the last three decades.

*

How should this “lost” and now recovered history of liberalism change our understanding of what liberalism is? Sometimes a detailed historical account of a phenomenon can make any assertion of its essential character dubious; liberalism could lose its coherence and dissolve into a hundred variants of post-revolutionary thinking. Can a political theorist reading Rosenblatt’s book still identify a fundamental core of liberalism? And, if so, does the history told here make that core more or less attractive for people today?

The book argues that it is wrong to identify the protection of individual rights as the core of liberalism. Still, one right in particular does emerge as central to its account: the right to religious freedom. The separation of church and state is crucial to the book at almost every modern stage of its argument, from the U.S. Bill of Rights to Benjamin Constant’s proposed Additional Act for Napoleon’s 1815 Constitution to the 1905 law on education in France.

As soon as we focus on the centrality of the separation of church and state, we find that the political philosopher John Locke retains a pivotal moment in the story, in spite of the focus on France. It was in Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1685) that we find, for the first time according to Rosenblatt, the Christian virtue of “liberality” interpreted to require the practice of broad religious toleration (28). During the next century that meaning of the word spread, so that President George Washington could casually use “liberal” to mean “religiously tolerant” in his 1790 letter to the Jewish congregation in Newport, for example. Rosenblatt agrees that religious toleration became a “core liberal value” (28).

Famously, Locke’s *Letter* did not include Catholics among the religious sects that a liberal person had to tolerate. Locke was not alone: Liberality understood as religious toleration appears, in the book, as a Protestant value advanced against the Catholic Church. The combat between liberals and Catholics is one of the defining narratives. Popes issued encyclicals and bulls against liberalism through almost the whole modern history, from Pope Pius VI’s momentous decision in 1791 to denounce the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, to Pope Gregory XVI’s fiery criticism of Catholics who sought to make peace with liberalism in the encyclical *Mirari vos* of 1832, to the 1886 encyclical describing the separation of church and state as a project of Lucifer, and into the early twentieth century at least. A section at the end of chapter six, on education, is titled, “The Pope Strikes Back.” (If the nineteenth-century were a Star Wars movie, the Church would be the Empire.) Rosenblatt does mention individual liberal Catholics, fascinating figures in their own right, but the main story is one of antagonism. The Church we learn about in this book is the one that viewed the tolerant virtue of liberality as a pernicious form of what *Mirari vos* described as ‘indifferentism.’

The principal effect of emphasizing France and the religious question in this version of liberalism’s history is to make liberalism’s battle with the Catholic Church one of its defining characteristics. This has philosophical, as well as historical, implications. Some Protestants found in their freedom from the Church an opportunity to embrace progressive understandings of human history and appreciative theories of commercial society.

In the nineteenth century, liberals tended to believe that the violence and cruelty of human beings, their sinfulness, was a product of the wrong religious and social institutions rather than original sin. They also believed that social progress would lead us away from violence, making us more gentle, more interested in comfort and luxury than in the pleasures of warfare. If they assumed that human beings could be moral even without the guidance of the one true Church, that was because they thought that History would do most of the work of forming us. The deep justification for separating church and state

included a progressive understanding of history that Benjamin Constant famously described in his lecture comparing ancient and modern liberty.¹¹

The progressive understanding of history, in turn, usually depended on a thesis about the effects of commerce on human sociability and morality. According to the familiar story as we find it in the philosopher Immanuel Kant as well as Constant, commerce brought us into contact with a greater variety of humanity and gave us reason to co-exist peacefully with them. *The Lost History of Liberalism* is certainly right that this emphasis on commerce did not lead most liberals into a doctrinaire free-market position, but it did lead them to endorse the fundamental shift from rural life to city life, to prefer the mobility of modern workers to traditional apprenticeships and guilds, and to support the division of familial landholdings by abolishing primogeniture. Liberals agreed with the writers Adam Smith and Karl Marx that commerce was a welcome revolutionary force against the old regime's fixities, against conglomerations of social authority, power and wealth. The Revolution and commercial society worked together to empower the middle classes and financiers. It is not an accident that liberals were involved in the global networks of trade that found both raw materials and customers in the colonies.

This modern commercial society required a pool of free labor, workers willing to move in pursuit of jobs. The questions of morals and character that the book shows some liberals to have been concerned about arose partly from this new social and geographical mobility. Could individuals who had been liberated from ties to home, family and parish remain morally grounded and loyal to a civic community?

Rosenblatt shows very clearly, as a matter of intellectual history, that many liberals were trying to answer these questions about morals and citizenship. To fully evaluate liberalism, it is necessary to go beyond the arguments in this book, and to evaluate the adequacy of the answers they gave. The opposition to liberalism often arises not from the belief that liberals never spoke of morals, but from a sense that what liberals said was superficial and inadequate.

One of the virtues of the book is to highlight how important new accounts of religion have been to liberal conversations on morals and citizenship. At key moments, the book answers questions about values with responses about religion: The chapter on the question of character ends with a section on "The Religion of Humanity." The section titled "A Moral Way of Life" in chapter seven ends with a discussion of the influential Unitarian pamphlet *Our Liberal Movement in Theology* (235). Among the other liberal attempts to address the question of morals and character are the writer Charles Villers's 1803 prize-winning essay to the *Institut de France*, "An essay on the spirit and influence of the Reformation of Luther," arguing that liberal politics requires liberal religion, which the British philosopher James Mill admired so much that he had it translated into English (60-61), and the interest of John Stuart Mill, French thinker Edgar Quinet and others in new reformed versions of Protestantism, from American Transcendentalist William Ellery Channing's Unitarianism to a so-called 'religion of humanity.' The claim that liberalism can be moral and civic-minded seems to rest, for most of the liberals explored in this book, on the coherence and value of some liberal understanding of religion.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some of liberalism's most penetrating critics regarded liberal religion as its weakest point, and they focused their attacks there. Liberal religion was pilloried by religious traditionalists, Protestant as well as Catholic, as a dressed-up form of selfishness, based on the assumption of spontaneous human goodness and progress, ignorant of original sin and devilish temptation, weak in its socially integrating force and in its moral force. Some years ago, the writer Mark Lilla revived this attack in the title of a book, calling liberal religion a "Stillborn God" and complaining that it had left German liberals unable to resist German militarism in the early twentieth century.¹²

¹¹ Constant, "The liberty of the ancients compared with that of the moderns," in Biancamaria Fontana, ed., *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 309-328.

¹² Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

It seems to me what *The Lost History of Liberalism* reveals is how important this debate about liberal religion is to our judgment about social and political liberalism. The book essentially concedes to the Catholic critics of liberalism that they are correct to focus on the religious aspect of liberalism, even as it resists the Catholic judgment about that religion. The book suggests that the argument for liberalism stands or falls with our ability to show that the sociological conditions of life ushered in by liberal societies can be a home for the full development of human capacities, moral and spiritual as well as material. The mobility of people, the relative weakness of familial ties, the occasionalism of work relationships, the dynamism of commercial society, the hypocrisy of social roles, the inevitable disappointments of representative democracy, the proliferation of family types and lifestyles, the experiments in living, and so on—all of this must be shown to support, rather than threaten, the possibility of realizing our best selves. And the sense of what counts as our best selves is inevitably “comprehensive” in Rawls’s sense; it is tied up with our fundamental views about our place in the world and our relation to the divine, if we feel any such relation.

To vindicate liberalism, the individualism about which Catholic critics worried so incessantly must be refigured somehow as a positive human possibility, that of individuality, and it must be shown to be compatible with fulfilling forms of human relation. These were some of the projects of nineteenth-century liberal thought. These projects to deepen liberal religion were interrupted by the world wars, and their inadequacy was blamed, by some, for the regimes that provoked those wars. But the chastened liberalism that emerged instead has not satisfied us. The Cold War theorists of liberalism were understandably concerned about political fanaticism. What they failed to see was that if liberals cannot offer some reassurance that the societies they recommend contain recognizable human goods, they open the door for antiliberals.

A complete defense of liberalism will therefore have to be philosophic and religious, not merely historical, and it will have to arise from deep study not only of liberals, but also of their most profound enemies, who force us to answer their skeptical questions. Getting the history right is a crucial first step, but that history is essentially one of liberals promising to address the displacements of modernity. Liberalism remains an experiment, and we still need to make good on its promises. On the crucial question of whether or not this is a fool’s errand, we are left with the quintessentially liberal burden and pleasure—that of judging for ourselves.

REVIEW BY DANIEL GORDON, UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Plastic Words

Assessing an academic book has something in common with voting. The shared dilemma is: Should one think primarily in terms of one's own interest, or in terms of the public's interest? Some academic studies are rewarding for me as a specialist in European and American political thought. But I am irritated when a text that teaches me something would be incomprehensible to general readers. Conversely, I admire academic books that reach out to the broader public. But I often find that I learn little from such books. With Helena Rosenblatt's *The Lost History of Liberalism*, the two readers in me, the one searching for rigorous scholarship, the other seeking to be a participant in a broad reading public, found fulfilment.

The book is informative and elegant. The author is learned in the history of political ideas. She has a knack for exposing the background and the content of many kinds of texts: political treatises, manifestos, party platforms, speeches, newspapers, and memoirs. It is an impressive book and a model for academics seeking to communicate with a wider audience.

Nothing in this review takes away from my appreciative assessment. However, in her last paragraph, Rosenblatt says that she wishes to reinvigorate debate (277) about the meaning of liberalism. The following questions are meant to enter into this debate.

First, when Rosenblatt argues that liberals today are too invested in rights and lack public spirit, who exactly does she have in mind? What Rosenblatt calls the "lost" history of liberalism is an international intellectual tradition in which German and French thinkers played a large but largely forgotten role. Rosenblatt suggests in the epilogue that American liberalism has become too focused on individual rights and has lost the connection that continental liberalism had with moral compassion (265-266). But since she provides no specific names or policies, the target of her criticism is vague. Non-academic readers may well be perplexed by her description of American liberalism. On the whole, in the U.S., people who call themselves 'liberal' favor welfare programs; many devote some of their time to social service. Who are these liberals who are invested in rights at the expense of compassion?

Second, can one really write the history of liberalism by focusing on the history of a few words?

Rosenblatt's book is not a complete history of liberalism. She says very little about the British liberal John Locke and nothing about the architect of America's liberal constitution, James Madison. The history of the concept of private property is omitted. It is true that no single volume can cover the whole history of liberal ideas. And Rosenblatt offers a principled basis for her selection. She wishes to rehabilitate French and German thinkers and avoid the usual canon of English and American authors. Even more, her goal is to write a history of liberalism by tracing some key terms associated with the concept: notably, the very words 'liberal' and 'liberalism.' This means that she focuses on people who played a role in defining, redefining, and propagating these terms, which is a great idea for a history. However, she appears to apply the methodology in an inconsistent manner.

Rosenblatt starts with a nice quote from the great French historian Lucien Febvre: "It is never a waste of time to study the history of a word" (1). This is from Febvre's classic article, first published in French in 1930, on the history of the concept of 'civilization.' I need to make a rather technical point about this article. An important feature of Febvre's argument is that he did not limit his inquiry to the word 'civilization' and its variants ('civilized,' 'civil,' 'civility'). One of his main points was that the concept of civilization was originally invested in a set of terms based on a different root: the word 'police.' Until about 1750, words like 'police,' 'policed,' 'polished,' and 'polite' designated the idea of a commercially and morally advanced society. When supporters of absolute monarchy appropriated some of the same terms, notably 'police,' to refer to the utility of top-down public administration, Enlightenment authors moved their concept over to another word cluster, based on

“civilized.” The term ‘civilization’ was born around 1750 to denote a conception of progress that could no longer be anchored unequivocally in ‘police.’¹³

I wonder if Rosenblatt has focused too exclusively on the words ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism,’ neglecting other semantic fields that were crucial in the formation of liberal ideas. She does not look at any other key words. Even her study of the word ‘liberal’ and its variants seems at times to focus on just a subset of words inside this particular semantic field. Thus, in the first chapter, dealing with European thought from antiquity through the Enlightenment, she looks closely at the adjective ‘liberal’ (in the sense of magnanimous) but not the Latin adjective ‘liber’ (free) or noun ‘libertas’ (freedom). The result is to create the impression that before the nineteenth century, ‘liberal’ thought was principally an upper-class discourse about the virtue of generosity. This is a good setup for one her main arguments, that ‘liberalism,’ with its emphasis on freedom, was born in the nineteenth century, but it feels like a semantic sleight of hand.

At times Rosenblatt skips over major thinkers because they did not use the key words; at other times she grants herself exceptions, and focuses on authors in spite of the fact that they did not use these words. Thus, when she opens a long (and highly interesting) discussion of Benjamin Constant and Germaine de Staël, two creative political thinkers in early nineteenth-century France, she notes that they did not use the term ‘liberalism’ because the term “had not yet been coined” (51). Yet, she credits these two, more than anyone else, for being the inventors of the *concept* of liberalism (not the word)—even though she previously rejected John Locke as a founder of liberalism because he “never used the word” (19). Rosenblatt suggests that the two French authors are important because they critiqued the excesses of the French Revolution. They posited the need for restrictions on all governments, including democratically elected ones. Liberalism for them was the principle that all states, regardless of their *source* of legitimacy, must be limited in their practical *scope*. Modern liberalism was born when the idea of limited government became a hedge not merely against absolute monarchy but against popular rule.

This is a compelling point. However, it has little to do with the words ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism.’ These were not crucial terms for Constant and Staël. These authors are important for other reasons. It appears that Rosenblatt sometimes veers away from her methodology, the focus on words, in order to focus on a preconceived idea of liberalism. If she had looked systematically at those who were early users of the term ‘liberalism,’ she could have discussed Charles Fourier, the utopian socialist who appears to be the first French political theorist to repeatedly use the term ‘liberalism’ to designate a doctrine. Fourier uses the term 19 times in *Le Nouveau monde industriel* (1830), and six times in *Le Nouveau monde amoureux* (1816). Beyond Fourier, the term ‘liberalism’ occurs most frequently, in early nineteenth-century France, in the writings of three novelists: Honoré de Balzac, Marie-Henri Beyle, known as Stendhal, and George Sand. A discussion of ‘liberalism’ in literature would be worthwhile, though I acknowledge every book must have boundaries.

The final question is whether liberalism is still a valuable term. Can it be given precision? Can its history invigorate our political culture, as Rosenblatt suggests?

In Rosenblatt’s reading, liberalism emerged in the early nineteenth century in response to the French Revolution. Liberalism combined a critique of popular sovereignty with a defense of religion and civic duty. If the state was to be limited in its scope, then individuals had to assume responsibility for each other. Rosenblatt shows that over time, ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’ spread all over the ideological map. Her discussion of liberal parties and ideologies in Europe and America in the early twentieth century is superb. Indeed, I think the best parts of the book are those that reveal the semantic sprawl of ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’ starting in the late nineteenth century. These terms did not correlate to any specific political vision. They became what the linguist Uwe Poerksen calls “plastic words”—words that can be combined with anything, like Lego blocks.¹⁴

¹³ The article can be found in English: Lucien Febvre, “Civilisation: Evolution of a Word and a Group of Ideas,” in Peter Burke, ed., *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Lucien Febvre* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 219-257.

¹⁴ Uwe Poerksen, *Plastics Words: The Tyranny of Modular Language* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2004).

I would go further and suggest that the plasticity of 'liberal' and 'liberalism' was evident already in the late eighteenth century when both defenders and critics of the French Revolution claimed to be liberal. The founder of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, in his 1790 *Reflections*, spoke of "this idea of a liberal descent," "a liberal order of commons," "such habits as enlarge and liberalize the understanding," and, with reference to the French revolutionaries, "their liberty is not liberal."¹⁵

The Lost History of Liberalism suggests to me that the history of 'liberalism' has never been a process of cumulative conceptual refinement, like the history of a scientific concept. Theorists and politicians of different persuasions have competed with each other to own these terms. Advocates for universal suffrage, and promoters of a property qualification for the vote. Defenders of the free market, and of the welfare state. Theologians and atheists. All claimed to be 'liberal'—as Rosenblatt amply shows. Rosenblatt even reveals that in early twentieth-century America, 'liberal' could denote colonial ideology and belief in the racial superiority of Anglo-Americans!

This book would be highly congenial to the philosophers of 'ordinary language' in the mid-twentieth century. In an article called "Semantic Ascent," W.V.O. Quine referred to "the shift from talking in certain terms to talking about them."¹⁶ He regarded linguistic analysis as a prerequisite to setting any question "in its true colors." Thus, before asking 'Is liberalism good, is it bad?', we first need to know the various contexts in which the term can be and has been used. *The Lost of History of Liberalism* is an important book in this regard. The author has overlooked some linguistic contexts in which the term figured (like Fourier and the French novels). She nevertheless provides a wider range of instances of how 'liberal' and 'liberalism' have been used than any other author to date.

A question that remains to be answered is whether the term 'liberalism' can acquire any specificity outside of narrow academic circles, given how ubiquitous and hollow the term has become in society as a whole. My hunch is that we cannot use the history of ideas to establish a clear meaning for 'liberalism,' for this history only reveals contradictory meanings. There is no golden age in which 'liberalism' was part of consistent language game. Professional scholars of course can use 'liberalism' as a term of art—they can define it as they wish. Yet, 'liberalism,' however defined, cannot unify our splintered political culture. Not merely because, in the wider world, the term 'liberal' means so many things to those who like this kind of language but because there is outright hatred of the term today. We are in a post-liberal era, as is evident from the scorn with which many, not only on the right but equally on the radical left, speak of 'liberal' or 'neo-liberal' ideas and institutions.

The hope that liberalism can be re-invigorated, which Rosenblatt expresses at the end of her book, may appeal to moderate supporters of the Welfare State who are concerned about the growing extremism in the academy and in the Democratic party. But this radicalism needs to be confronted on its own terms. Moderately progressive academics and politicians generally avoid criticizing the extreme left. They are fearful of splintering the opposition to the right. They are equally fearful for their reputations; they do not want to risk being 'called out' as racists and reactionaries by radicals who promote the rhetoric of denunciation. As a result of liberal deference to anti-liberal fervor, a new vocabulary now overshadows the older discourses of liberalism.

No history of the term 'liberalism,' even one as broad-minded and erudite as Rosenblatt's, can diminish the allure of the newer watchwords, such as 'Orientalism,' 'euro-centrism,' 'carceral society,' 'intersectionality,' 'positionality,' 'safe space,' 'bio-politics,' 'unconscious bias,' 'symbolic violence,' 'gender performativity,' and various kinds of 'phobia.' Such terms create an atmosphere of disenchantment not only with the word 'liberalism' but with all aspects of Western political thought up to

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), <https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/burke/revfrance.pdf>. The quotations are from 29, 31, and 66.

¹⁶ Willard Van Orman Quine, "Semantic Ascent," in Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 169.

the era of decolonization. One hopes that a scholar of Rosenblatt's caliber will soon write a critical history of the plastic words of the radical Left, which are replacing the plastic words of liberalism.

REVIEW BY SHANNON C. STIMSON, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

Helena Rosenblatt's intriguing and serious *begriffsgeschichte* of the conceptual "lost history" of liberalism adds both complexity and nuance to contemporary debates over this highly contested concept. For Rosenblatt, this history is necessary in order to bring some clarity to what she terms "muddled" thinking "about what we mean by liberalism" in the fray of contemporary (and largely western European) democratic politics (1). A conceptual history of liberalism that begins with Cicero and Seneca and ends with the economist Friedrich Hayek, with an epilogue that brings us up to the present is bound to give one pause. However, because we know we are being led on this intellectual journey by someone whose distinguished earlier scholarship¹⁷ on post-French revolutionary political and intellectual thought comprehends both French and German commitments to liberal values and institutions, we are prepared to follow along.

As we follow, we might wonder whether it can truly be one "liberalism" that productively cabins all these meanings such that *its* history is being written. Rosenblatt is clear that "it goes without saying that our notions of liberalism will vary according to our choice of key thinkers and how we read them" (2). And, the sheer scope, multiplicity, and divergence of the liberalisms she creatively articulates here might challenge us to understand and acknowledge that liberalism lacks one central core that unites the history of one concept and its transformation. Might it be better to encourage us to explore how various understandings of liberalism must be placed in their own historical contexts, and offer us the collective lost history of what some of these might be taken to mean? The historical contexts of conceptual change and conceptual "transformation over time," of course, are inevitably more complicated than can be covered in a short book, but it is perhaps a tribute to Rosenblatt's writing that she makes one wish for more.

After the first chapter, Rosenblatt's work plants its feet pretty firmly in the context of debates over politics and religion and/or a "moral way of life" (233)—a discursive history that reconstructs European/British/American debates from the Enlightenment forward to the twentieth century. There are interesting discussions here of both French and German political economy: distinctive understandings of liberal "free trade" which should not be identified with the simple liberalism of *laissez-faire* (105-108; 113-115). Indeed, Rosenblatt suggests that her historical approach "leads to some surprising discoveries," one of which she suggests is "the centrality of France to the history of liberalism" (3). In terms of the important, if problematic, role of political economy in this history, however, this may give somewhat shorter shrift than one might like to the role of British thinkers in the story. Certainly the notion that the systematic consideration of commercial society which generates such key insights not only for economics, but also for morals and politics, begins and finds its most sustained elaboration, for better or worse, in Britain.

To be fair, there is a discussion of the political economist Adam Smith in this work that is careful to excise him from a common contemporary economic liberal anachronism, that is, the economist's egoistic or even neoliberal reading. Rosenblatt notes that Smith would have understood 'liberal' in the manner of an "educated gentleman of his time" (34). Therefore, she suggests, his equation of a "liberal plan" with a market society would have comprised "freedom but also generosity and reciprocity" (34). Of course, Adam Smith contested the moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson's claim for beneficence as a connective tissue in market society, and he did not believe that the great imaginary machine of the market operated on the principle of generosity. The desires for esteem and admiration were instead more relevant. When Smith writes in the *Moral Sentiments* of the poor man's son, "whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition," and who, "when he begins to look around him, admires the condition of the rich" and the life that only laborious efforts at commercial success can afford, Smith offers a clear insight into exactly what he believes motors the market well beyond the principle of

¹⁷ Helena Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

simple individual self-interest.¹⁸ The passage is an extended consideration of efforts without virtue to rise well beyond immediate material needs to possess splendid and useless possessions. Nor, suggests Smith, is it immediate self-interest or material needs *per se* that first drives men's propensity to exchange, to initially divide their labor, and then to endlessly acquire. It is rather that most social of desires: "to persuade," and above all to persuade others to admire us.¹⁹ And though the efforts of the poor man's son bring him to a splenetic end, Smith suggests the trick of the Imagination, "this deception" of Nature, is important as it drives him and others like him to acquisitiveness, even avariciousness, all the while working unintendedly to advance the common wealth of the nation as it "rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind."²⁰ This too provides a look at the social origins and impact of liberal political economy, though it is truly shaped in Britain by Smith's classical economic successors.

All this is simply to suggest that Rosenblatt's account of the French contributors to this history might have been supplemented and strengthened in the area of political economy through a greater reach across the channel. The nineteenth-century classical political economists of Britain—principally T.R. Malthus, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill—followed and significantly recast Smith's thinking and moved consideration of the interdependence between politics and political economy not only in more democratic directions, but also in more questionable ones in the form of Britain's New Poor Law and/or its Imperial policies. All contributed to the emerging discourse of political liberalism, and Mill discussed its political potential and limitations quite explicitly. Interestingly, Rosenblatt's account stresses that Mill was engaged in a European discussion about liberalism. True enough; indeed his largeness of view and willingness to engage with French events and the theories of thinkers such as Comte and Tocqueville was unusual for his time. Yet his development of his political economy was embedded in thoroughly distinctive British debates and quarrels. Each of the British classical political economists attempted, like Smith, to integrate considerations of wider participation in both Britain's political and economic life into one coherent and analytic discourse in ways that the state-driven or oeconomic theorists who had preceded them had not. All have been characterized by both contemporary liberal critics and defenders as advocates of *laissez-faire*, but none were champions of an unregulated market *tout court*, nor were they the moral purveyors of a possessive individualism, nor the architects of an unleashed economic theory of capitalist democracy which placed consumers over labor in their model of its operation, nor were they predecessors of Hayek, whose legacy was rather more influenced by the Austrian neoclassical thought of Ludwig von Mises.

Were there room for more considerations in her account, this reader might ask for the British classical political economists to be situated within some of the more important and problematic elements of the lost history of liberalism which Rosenblatt so informatively presents. The notion that Britain was both the cradle of liberty and the source of the ills of modernity through its pioneering process of commercialization and then industrialization pervades the liberal tradition. Liberalism was in some ways a reaction to political disruptions on the continent, as Rosenblatt shows, but it was also a reaction to seminal events in Britain which helped to shape its historical trajectory in both political and economic thought.

¹⁸ Adam Smith, *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, 1759, eds. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), IV.I.8: 181.

¹⁹ Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, eds. R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael and P.G. Stein (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1978), B, 1766, sec. 221-222: 493-494.

²⁰ Smith, *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, 1759 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984), IV.1.9, 10: 183.

REVIEW BY CHERYL WELCH, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

American liberals are shocked and bewildered. Political structures and norms that seemed impregnable for a half century appear very likely—in Karl Marx’s phrase—“to melt into air.”²¹ Gone is the bipartisan consensus on the need to establish some version of a basic welfare state at home and on the rightness of participating in global institutions to create a liberal world order. Gone too is America’s smugness about its special relationship with Britain: the assumption that the two countries shared a uniquely liberal political tradition that inoculated their democracies from disruptive political forces at home and made them the tutors first of the defeated Axis powers, then of new post-colonial states, and finally of Eastern Europe. Indeed, forces still not clearly understood have upended the practice of Anglo-Saxon liberalism and paralyzed and polarized its politics.

Troubled times often clarify the theoretical stakes in politics, but today liberal theories appear to offer little guidance to the perplexed. As Helena Rosenblatt notes, “we are muddled about what we mean by liberalism. . . precluding any possibility of reasonable debate” (1). Thus, her lucid and learned narrative of liberalism’s “lost history” comes at a particularly opportune moment. And Rosenblatt is a wonderful narrator. She is liberal in the original sense of generous and civic-minded, able to convey complex matters in succinct prose, and skillful at synthesizing disparate sources into a sustained story.

Rosenblatt offers guidance in two senses for liberals who have lost their way. First, she hopes that a fuller understanding of liberalism’s history may offer resources to help contemporaries recalibrate and reorient their practice. Her method is a version of *Begriffsgeschichte*, a conceptual history that traces the ways in which the word ‘liberal’ has been used by adherents and critics in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, without indulging in anachronism or just-so stories.²² Above all, she tries to restore the moral aspirations, spiritual self-understandings, and sense of the public interest of those who began to call themselves liberal in the early nineteenth century. Though she aims “not to attack or defend liberalism” (2), the enterprise would be pointless without a belief that careful attention to heated battles over roads both taken and not taken will prompt us to be sensitive to possibilities unseen in the current polarized context. Second, Rosenblatt has an explanation for the swiftness of the disintegration of the post-war liberal consensus in the United States, suggesting that anti-totalitarian liberal thinkers inadvertently sealed themselves off from some of the keenest insights of their own tradition, thus impoverishing their discourse and inhibiting compromise by entrenching themselves in unnecessarily restrictive rights-based paradigms.

Let me first turn to Rosenblatt’s impressive reconstruction of the contentious quarrels that defined the history of liberalism. Much of her material will not be a surprise to intellectual historians, but her clear and challenging intellectual map is meant to “reset and stimulate the debate” (277) rather than to chart totally new territory. The following comments and queries are offered in the spirit of engaging in such debate.

What is most arresting in Rosenblatt’s narrative is the way in which a damning picture of liberalism—the joint product of critiques from the religious right and the socialist left—comes into focus early on and is endlessly re-cycled. Foes have long painted liberalism as a philosophy that valorized soulless atomistic individuals who are intent on maximizing their own self-interest without regard for patriotism, civic virtue, or social justice. Against this portrait, Rosenblatt reconstructs the views of a host of nineteenth-century European liberals on moral education, personal character, the duties of citizenship, the need for fairness, and the role of religion. She implicitly asks us to mine this rich history both for cautionary tales and for potentially inspiring lessons in confronting difficult political problems with theoretical creativity and acuity.

²¹ The Communist Manifesto, Chapter one, Marx-Engels Internet librar , <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm>.

²² The two millennia before the Enlightenment are treated in a mere twenty pages and there is little discussion of contemporary liberal political theory, so the phrase “From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century” in the title is a bit misleading.

In the case of liberalism's collusion in the exclusion of women, its enthusiastic empire-building, and its rather widespread adoption of racist eugenics—all of which are acknowledged frankly here—Rosenblatt reads this history as a caution about the ease with which liberal values can be subverted, though she suggests that there are also resources for self-correction. But in the case of three deep quarrels within liberalism that she chronicles—between democracy and liberalism, between theories of the market and liberalism, and between religion and liberalism—she looks backward for inspiration rather than for warnings. If common theoretical ground was found by earlier liberals—for example, if German theologians could launch 'liberal Christianity,' if a Catholic liberal could endorse and even coin the term 'liberal democracy,' or if socialist liberals could plausibly lay claim to the left's quest for social justice—then the 'L' word can accommodate and perhaps help bridge deep contemporary antinomies. But this history of past quarrels, as all good histories, prompts skeptical questions about how and why we are to take heart. It also raises questions about whether cultural inflections in the languages that liberals speak pose deeper barriers to the project of reconstructing a capacious European/American liberal tradition than Rosenblatt perhaps imagines.

Let me give just one example of the difficulty of focusing on liberalism as a common legacy that offers the conceptual resources for renewal: the persistent French discomfort with the label. Not only the enemies of liberals, but liberals themselves, have absorbed the negative caricatures of liberalism that Rosenblatt reveals. One of the boldest claims in her book is that liberalism owes its origins to the French Revolution, that some of the most profound and influential thinkers in the history of liberalism were French, indeed that France "invented liberalism" (3). She skillfully organizes her narrative around eruptions of contentious political debates in France, Germany, England, and the U.S. that were prompted by events in France: the revolutions of 1789, 1830, 1848, and 1870. The puzzle is: why have most French thinkers largely rejected the label of 'liberal' for the last 150 years, even while celebrating a range of political practices that are arguably liberal? Today, for example, France's economic elites and politicians have proved no less willing than their European counterparts to adopt the principles of economic neo-liberalism. However, since French public opinion is strikingly negative towards the discourse of globalization, identifying it with liberalism run amuck, such globalizers often refuse to recognize their own practice, engaging in what has been termed "globalization by stealth."²³ Or as Pierre Rosanvallon has termed such evasive impulses in French political culture, a "penchant for a reformism that dares not speak its name."²⁴

Rosenblatt argues that the narrowing and belittling of French liberalism was in some ways the artifact of the belated French rejection of totalitarianism in the 1970s, exemplified in the influential works of the historian François Furet. Furet re-interpreted the French Revolution as a proto-totalitarian phenomenon and viewed the post-revolutionary French liberal tradition for the most part as a flawed and failed attempt to face the real theoretical challenges inherent in this terrifying and clarifying 'moment.'²⁵ Even as liberals like Furet rediscovered the political history of the nineteenth century, they inadvertently restricted our ability to see its relevance and furthered the truncation of the liberal tradition by constantly holding it up to an Anglo-American mirror; if they admired thinkers like Benjamin Constant, it was because they mistakenly interpreted him through this individualist lens. But I suggest that the marginalization of French liberalism goes much deeper and is more pervasive. For example, the attempts at a 'third way' between socialism and liberalism were in many ways distinctive in France.

In her chapter on "Two Liberalisms?," Rosenblatt is struck by the similarities among theorists in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Germany, England, the U.S., and France, who attempted to marry liberal and socialist principles.

²³ Philip H. Gordon and Sophie Meunier, *The French Challenge: Adapting to Globalization* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2001).

²⁴ Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Demands of Liberty: Civil Society in France Since the Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) 264.

²⁵ The seminal work is François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) ; François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

She argues that they did so for moral reasons, thus showing their continuity with earlier thinkers who “[f]rom the very inception of liberalism, . . . saw their cause as a moral one” (233). Such liberals, she says, did not care if they were mistaken for socialists. Note, however, that this current in France, exemplified in writers focused on social justice such as Léon Bourgeois and Charles Gide, *did* care if they were mistaken for liberals. They were more comfortable with terms like solidarist (Bourgeois) or Christian socialist or cooperativist (Gide) than socialist liberal.²⁶ Only in England did the mainstream liberal tradition allow the socialist current to carry it into new waters. In France republicans and socialists were sometimes willing to open themselves up to a carefully circumscribed ‘ethical’ version of liberalism, but their self-image is that of social thinkers who endorse ideas about the sanctity of the individual and of property only after these ideas have been purged of ‘liberal’ distortions.

My point is not that there is no similarity in ideas between ‘socialist liberals’ and ‘liberal socialists’, but only that the discourse in France had to overcome a much deeper resistance and hostility. Due to the persistent political failures that Rosenblatt concedes but does not fully explore, the legacy of her exemplary French liberals was marginalized and mistrusted. The language of nineteenth-century French liberalism was widely perceived to depend on a theoretical position that obtusely ignored the pain of the poorest citizens or invoked the language of rationalism and the public good to mask its soulless collaboration with oligarchical power.

The deep legacy of this distrust might be usefully explored by considering the position of Pierre Rosanvallon himself, perhaps the most interesting theorist of the travails of the post-Revolutionary political project in France and a figure who explicitly embraces the theoretical project of bridging liberalism and democracy as well as the ‘two liberalisms’ of which Rosenblatt reminds us. Excavating parliamentary debates, forgotten pamphlets, and minor legal and political texts, Rosanvallon has striven to uncover the assumptions and premises inherent in past political conversations, and to show how this discursive legacy has interacted with social history. Avoiding Furet’s tendency to defer to Anglo/American superiority and delving ever deeper into the nuances of primarily French conversations, he has produced an impressive body of work on the French transition to democracy in the nineteenth century.²⁷

Compelling to those who want to use historical work to clarify the possibilities of a more inclusive liberalism, Rosanvallon’s position nevertheless remains elusive and difficult to unpack. As a student of Furet, he acknowledges that French political development since the Revolution reveals an exceptional weakness: a “tradition of centralization and the permanent illiberal temptation stemming from the absolutization of popular sovereignty and the state’s claim to institute and instruct society.”²⁸ He argues that this internal contradiction was not overcome until the silent revolution of the 1890’s, in which French associations, expressing the plurality and differences of civil society, became normalized in practice if not in theory. Associations mediated between the individual and the state and implicitly realigned France with some liberal democratic norm. Yet even Rosanvallon is uncomfortable terming this indigenous French development as a potential reconciliation

²⁶ Gide consistently used ‘liberal’ in the disparaging sense of a person who believed in the utopian theory of classical laissez-faire and avoided the term for his own commitments to cooperative associationism. See, for example, his usage throughout *A History of Economic Doctrines from the Time of the Physiocrats to the Present Day* (Boston: DC Heath, 1915), written with Charles Rist. Gide interpreted his own theory as a break with, rather than an amendment of, liberalism. Bourgeois was willing to call himself a liberal socialist only in passing and with some bravado. Or at least that is how I interpret the discussion that Rosenblatt references in Alfred Croiset and Léon Bourgeois, *Essai d’une philosophie de la solidarité: conférence et discussions* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1907) 34.

²⁷ See Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen: Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (1992); *Le peuple introuvable: Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (1998); and *La démocratie inachevée: Histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France* (2000). *The Demands of Liberty* is a translation of a fourth volume following on this trilogy: *Le Modèle politique français: la société civile contre le jacobinisme, de 1789 à nos jours* (2004).

²⁸ Rosanvallon, *Demands of Liberty*, 3.

with its liberal heritage; rather it is held up as evidence of the possibility of approximating an elusive ideal: a way to overcome and escape the pathologies of a purely economic liberalism or a rationalist technocratic liberalism intent on state-building.

The idea that social progressives should distrust the versions of common interest proposed by both laissez-faire theorists and rationalizing policy elites is hardly distinctively French. But it is something of a French idiosyncrasy to equate those dangers so completely with an internally incoherent liberalism. Indeed, insofar as Rosenvallón finds muted and cautious historical inspiration for contemporary social reform, it is among the solidarists and sociologists who also were uncomfortable in liberal company. It is not insignificant that Rosanvallón contrasts ‘illiberal’ Jacobin democracy not with ‘liberal’ democracy, but with either ‘balanced democracy’ (the flawed achievement of the Third Republic) or ‘complex democracy’ (an ideal form, yet to be realized, in which the ‘social’ achieves true political representation without denying its ontological pluralism). The American editors’ choice to translate *Le modèle politique française* as *The Demands of Liberty* is something of an ironic commentary on the gulf between Anglophone and Francophone sensibilities around the discourse of liberty. French liberalism, it appears, may only be advanced by stealth, rather than by efforts to “recover, understand, and embrace its core values” (277), as Rosenblatt hopes.

Let me now return to Rosenblatt’s claim in her introduction that “[t]he idea that liberalism is an Anglo-American tradition concerned primarily with the protection of individual rights and interests” (4) is both false and a very recent development in the history of liberalism. In the Epilogue she hazards an explanation for this theoretical turn and its accompanying amnesia about liberalism’s more complicated and cosmopolitan roots. Rosenblatt posits that Cold-war liberals, because of a perceived need to exonerate themselves from the widespread charge that liberalism had weakened society from within and thus contributed to the rise of totalitarianism, seized on the individualist and rights-based aspects of their inheritance. Insistence on a bedrock commitment to ‘negative liberty’ strengthened their anti-totalitarian *bona fides*. Fear of metastasizing state power led to a reanimation of what were basically flawed economic laissez-faire versions of liberalism. These ‘atomistic individualist’ accounts, however, inadvertently gave new life to charges that liberalism was godless, selfish, and rootless—charges that liberals had been struggling to refute since the French Revolution.

There is certainly a kernel of truth to this account, but to say that the pedigree of a distinctive Anglo-American rights-based liberalism can be found in an over-correction of totalitarianism is surely an overstatement. The image of the English (and then Anglo-American) ‘other’ is a trope indigenous to the European liberal territory Rosenblatt examines, at least from the time of Montesquieu. Indeed, the contrast was particularly favored by liberals such as Germaine de Staël, Constant, and François Guizot, who were fascinated by the British counter example, and by Alexis de Tocqueville and Édouard de Laboulaye, who re-fashioned and popularized the Anglo-American other. Those portraits pointed admiringly to the respect for individual rights and an independent judiciary, and even to the ways in which theories of self-interest and individual rights could be combined with public interestedness in practice. As Rosenblatt recognizes, with the rise of the British empire and then the emergence of the United States as a world power in the early twentieth century, the implicit claim of a superior and distinctive Anglo-Saxon liberalism—whether libertarian or progressive—was domesticated by Americans as a variation on the “American creed” (264). But British and European liberals, whether admirers or detractors, collaborated much earlier in the creation of a host of English Whig or Anglo-American ‘others’ who allegedly demonstrated the political effects of ‘individualism’ and not just ‘individuality.’ It would be illuminating to hear more from Rosenblatt on the topic of the very long shadow that England cast on the history of liberalism.

A second reservation about Rosenblatt’s account of the origins and consequent vulnerabilities of contemporary liberalism arises with regard to her assertion, without sufficient explanation, of a link between the criticisms of liberalism made by such post-war religious thinkers as Reinhold Niebuhr, Waldemar Gurian, and Jacques Maritain and the turn to rights talk by cold war liberals who had allegedly been thrown on the defensive. This turn, she notes, culminated in the Rawlsian revolution, in which “[t]here was no need to worry about overcoming man’s selfish impulses. It had become okay to be selfish” (273). In contrast to her sympathetic treatment of historical liberals, Rosenblatt takes her description of contemporary rights-based liberalism mostly from its enemies, rather than considering their own self-understandings. Certainly a preoccupation with personhood and character, with high-minded idealism, and with liberal versions of community and social justice are not absent from contemporary theories that define themselves as working within a liberal paradigm. To imply that liberalism is

not currently an “ethical project” (128) is a bit mystifying. It is particularly misleading regarding John Rawls himself, who contemplated becoming a minister, wrote his Princeton undergraduate thesis on theological ethics, and continued his dialogue with Christian ethicists throughout his later career. Rawls’s thought has persuasively been interpreted as a subtle manifestation of the very liberal Protestant theology that Rosenblatt recovers in this book; his ethical and political theory stemmed from a naturalized Christian ethics and psychology premised on universal community.²⁹ Rather than their adversary, then, John Rawls was the heir of the Germans who invented liberal theology and of Constant who developed it and tried to draw out its political implications. It is not immediately obvious that Rawls’s liberal religious ancestors, who drew even more directly on the centrality of Christianity, can do a better job than contemporary Rawlsians in accommodating deep religious pluralism and value differences: among the greatest challenges to the Eurocentric liberal tradition in the twenty-first century.

Despite these reservations and queries, or perhaps because of them, we have cause to be grateful to Helena Rosenblatt for writing an intellectual history of liberalism that is at once accessible and deeply thought-provoking. She urges contemporary liberals to make sure that linguistic barriers do not become barricades and she pushes them to grapple—yet again—with the intractable but unavoidable tensions inherent in attempting to create a free way of life within a moral community. No message could be more urgent and timely.

²⁹ See, for example, P. MacKenzie Bok, “To the Mountaintop Again: The Early Rawls and Post-Protestant Ethics in Postwar America,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14:1 (April 2017): 153-185.

RESPONSE BY HELENA ROSENBLATT, THE GRADUATE CENTER, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Let me begin by thanking Daniel Steinmetz Jenkins and Diane Labrosse for organizing this roundtable and Gianna Englert for her excellent introduction. I am especially grateful to the five reviewers who took the time to read my book and offer such thought-provoking comments. It is an honor to be critiqued by scholars who are experts in the field and from whose work I have learned so much.

I am thrilled by my reviewers' warm endorsements and enthusiasm. I must admit to taking special pride in the fact that they found the book an enjoyable read. I am also pleased to have it described as "challenging" and even "intriguing." One of my goals was precisely to challenge preconceived notions of what liberalism *is* and how its history tends to be told. I did this, as my respondents all appreciate (though with some reservations), by adopting a new method of inquiry. It is this new method that led me to some often surprising discoveries.

My book is a conceptual history of liberalism. But it is also a special kind of conceptual history, namely one based on a *word history*.

When I began the project that became this book, I did not foresee that I would adopt this 'word history' approach. When I thought of liberalism, like so many others, I thought of a canon of 'great thinkers,' who collectively made up a 'liberal tradition.' I planned to write about their thought, perhaps devoting a chapter to each of the most important theorists. But I soon encountered a set of questions and contradictions. Who should I include in my canon and who should I leave out? Many today call John Locke a founder, but others choose very different thinkers, such as Thomas Hobbes or even Machiavelli. One recent scholar places emphasis on early Christian philosophers and canon lawyers.³⁰ How can these all be part of the same tradition when they are so very different? How was I to begin my story?

Ultimately, of course, how you tell the history of liberalism depends on how you define 'liberalism.' And this realization led me to additional problems and questions. Why is it, for example, that in colloquial parlance, liberalism means free markets and 'small government' in Europe and in much of the rest of the world, while it means almost the opposite in the United States, namely regulation and 'big government'? Why do so-called 'libertarians' speak of a 'classical' or 'orthodox' liberalism that they claim is more authentic than that of today? As I write this, some liberals are describing themselves as 'democratic socialists,' while others find this term to be contradictory.

Meanwhile, scholars who study liberalism, or use the word, admit that it is a vague and slippery concept, hard to define. Yet they then proceed to stipulate and use personal definitions that often conflict with those of others. As an historian, I find this deeply problematic. When they adopt such an approach, scholars are in fact projecting their own views on the past. They are not telling the history of liberalism; they are explaining their own views with a few selected references to the past. Picking thinkers and ideas out of their context and lining them up in chronological order to support one's own views does not constitute doing history to me –and it results different, conflicting or at least confusing definitions and histories of 'liberalism,' a term that essential to our political discussions.

So, the question I grappled with was how to write a history of liberalism when there is little agreement on what it is. I did not want just to stipulate my own definition, choose my own canon of thinkers, and do what others were doing.

³⁰ Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism*, Belknap Press, 2014.

For a while, I was quite stumped. Eventually, however, I was drawn to the methods of conceptual history and found several models to emulate and adapt to my purposes.³¹ I decided to trace the history of what the word and concept of ‘liberalism’ meant to the people who used it. First, I would consider what ‘liberal’ meant two thousand years ago and how that meaning changed over time. Then, I would examine when the word ‘liberalism’ was coined, why it was coined, and what it meant to the people who used it. Finally, I would trace the changes of the meaning of the term over time. This approach made me less concerned with the philosophical *sources* and ‘great thinkers’ of the so-called ‘liberal tradition’ than with the *meanings* and *uses* of the concept over time. I wished to identify important *moments* in the evolution of the concept and the principal debates that occurred during these moments. In so doing, I learned that historical circumstances and events, like the French successive revolutions (1789, 1830, 1848, and 1871), the effects of industrialization, and the American Civil War were at least as important in the conception and evolution of ‘liberalism’ as any one individual or text.

A conceptual approach based on word history, I hoped, would reset our thinking and encourage debate on new and less anachronistic foundations. By telling the story in this new way, I also hoped to expose the often ideological and politically motivated accounts of the past propagated from the middle of the twentieth century and still reigning today.

One of the most surprising discoveries I made is that ‘liberalism,’ as a word and cluster of ideas, emerged in France in the wake of the French Revolution. It was coined in or around 1810. Among its first advocates were the political actors and theorists, Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël. Indeed, for most of the nineteenth century, liberalism was widely seen as a *French* doctrine, closely associated with that country’s successive revolutions. Second, Germany, which is today most often described as the incubator and purveyor of an *illiberal* tradition, played a huge role in liberalism’s evolution. As it turns out, British and American contributions were less important and more reactive than seminal. It was only in the middle of the twentieth century that the idea of an ‘Anglo-American liberal tradition’ emerged and such importance placed on thinkers like Thomas Hobbes or John Locke.

Somewhat surprisingly given my argument, several of my respondents nevertheless prod me to explain why I didn’t spend more time on certain thinkers, mainly British ones. Daniel Gordon wonders why I didn’t discuss John Locke more. Shannon Stimson suggests that I might have added depth and nuance to my argument if I had discussed classical political economists like T.R. Malthus and David Ricardo. Gordon also asks why I didn’t include James Madison, novelists like Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, and George Sand, or the utopian socialist, Charles Fourier. Annelien de Dijn writes about François Guizot, the French thinker and statesman, in a way that suggests that I might have dwelt longer on him.

These are questions that I grappled with during the course of my research and writing. I thought long and hard about which authors to include and how far to pursue intellectual *sources*. It is certainly true that in the finished product I “skipped over” (Gordon’s phrase) many important contributors to the history of liberalism. But my treatment does not pretend to be exhaustive nor could it possibly have been. I offered a “principled” basis for my selection, as Gordon also notes.

How one should choose among so many possible influences and sources is an excellent question worth discussing and I would be happy if my book triggered such a debate. In my case, how should I have balanced the contributions of British thinkers, actors, texts and events with the contributions of French, Spanish, German, Italian, American thinkers, actors, texts and events, which were also important, as I think my book shows? After all, Benjamin Constant, one of the first in France to use the word “liberal” in a political sense, and widely recognized at his time as one of the first proponents of ‘liberalism,’ most likely read John Locke and certainly read Adam Smith, but was also steeped in the writings of Montesquieu, Voltaire and the theorists of the French *politique* tradition. He was exposed to the thinking of Clermont Tonnerre, a deputy in the French National Assembly known for his support for a religious toleration more expansive than Locke’s, and to that of Abbé Sieyès, whose writings were widely disseminated in the wake of the Revolution and, of course, of Jacques Necker, the father of Madame de Staël, Constant’s lifelong intellectual partner. He was also influenced by many

³¹ A notable example is Jörn Leonhart’s *Liberalismus. Zur historischen Semantik eines europäischen Deutungsmusters* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2001).

counter-revolutionary thinkers and actors as well as religious writers of various kinds who are virtually forgotten today. He spent time in Scotland, England, and Germany, where he read massively in religious and historical sources and met a variety of intellectuals and political leaders. Madame de Staël travelled through central Europe all the way to Russia, meeting many of the most prominent literary and political thinkers and writers along the way. Married to the Swedish ambassador to France, she corresponded with Swedes, and met with Swedish liberals during an eight-month stay in Stockholm during which she hosted an influential salon. Among these possible influences, how should one choose, what specific ideas from each should one emphasize, and how much time and space should one devote to each?

Such questions, interesting and important as they are, inevitably brought me back to the problem I wished to avoid at the outset, namely telling the story of liberalism through a list of ‘influential’ thinkers based on what almost necessarily would have been a pre-conceived notion of what liberalism *is* and what its main concepts *are*. Intellectual historians know how difficult it is to identify ‘influence’ and ‘significance’ without anachronism. Again, my respondents are certainly right to raise the issue. And if my book alerts readers to the problems involved in choosing sources and influences, it will have accomplished one of my goals.

I decided to adopt a method by which I would focus more on how the concept ‘liberalism’ was defined, debated and redefined, than on its *sources*, and I selected thinkers who participated in this process. Of course, the list of thinkers I chose is not exhaustive. I selected what I thought were good examples of the main points of view being debated. Perhaps the best way to explain what my book does is to say that it tracks the tradition of making claims about what ‘true liberalism’ is. As it turns out, making claims and counter-claims about liberalism has a long history and involves many individuals other than the classic ones we tend to emphasize. I followed where my numerous and multifarious sources led me. I was quite surprised and excited by what I found and read massively to arrive at—and confirm—my conclusions.

This does not mean that I disagree with Cheryl Welch about the “very long shadow that England cast on the history of liberalism.” And, in fact, I do discuss, at some length, quite a few British thinkers and actors, for example John Stuart Mill, T.H. Green, John Hobson, Leonard Hobhouse, and Lord Acton. I write about William Gladstone and other members of the British Liberal Party as well as their British adversaries. I acknowledge the importance of the British constitution and economy as models and anti-models. The incontrovertible fact, however, is that ‘liberalism’ was born not with seventeenth century political theorists like John Locke, or American founding fathers like James Madison, or with political economists like Adam Smith, but with early nineteenth century thinkers such as Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël. And Constant and de Staël reacted to problems triggered by the French Revolution. Whatever they read, they filtered through their experiences with the Revolution and the issues it raised. Half a century later, the problems caused by industrialization and the example of a group of German thinkers who are quite forgotten today caused ‘liberalism’ to be updated and changed. I might have included other individuals who participated in the debates about ‘true liberalism,’ but I don’t think it would have altered my conclusions or changed my story.

Let us consider, for example, Charles Fourier, who is mentioned by Gordon. I could certainly have discussed him. But Fourier’s *Nouveau monde industriel* (1829-1830), in which he uses the term ‘liberalism’ twenty-five times, only duplicates the arguments I discuss in chapter three. Fourier makes no mention of Britain or of any British thinker. He identifies Benjamin Constant as “one of the leaders [chefs] of liberalism.” He laments the interminable debates going on about “true liberalism” and accuses some liberals of propagating a “false liberalism.” Their liberalism is false because it is insensitive to the needs of the poor. He writes that liberals like François Guizot have become venal and oligarchical. They only pretend to be “friends of the people,” while in reality caring nothing about them. They care only about “words” and not about “things.” Fourier’s point is that liberalism needs to be updated and become more socialist.³² Because of his fiery language and

³² Charles Fourier, *Le Nouveau monde industriel et sociétaire, ou Invention du procédé d’industrie attrayante et naturelle distribuée en séries passionnées*, Paris: Bossange Père, 1829-1830, 52, 286, 362, 459, 492-93, 525, 553-554, 563, 575, 592-593, 617, 622, 635, 644-45, 652, 656, 659-61, 664

passionate expressions, a discussion of Fourier would certainly have added color to my narrative, but it would not have added to my argument in any substantial way, nor undermined it.

While I do not discuss Fourier, I do discuss preachers, theologians, and religious writers of different denominations, whose contributions to the history of liberalism were essential but are neglected today in standard accounts of liberalism. By adding their voices to my story, I show, as Bryan Garsten rightly notes, that, throughout its history, liberalism has always been involved in a lively dialogue with religion and that “liberal Christianity,” as it was often called, correlated closely with liberal politics. Religiously ‘liberal’ thinkers, when included in the history of liberalism, underscore a central argument of my book, namely that liberals were never interested in just the defense of individual rights, limited government, or fair procedures. They were also deeply concerned with questions of morals and citizenship. Over the course of its history, liberalism always understood itself as being centered on a set of core values: not just individual freedoms, but also generosity, tolerance, and political engagement, all of which were interrelated. Liberalism is and always has been an ‘ethical project’ and propounded as such.

I certainly did not mean to say that liberals today lack public spirit or compassion, as one or two of my interlocutors suggests I do. Nor would I deny that individual rights can be seen as moral or aspirational. What I *do* say is that after the Second World War, liberals began to *redefine* liberalism as an individualistic and rights-oriented tradition and that by privileging the protection of individual rights over other commitments, they downgraded liberalism’s goals. The version of liberalism that emerged in the late twentieth-century, most obviously in John Rawls’s philosophy, is, in my opinion, an impoverished one.³³

A final question I would like to address is whether my book is a defense of liberalism. The answer is both yes and no. I believe that, when examined in the context of their time, liberals were generally on the ‘right side’ of contemporary debates. I find much to be admired in their goals and principles as they developed over time. But I also see much that was reprehensible in their history. I certainly do not deny what de Dijn calls liberalism’s “unattractive baggage” and, indeed, offer many of examples of the dark side of liberalism. For example, I give evidence of the sexism, racism, enthusiasm about imperialism, and belief in eugenics of many liberals. I talk about their elitism, hostility to democracy and insensitivity to the needs of the poor. Therefore, I think it somewhat misleading to say, as Welch does, that I look to history “for inspiration rather than for warnings.” I do, however, believe that liberalism has the resources within its rich history to renew itself. It can do so by drawing on the better aspects of that history and by updating itself once again, as it has in the past.

To conclude, I agree with Gordon that ‘liberalism,’ however defined, cannot unify our splintered political culture. As de Dijn rightly notes, words and definitions are not enough. But I do not quite understand what Gordon means when he writes that we live in a “post-liberal age.” Liberalism has been under attack since its inception and has been written off as dead or dying many times before. Does the ‘semantic sprawl’ or plasticity of the term render it useless? I would say that it is not more useless today than it has been in the past. Perhaps it is precisely liberalism’s plasticity that constitutes its staying power. In any case, I think it is highly unlikely that we will stop arguing about ‘liberalism.’ I just hope that my book encourages people to know its history and to think about what they mean when they speak about it.

³³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).