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Annelien de Dijn. ***Freedom: An Unruly History.*** Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780674988330 (hardcover, $35.00).

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Introduction by Cheryl B. Welch, Harvard University

Annelien de Dijn's publications are challenging, but not because they are inaccessible or ambiguous. Indeed, her work combines an historian's attention to complex sources with stylistic lucidity in a way that seems effortless but is quite unusual in academic writing. De Dijn's work challenges in a different sense. It boldly rearranges readers' preconceptions, jolting them into a different way of viewing familiar matters.[1] Thus her writing has a virtue that is all too rare: helping readers to clarify and articulate their disagreements with her, and thus their own views of the matter. Her important new book could not have a more ambitious canvas—the western idea of freedom from the Greeks to the present. It is to be welcomed, as the insightful reviewers in this roundtable note, for providing not just an impressive array of historical materials, but a provocative narrative that stimulates readers to review and rethink—and sometimes to refute.

De Dijn argues that alarmed reactions to the French Revolution precipitated a rupture with, and displacement of, a 2000-year consensus on the meaning of freedom that had been forged by the ancient Greeks and Romans, revived in the Renaissance, and adopted and adapted by those who made the Atlantic revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century. That idea was that liberty meant control over the way in which one was governed; it was thus a *democratic* conception of liberty. In contrast, the post-revolutionary period allegedly saw the birth of a new and opposite understanding. Liberty came to mean the enjoyment of private independence and personal rights against the collective power of government, and especially of democratic government. Influential but never wholly persuasive in the long nineteenth century, the modern view of freedom, according to de Dijn, triumphed during the struggles of the Cold War and remains dominant today. A form of elitist liberalism, with an individualistic view of freedom that is all too compatible with hegemonic capitalism, this view was contested by "radicals, socialists, populists and progressives," but their voices were "drowned out" by a tsunami of thinkers who equated liberty with minimal, rather than popular, government (5).

De Dijn's book is likely to provoke widespread discussion because her historical argument intersects with two contemporary intellectual trends, both internally messy, that cast doubt on the assumption that liberal democracy is the normative *terminus ad quem* of western history. After a period in which the hybrids "liberal democracy" and "democratic liberalism" appeared to almost everyone as the happy downstream destination of a difficult twentieth-century political history, this allegedly fortuitous union is now beset by critics on all sides. Democrats and liberals are both on the hunt for independent genealogies.

Some proponents of democracy insist that it is a deeply engrained pattern of thought and emotion with its own powerful force field. They are skeptical of efforts to portray the discourse of liberal democracy with its emphasis on "individual human rights" as the precious legacy of several centuries of progressive striving. This form of liberal triumphalism, it is argued, obscures the possibilities for radical reform in our own era and distorts our historical judgments of past radical and democratic movements. Moreover, such movements, when viewed retrospectively through a Cold War lens, have often been interpreted as forerunners to totalitarianism and as "problems" for liberalism rather than as political efforts at emancipation that need to be understood on their own terms.[2] De Dijn's account in *Freedom: An Unruly History* lends support to those who wish to validate a democratic tradition that is theoretically separate from liberalism. If a distinctively

[1] See Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), which confronts the assumption that French liberalism was an ideology primarily generated and welcomed by middle class elites. See also her wide-ranging and sharply observed article disputing the dominant understanding of Montesquieu: De Dijn, "Was Montesquieu a Liberal Republican," *The Review of Politics* 76 (2014): 21-41.

[2] See the influential work of Samuel Moyn, both popular and scholarly: among other titles, The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) and *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018). This democratic vein is noticeable among many younger scholars. See, for example, Kevin Duong, *The Virtues of Violence: Democracy against Disintegration in Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

democratic form of freedom can be shown to have both ancient roots and an endangered modern legacy, liberalism becomes the upstart, bereft of insight into the rich history of collective striving for liberty.

On the other hand, the political ascendance of what de Dijn calls modern liberalism, both in its libertarian free-market form and in its more state-friendly varieties, has been accompanied by an enormous interest among political theorists and intellectual historians in specifically liberal genealogies. Such accounts aim to reconstruct the tradition—or traditions—of liberalism, before and after its marriage to democracy. These efforts sometimes take the form of attempts to identify the sources of "classical" liberalism, either to praise it or to bury it.[3] They can also take the form of more purely historical efforts to untangle the contingent clashes, reconciliations, and mergers between liberal and democratic ideas. The reviewers in this roundtable fall into the latter category. Their own work illuminates the complicated historical encounters between liberalism and democracy, especially in the post-Revolutionary period.[4] All admire the book's daring narrative sweep, but they raise a number of concerns about contrary or complicating evidence that de Dijn may too quickly brush aside in her reconstruction of the history of freedom. To adopt Gianna Englert's phrase, they "wish for more 'unruliness' in its story."

The disagreements, which are illuminated by de Dijn's thoughtful and engaged response to her critics, hinge on the allegedly sharp dichotomy between an old notion of democratic freedom and a new conception of liberal freedom. The figures that de Dijn puts in the former category, as she sometimes admits, in fact had a place for private independence and rights. Helena Rosenblatt and William Selinger argue that de Dijn's admission that the Greeks valorized personal security and independence, and saw self-government as its guarantee, muddies her own thesis. Rosenblatt and Englert question her attempt to claim Locke for the democratic conception of freedom. Moreover, those claimed for a democratic conception of freedom were sometimes opposed to popular rule and favored notions of balance against the mob. De Dijn and her reviewers differ over whether "freedom" for a figure like Cicero was one of the elements to be balanced in a constitutional regime or was thought to result from the proper balance of elements. On the other hand, the nineteenth-century figures that she counts among the unambiguous proponents of modern liberty, including Benjamin Constant himself, from whom she appropriates the distinction between ancient and modern, were not as intrinsically hostile to democracy as she asserts. All the reviewers, though for different reasons, dispute the claim that Constant's was an essentially "private" or "civil" view of freedom.[5]

Finally, de Dijn could have included more figures who blur the bright line between freedom as "self-rule" and freedom as "guarantees against misrule." As the reviewers point out, she does not examine in detail either the natural rights tradition or the long history of constitutionalism. On the former, Rosenblatt, for example, recalls the pervasive influence of the natural rights tradition (in particular the works of Samuel von Pufendorf, Jean Barbeyrac, and Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui) in spreading a view of freedom as obedience to law rather than as popular self-rule. On the latter, Englert notes that the

[3]Among the praisers are public intellectuals like William Kristol, as well as many scholars associated with the Institute of Humane Studies (https://theihs.org/) or the Liberty Fund. For the Liberty Fund's useful "online library of liberty," see here https://oll.libertyfund.org/. Among the buriers, see Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) and Adrian Vermeule, "Beyond Originalism," *The Atlantic* (31 March 2020); https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/common-good-constitutionalism/609037/, and "A Christian Strategy," *First Things* (November 2017); https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/11/a-christian-strategy. William Selinger shrewdly notes in his comments below that in some ways de Dijn's account echoes Deneen's reconstruction of modern liberalism, but from the left rather than from the religious right.

[4] Most recently, Gianna Englert, *Democracy Deferred: French Liberalism and The Politics of Suffrage* (forthcoming); Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: from Ancient Rome to the Twenty-first Century*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); William Selinger, *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[5] For Englert's and Selinger's views of Constant, see their comments below. For Rosenblatt's position on the sources of "public liberty" in Constant, see her "Why Constant? A Critical View of the Constant Revival, *Modern Intellectual History* 1:3 (2004): 439-453, and *Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

"constitutional tradition. . . straddles de Dijn's two distinct models of freedom" and Selinger argues that "sheltering elites through written constitutions. . .[has] played a preponderant role throughout the Western tradition." Both are puzzled about why the constitutionalism of the American founders illustrates a democratic conception of freedom when so many of them explicitly attempted to curb democracy through constitutional mechanisms. Finally, Selinger wonders why the constitutionalism of the founders is labelled as inspired by democratic freedom, while later admirers of the U.S. constitution like Edouard de Laboulaye and Henry Maine are categorized as anti-democrats. To these one might add the rich legacy of medieval thought about constraints on political power. In its move from Rome to the Renaissance, *Freedom* leapfrogs over the Middle Ages. It seems, then, that post-Revolutionary liberals had many sources—moral, legal, and political—on which to draw in creating theories of representative government that validated a notion of freedom yet repudiated rule by the people. Therefore, de Dijn may overstate their dependence on a novel theory of civil freedom allegedly invented by counterrevolutionaries, adopted by liberals, and then launched into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Finally, it is worth pondering what follows from de Dijn's conclusion that hostility to democracy is an intrinsic element in modern liberalism, and that many self-described liberals' own assertions that their first-order hostility was (and is) not to popular agency, but rather to tyranny or despotism, amount to no more than smoke and mirrors. She ends her book with the hope that piercing this smokescreen in order to reveal the skewed vision and tainted roots of modern liberty may inspire contemporary actors to remember a different saga of freedom: the irrepressible collective longing of the demos, shunted aside again and again by elites and markets, to reclaim control over their lives. In a time of growing inequality and manifest injustice, this admonition that the invocation of modern liberty often "empowers privileged elites" is salutary.[6] One might question, however, whether de Dijn's references to a submerged democratic project understate the unruliness *within* the democratic view of freedom. Those who agree that freedom means self-rule by the people may disagree profoundly on the characteristics of a people or on what constitutes membership in a people, thus empowering their own privileged elites. Moreover, the rich and complicated history she relates can inspire different fears and hopes. We live in a world in which the practices of mass democracy have long favored the power of executives over assemblies. The rise of authoritarian populists has revived old fears of democratic Caesarism, i.e., fears of demagogic figures who claim a mandate from the people's will but willfully manipulate that mandate in their own interests. At the same time, the guardrails of liberal proceduralism and the norms of constitutional restraint that many assumed were permanently embedded in modern democratic regimes have been weakened or broken. If de Dijn's portrayal of a sharp conceptual gulf between liberal and democratic views of freedom is true, then we likely face a dangerously unstable and polarized future. But if her account overstates the historical and conceptual divide, then past attempts to chart a political destiny that reconciles a sincere belief in popular rule with a commitment to constitutional limits and individual rights—roads only partially imagined and never fully traveled—are also surely worth remembering.

Participants:

Annelien de Dijn is a professor of political and intellectual history at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Her book *Freedom: An Unruly History* traces the different meanings of freedom from Herodotus to the present and was awarded with the 2021 PROSE Prize in Philosophy by the American Association of Publishers. She is also the author of *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2008 and translated into Chinese by Sun Yat-sen University Press in 2018.

Cheryl Welch is retired Senior Lecturer in the Department of Government at Harvard University. 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 of *The Cambridge Companion to Tocqueville* (Cambridge University Press, 2006). Welch has also published numerous articles on liberalism, on nineteenth-century conceptions of social science, and on utilitarianism.

[6] See de Dijn's response to her reviewers.

Gianna Englert is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Southern Methodist University. She has research interests in the history of liberalism, particularly on issues of citizenship and the suffrage. She is currently completing a book manuscript on French liberals' responses to the progress of democracy.

Helena Rosenblatt is Professor of History, Political Science and French at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and the author, most recently, of *A Lost History of Liberalism from Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (2018).

William Selinger teaches the history of political thought at University College London. His first book, *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2019.

Review by Gianna Englert, Southern Methodist University

As Americans invoke their promised freedoms – more loudly each day as we approach the November 2020 election – Annelien de Dijn argues that our version of freedom is a fairly recent invention. In her *Freedom: An Unruly History,* de Dijn maintains that current understandings of the concept mark "a deliberate and dramatic rupture" with the long tradition of defining liberty in the West (1). Contemporary freedom, she notes, is about "being left alone," undisturbed by the reach of state power – a definition I will return to later in my comments. This view of freedom receives support from related ideals like individual rights, personal autonomy, and non-interference, all of which generally go unquestioned as the foundations of a free society.

But de Dijn contends that this definition would have been unrecognizable prior to the late eighteenth century. For over 2,000 years, people associated freedom not with limited government but with democratic control. Through places as varied as ancient Sparta and Revolutionary France and from thinkers as distinct as Cicero and Benedict Spinoza, de Dijn traces a democratic approach to freedom that culminated in the Atlantic revolutions. Later efforts of continental counterrevolutionaries, American Gilded Age liberals, and free-market economists papered over the legacy of democratic freedom by supplanting popular control with private independence.

De Dijn's very engaging achievement is the latest in the vein of *long durée* word history, akin to Helena Rosenblatt's *The Lost History of Liberalism*.[7] Rosenblatt's work reframed liberalism's past to challenge what the term has come to mean in the present. De Dijn's genealogy of freedom recasts liberals' contribution to the history of liberty. In her account, those who adopted the term 'liberal' to describe their politics were actually hostile to traditional ways of defining freedom. And though de Dijn's book (like Rosenblatt's) does not begin with an expressly normative purpose, we can find one in its method. By unearthing the contentious but forgotten history of a cherished political value, we might come to see its most current version as wanting (or at least contingent). In the book's final paragraph, de Dijn writes that "we would do well to remember that there is another side to the story of freedom" (345). While it is not entirely clear how 'remembering' would change present-day debates, de Dijn does suggest that political uses of freedom have strayed quite far from the word's definitional beginnings. Freedom, like liberalism, has become one of those 'weaponized' watchwords that by serving as all things to all people has sadly ceased to mean much at all (6). But the stakes of getting freedom right are high. In the height of a pandemic, we contend with defenses of personal freedom over public health and of private choice against a common good. Any hope for a productive conversation about where freedom begins and ends requires that we can agree on its meaning at all. Finding agreement is not de Dijn's stated goal, but her thesis urges us to reflect on what Western thought left behind – and might find again – in the shift away from democratic freedom.

For de Dijn, some of our confusion about the concept can be explain historically. As counterrevolutionaries co-opted freedom to resist mob rule, they consciously severed the idea from its democratic origins. To tell this story of separation, de Dijn impressively weaves the very visible canon of political thought with the actions of lesser-known but influential "cults of freedom" and sources like early modern dictionaries. She provides compelling clarity for what could have been a dizzying history spanning from Herodotus to CNN pundit Fareed Zakaria. Her approach highlights the "unruly" struggle to achieve freedom as self-rule, a "fighting concept" wielded for centuries by the relatively-weak *demos* against a powerful few (341).

Yet in the spirit of the book's subtitle, we might wish for more 'unruliness' in its story. My comments that follow are variations on that theme.

As de Dijn locates a fairly-clean break between ancient and modern freedom, her argument places democratic freedom almost exclusively on one side of the Atlantic revolutions (chapters 1-4) and finds its exemplars around every corner. This

[7] Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

approach yields bold but sometimes confusing interpretations of individual thinkers and entire traditions. For example, natural rights theorists Hugo Grotius and John Locke appear as a conservative absolutist – largely unconcerned with freedom at all – and a radical democrat respectively. (Among the natural rights thinkers, Thomas Hobbes presents a more complex case.) Dijn rightly combats the caricatured libertarian Locke, writing that civil liberty in *The Second Treatise* (1689) was "not about being able to do whatever you want without outside interference" (176). As Locke made clear, liberty is not license.[8]

Still, I was surprised that de Dijn's rejection of the *laissez-faire* Locke led her to endorse a Rousseauean democratic one. She writes that "Locke's emphasis on natural liberty and natural rights was, in other words, perfectly compatible with the classical, democratic conception of freedom – or to put it differently, Locke's understanding of freedom was pretty much indistinguishable from that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's" (217). But Lockean freedom, while tied to consent, was very different from the self-abnegation of Rousseau's general will. The Lockean commonwealth aimed at the protection of *private* property, not the avoidance of political mastery that occupied Rousseau in *The Social Contract* (1762). The title of Chapter XI of *The Second Treatise* explicitly reveals Locke's concern for "The *Extent* of Legislative Power." A free society, Locke wrote, requires that "the People may know their Duty," a clause that supports de Dijn's democratic reading, but that "the Rulers too are kept within their due bounds."[9] Locke's careful definition of tyranny was similarly framed in terms of unrestrained political power, for "wherever Law ends, Tyranny begins."[10] The question of "who governs" that de Dijn attributes to democratic freedom was not Locke's central question in *The Second Treatise*, which is a text dedicated more to the reach of civil power than to who is justified in bearing it.

Locke's place in the argument raises larger questions about the book's typology of freedom. Rather than a sharp "rupture" between self-rule and limited government, we can instead locate a range of definitions between the two poles of freedom. There are many definitions and expressions of freedom between the unrestricted ability to "do what you want" (217) and the participatory liberty exercised in the assembly or, in different form, by alienation to the general will. Locke's work is a case in point. As an expression of *constitutional freedom* – of a government of known rules, powers, and limits – liberty in *The Second Treatise* was neither openly anti-democratic like the later capacitarian claims of the doctrinaire liberal François Guizot, nor purely "negative" like the capitalist "free-for-all" linked to the economist Ludwig von Mises. Nor was such liberty reducible to popular control of institutions. The constitutional tradition – including Locke, founding father James Madison, and the republican theorist James Harrington, all of whom receive mention in different ways in the book – straddles de Dijn's two distinct models of freedom. Or to put my claim more boldly, constitutionalism offers *one notable alternative* to the book's distinct warring traditions of democratic and undemocratic freedom. De Dijn herself points to potential others: freedom as personal security (342), as quiet enjoyment (237), and as "a standing rule to live by" (176).

I raise this point because the terms 'constitution' and 'constitutionalism' rarely appear in the story, surprising omissions given de Dijn's expertise in eighteenth-century political thought and the figure of Baron de Montesquieu, who curiously also has no role to play in this history of freedom. Montesquieu might also complicate the book's binary of pre-revolutionary freedom and reactionary *laissez-faire*, if not as an advocate of separated powers, then as the progenitor of what de Dijn

[8] John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, Section 22, line 9-10; https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/locke1689a.pdf.

[9] *Second Treatise*, Section 138, line 35.

[10] *Second Treatise*, Section 202, line 1.

elsewhere labels "aristocratic liberalism."[11] His inclusion would present potential problems for the book's timeline, which locates most of the conceptual change *after* the democratic displays of the Atlantic Revolutions.

Other figures muddle the book's related distinction between freedom fighters and fearful elites. The Swiss-French liberal Benjamin Constant comes to mind. Critical of the Jacobins and their promise of political liberty, Constant nonetheless concluded his 1819 Athénée Royal lecture by calling for a dose of ancient liberty in modern times: "far from renouncing either of the two sorts of freedom which I have described to you, it is necessary, as I have shown, to learn to combine the two together."[12] De Dijn is right to read this statement in the context of Constant's career, but too quick to caution that we not "make too much" of it (257). This moment, which is so often presented as a striking *volte-face* on Constant's part, was actually a consistent worry about the loss of public life that manifested across his mature writings. Even at his most "modern" in the *Commentaire sur l'ouvrage de Filangieri* (1822-24),[13] Constant warned that constitutional institutions could not survive without a watchful public. His warnings became *more* vehement during the first months of the liberal July Regime, as he criticized those same officials who championed antidemocratic freedom. Constant presented a vision of the "public" beyond the narrow bourgeois ruling class, a perspective that put him at odds with Guizot.[14] While he cautioned that civic participation was not the whole of liberty in the modern world, Constant did not aim to replace democratic liberty with the atomized life of non-interference. And while de Dijn is certainly right to identify a fear-motivated, liberal backlash against revolution, we should consider whether liberal attitudes toward *freedom* in this period were more nuanced and more varied than the book's picture of "modern freedom" suggests.

We can apply similar queries to the book's implied normative angle. As the two concepts of freedom drift further apart, democratic freedom becomes the standard (again, implied) for judging the term's later (ab)uses. The "fighting" freedom of self-rule rose to overturn existing power structures and the elites who tried to preserve them; modern, antidemocratic freedom grew out of anxieties about such a fight. Democratic freedom emboldened the weak; modern freedom was invented to deprive them of political voice. These are powerful contrasts. But I wonder if something about the character about modern freedom – and of freedom generally – is lost by drawing them so starkly. Consider the insights of two moderns in the book: François Guizot and John Stuart Mill. Both figures responded to the emergence of democracy. Guizot, the quintessential counterrevolutionary, feared lower-class revolt and his view of freedom aimed to restrain popular participation. But Mill's arguments about liberty were driven by the *summum malum* of majority tyranny. Mill worried that "the 'people' who exercise the power are not always the same people over whom it is exercised."[15] The goal of Millean freedom was not to undermine self-rule, but to question whether democracy was truly rule by the *demos* or only by a faction – even a majority – exercising power in their name. The examples of Guizot and Mill underlie wider concerns: Was there a single dominant definition of freedom after the Atlantic Revolutions? Was it so straightforwardly antidemocratic? Can we instead identify a multiplicity of *freedoms* in this period, many in response to revolution but some more amenable to democracy than others?

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[11] Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[12] Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns," in Biancamaria Fontana, ed., *Constant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 327.

[13] Constant, *Commentary on Filangieri's Work,* trans. Alan S. Kahan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2015)

[14] See Helena Rosenblatt, *Liberal Values: Benjamin Constant and the Politics of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Chapter 7.

[15] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill,* volume XVIII, ed. J.M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 219.

Relatedly, can the entire history of freedom be captured as one conceptual tug-of-war between two distinct groups: emancipatory revolutionaries who spoke for the *demos* and anxious conservatives who resisted popular rule? Or do we need to embrace the far messier past of freedom after all?

Despite these lingering questions, or maybe because of them, de Dijn's important work breathes new life into the history of a political ideal that is often championed but rarely examined. Her contribution makes clear that freedom and equality do not and need not conflict, while reminding us that the struggle to define each is ongoing.

Review by Helena Rosenblatt, the Graduate Center, City University of New York

Annelien de Dijn's *Freedom: An Unruly History* is a deeply thought-provoking book on a timely topic. Well researched and engagingly written, it deserves a wide readership and, due to its provocative thesis, should foster a lively and healthy debate.

De Dijn tells us that today, when we speak of freedom, we mean "limited freedom" and the respect for individual rights. However, for over 2000 years, freedom meant something very different. It meant "democratic" or "popular self-government" (2). A "free state," she writes, was one in which the people "govern[ed] themselves" (181), even if they lacked a bill of rights, an independent judiciary, or other institutions limiting state power. Then, the revolutions of the late eighteenth century, followed especially by those of 1848, created a backlash against democracy, and this is what gave rise to the modern idea of limited government. Thus it was the adversaries of democracy who gave us our present understanding of 'freedom.' The shift was triggered by the fear that universal suffrage would lead to socialism or at least an undesirable and frightening social levelling.

De Dijn is an expert in the history of European political thought from 1700 to the present and she displays her impressive command again here. In her first book, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?,* she revealed the surprising centrality of the concept "liberty" in early modern European counterrevolutionary discourse.[16] Here again she identifies and problematizes a simplistic and teleological view of liberty that allies it unreflectively with progressive or democratic forces. She proposes that what we regard as a modern and progressive view of freedom actually comes from the thought of reactionaries.

This is an exciting and provocative argument and de Dijn marshals a considerable amount of evidence to support it. My enthusiastic endorsement appears on the jacket of the book. Here, however, and in the interest of scholarly debate, I do want to raise a few points where I think her thesis might be in need of some attenuation or even reformulation.

My first issue concerns de Dijn's claim that there was a "deliberate and dramatic rupture" (1) in the history of freedom when a reigning democratic conception was replaced by the modern idea of limited government. I wonder whether the evidence provided in the book actually supports this conclusion. I would suggest, rather, that what the book proves is that 'freedom' has always meant, at least to a certain degree, individual freedom, or freedom from interference, and that whether "popular self-government" (2) or 'democracy' is its best guarantee has been debated, but mostly denied.

On several occasions, de Dijn seems to say this herself. She states, for example, that freedom in antiquity meant the preservation of "personal security and independence" (34). She notes that, contrary to what many have said, in Athens, democracy was very tolerant and "legal restrictions on private life" were few. The "state" did not "meddle" much with "private behavior" (42). Self-government, she further explains, was advocated in ancient Greece because it was the only way people could "control their own lives" (169). But this begs the question: Does not controlling one's life and having independence mean having a private space in which the government cannot interfere? Does it not, in fact, reflect an early notion of limited government? Moreover, if self-government is seen to be needed in order to guarantee that people can "control their own lives," then the two concepts, 'self-government' and 'freedom,' are, in fact, distinguishable. Freedom in ancient Greece did not mean self-government; self-government instead was what *protected* freedom.

The Romans, de Dijn writes, were much like the Greeks. They, too, believed that "self-government was necessary for the sustained exercise of liberty" (287). Again, it seems to me that what de Dijn is saying here is not that freedom in Rome meant self-government, but that it was something that needed the protection of self-government. Moreover, she tells us that this idea of freedom is the one that has been dominant ever since: "For centuries to come," de Dijn writes, "political thinkers

[16] Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

and activists would repeat the mantra that freedom could be enjoyed only in a popular regime in which the people governed themselves" (42). And, for that matter, isn't that what we believe today? Surely, we also believe that our democratic government is needed to protect our freedom. And, if that is the case, then when and where did the "deliberate and dramatic rupture" in our concept of freedom occur?

My second question concerns de Dijn's use of the word "democratic" to describe the "self-government" to which she refers. When it comes to ancient Greek authors, it may, indeed, be appropriate to speak of 'democratic self-government' or 'democracy.' But later writers apparently believed that one could be free as long as one was represented, or if one "exercis[ed] control" over the way in which one was governed (177, with similar formulations on 2 and 237). Yet others believed that one was free if one gave "consent" to laws (176) or "had a say" in the direction of one's country (36, 190). But being represented, exercising control, and having a say are clearly not the same thing. And none of them necessarily translates into *democratic* self-government.

This holds for 'free cities' as well. A free city did not necessarily self-govern democratically, as de Dijn's language sometimes suggests. I would argue instead that a 'free city' most frequently meant a city independent from the domination or interference of a local lord aiming to extend his power, or from any foreign power wishing to do the same. This means that the notion of freedom evoked in the term 'free city' was closer to meaning being 'left alone' than exercising democratic self-government. More examples could be proffered: The first loyalty oath issued by the new United States affirmed that being "free, independent and sovereign states" meant that their citizens "owed no allegiance or obedience to George the Third." Here, too, freedom did not necessarily mean *democratic* self-government. This was also the freedom demanded by the American South in the Civil War, the freedom to be left alone by the (federal) government. In fact, I am not sure that anyone who is referred to in de Dijn's book actually used the term 'democratic self-government.'

In my mind, John Locke never advocated anything like democratic self-government. If there is anything that resembles democratic freedom in Locke's thought, I would say that it is confined to the right to resist or overthrow an oppressive government. However, after a new government had been constituted, the community was meant to transfer or delegate its power to that government. When Locke writes that the "freedom of men under government is to have a standing rule to live by, common to everyone of that society, and made by the legislative power erected in it," it surely does not mean that everyone has the right to participate in that legislative power. Notice the "under" in that sentence. And Locke also writes that freedom is "a liberty to follow my own will *in all things where the rule prescribes not* [my emphasis]."[17] This also does not involve democratic or popular self-government.

In my own work, I have found that natural rights thinkers like Jean Barbeyrac and Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, hardly reactionary thinkers for their time, consistently affirmed that enjoying freedom depended on submission to the law rather than self-government. They speculated that when individuals left the state of nature to enter society, they agreed to a form of government—a monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, or some sort of mixture. But once they had chosen that form of government, they promised to obey it. They would not participate in the passing of legislation, unless, perhaps, if they chose democracy, but that was regarded the worst form of government. In fact, not even Jean-Jacques Rousseau advocated democratic self-government; although he was a supporter of popular sovereignty, he held that "there is no government so subject to civil wars and intestine agitations as democratic or popular government." For him, democracy was a form of government suited only to a "nation of gods."[18]

There are many examples of the use of natural rights theories to support the idea that a functioning form of government depends on submission and not political participation, but let me provide one with which I am particularly familiar. The Genevan patriciate, with whom, of course, Rousseau was in debate, adopted ideas taken straight from Samuel von Pufendorf,

[17] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, chap IV "Of Slavery," sec. 22.

[18] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Book III, chapter iv.

Barbeyrac and Burlamaqui expressly to *deny* the Geneva citizenry the right to legislate. "It is a fantasy to imagine that liberty consists in exercising sovereignty," one leading patrician spokesman declared, "a people who self-governed in this way would be the least free and the most unhappy of all peoples."[19] And yet, Geneva was certainly regarded as a 'free city,' since it was an independent republic, not ruled by either France or the House of Savoy.

Natural rights theorists like Pufendorf, Barbeyrac and Burlamaqui did indeed believe that at some point the people 'consented' to 'laws' but these laws usually referred to a form of government or what we, today, might call a constitution. Once they had consented to it they were no longer unilaterally allowed to change it. Barbeyrac, who cannot be called a 'counterrevolutionary,' even had a hard time accepting the idea that people were authorized to resist a tyrant. Like other thinkers at the time, he distinguished between different kinds of 'people': "When we speak of a Tyrant that may lawfully be dethroned by the People, we do not mean by the People the vile Populace, or Rabble of the Country, nor the Cabal of a small Number of factious Persons; but the greater and more judicious Part of the Subjects of all Ranks in the Kingdom."[20] There is a good case to be made that even Rousseau subscribed to an elitist concept of the 'people.' Popular self-government, or 'democracy' was customarily associated with chaos, not freedom.

In short, I would argue that freedom and self-government were, throughout history, separate concepts. Some then debated whether democratic self-government was the best way to protect freedom. Until the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth, most did not think it did. This is a very interesting story and, it seems to me, is what de Dijn's book narrates, even if the book often suggests the contrary.

This leads to me to a final question. *Freedom: An Unruly History* is a history of the meaning of 'freedom.' But it also makes claims about a waxing and waning *cult* of freedom, which is something a bit different. And, I wonder, how does one measure the popularity of a concept? (I confess here that I encountered this problem myself when writing *The Lost History of Liberalism from Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*, and am not entirely sure I resolved it satisfactorily.)[21] The question rephrased is: On the basis of what data can one conclude that a notion is "rarely floated" (121), is "revived" (2), or suddenly comes "roaring back to life" (165)? And can we really say that the Cold War "drown[ed] out" (5) democratic views of freedom?

I'd like to end my remarks the way I began. Annelien de Dijn's *Freedom: An Unruly History* is an important book that should be widely read and discussed. At this fraught time in the history of freedom around the world, it reminds us of the battles that have been fought over our most cherished values and, in particular, over our right and duty to participate in government in order to protect our freedom. It is the mark of an excellent book not only to inform but to provoke thought. In this it has succeeded marvelously.

[19] Quoted in Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva. From the First Discourse to the Social Contract* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 138.

[20] Quoted in Tim Hochstrasser, "Conscience and Reason: The Natural Law Theory of Jean Barbeyrac," *The Historical Journal* 36:2, at 307.

[21] Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism from Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

Review by William Selinger, University College London

Annelien de Dijn's *Freedom: An Unruly History* is one of the most ambitious books on Western political thought in recent memory. De Dijn not only aims to offer a new narrative of the history of political ideas from Classical Athens to the present; she also claims to recover a way of thinking about politics that, she argues, was slowly lost in the modern era, and is today entirely forgotten. In the grand sweep of its narrative, and in its claim to recover a lost world of thought, *Freedom: An Unruly History* is reminiscent of classic mid-century works by Leo Strauss,[22] Hannah Arendt,[23] and J.G.A. Pocock[24] that did so much to launch the history of Western political thought as a field

Yet *Freedom: An Unruly History* is also very much a book of our current moment. Since 2016, it has been repeatedly suggested that 'liberalism is in crisis.' Sometimes this means no more than that the consensus of ideas which have generally governed Western democracies since the end of the Cold War are being challenged and rethought. But a few authors have gone further. In his book *Why Liberalism Failed*, which became a surprising bestseller, Patrick Deneen argued that it is not merely our current governing philosophy which is to blame, but the individualist ideas that have increasingly governed the West since the seventeenth century, when they were articulated by philosophers like John Locke. According to Deneen, "liberalism" in this broad sense "has failed—not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself."[25]

There are many differences between *Freedom: An Unruly History* and *Why Liberalism Failed*. De Dijn locates the origins of liberalism in the nineteenth century rather than in the seventeenth century. Whereas Deneen attacked liberal individualism in the name of "embedded cultures, traditions, places and relationships,"[26] de Dijn appeals to democracy. Also, de Dijn does praise various liberals in the twentieth century. She lauds the British writer Leonard Hobhouse, and the achievements of the American presidents Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt.[27] But despite these differences, it is not entirely wrong, I think, to see *Freedom: An Unruly History* as making an argument from the left that is broadly parallel to the argument Deneen made from the right.

The central theme of *Freedom: An Unruly History* is, of course, 'freedom.' Before the nineteenth century, de Dijn argues, Western political thinkers subscribed for the most part to what she calls a "democratic conception of freedom" (2). To be free did not mean to be unhindered and left alone to do what one wanted, it meant participating in the process of governing one's community. De Dijn traces this conception of freedom back to ancient Athens and Rome. Following Quentin Skinner, she argues that a more individualist notion of freedom was invented by the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. But she amends Skinner's account by showing that Hobbes's ideas had little influence. The individualist notion of freedom, in which freedom means "the freedom to peacefully enjoy one's life and goods" was really invented, she argues, by opponents of the American and French Revolutions, and it was only then that this conception really took off (251). The great exponents of the individualist conception of freedom were nineteenth-century liberals like

[22] Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).

[23] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

[24] J.G.A Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[25] Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 3.

[26] Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed,* 17.

[27] Deneen, to be clear, also pays complements to various figures in the liberal tradition and to several of the accomplishments of liberalism, 179-198.

Benjamin Constant, Germaine de Stael, John Stuart Mill and Édouard Laboulaye. De Dijn argues that this liberal individualist conception of freedom continued to be challenged and contested by various proponents of democracy—by suffragettes, socialists, and by the American progressive movement—and that it was during the Cold War that liberal individualism really become hegemonic. Freedom, she argues, is now almost universally considered the property of an individual. The idea that freedom is the activity of a self-governing community has been forgotten. It is this older conception of freedom that she intends to recover.

Freedom: An Unruly History has considerable strengths as a work of intellectual history. It investigates ideas, texts, and even images in remarkable detail across practically the whole of Western history. De Dijn brings a new perspective to bear on familiar figures like Cicero and Plato while at the same time recovering important authors who have tended to be overlooked in the construction of the canon, like Laboulaye and Henry Maine. Indeed, *Freedom: An Unruly History* is such an excellent historical work that it calls into question the very lesson that de Dijn offers. It is simply impossible, I will argue, to carefully read the book and come away thinking that liberalism was a profound break with the past, or that there is an older worthwhile democratic conception of freedom which we have lost.

The contrast between the simple moral lesson of the book, and the complexity of the history de Dijn presents, is apparent from the beginning of the book. De Dijn argues that the first great expression of the democratic ideal of freedom was given to us by the Athenian historian Herodotus, who "provided one of the earliest reflections on why freedom was valuable. Political freedom—that is, popular self-government—was important, he made clear, because only under this form of government could individuals order their lives as they wanted and enjoy personal security and independence" (28).

This passage confronts us with the first unexpected feature of de Dijn's history, the first way in which her history deviates from her political moral. Even though the "democratic conception of freedom" she recovers is supposed to be an alternative to the modern individualist conception of freedom, it too was fundamentally about "individuals order[ing] their lives as they want[ed] " (28). Indeed, de Dijn is quite explicit that the notion of the ancient Greeks being collectivist and not caring about the individual is a nineteenth-century myth (41). She notes, "writings by Herodotus and others let us see that they believed freedom—or the ability to control the way we are governed—was also crucial to the preservation of personal security and individual independence. Far from privileging collective freedom above personal security, the Greeks believed that one could not exist without the other" (34).

It would seem, then, that Benjamin Constant was not entirely wrong to prioritize what he called "the liberty of the moderns," by which he meant the protection of personal security and individual independence.[28] He was just wrong to call this *freedom*. Real freedom is "popular self-government," not the individual security which results from it. What Constant overlooked, and what the Greeks knew so well, is that what we have come to call "individual liberty" requires democracy.

Yet this is not quite de Dijn's argument either, as becomes clear in the next part of the book. Here de Dijn turns to Rome, which, she acknowledges, was not a democracy like Athens. While the people voted on laws and elected magistrates, an aristocracy wielded substantial power, especially through the institution of the Senate. In the second century BC, two Roman tribunes, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus led a movement known as the *populares* that sought to give the people greater power, although de Dijn emphasizes that Athenian-style democracy was probably never their aim. This movement was crushed by an aristocratic party (the *optimates*) who murdered both Tiberius and Gaius. Although he sympathized with some of the Gracchi brothers' proposals, Cicero would write an encomium to the Roman mixed regime that defended it as superior to democracy. Cicero "rejected democracy," de Dijn writes, and argued that it was in fact the balance between the popular assemblies, the aristocratic Senate, and the individual Consuls that secured liberty (86).

[28] Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns," Biancamaria Fontana, ed., Political Writings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 307-328.

At this point, one might have expected de Dijn to declare Cicero an opponent of the Athenian argument that associates freedom and democracy. Instead, in a move with important consequences for the argument of the book, she includes not only him, but the entire party of Roman aristocrats who crushed the Gracchi, within the democratic tradition:

> "As Cicero's writings illustrate, the political ideals of the *optimates* and *populares* were not that divergent—this despite the very real violence to which both parties resorted. Both parties agreed that the preservation of freedom, understood as communal self-government, was of key importance, and both agreed that the Roman Republic, in the shape it had taken in the wake of the Conflict of Orders, was the embodiment of that freedom. They differed, however, over the best way to maintain that freedom. According to the *populares*, incremental reforms were necessary…The *optimates*, on the other hand, feared that giving ordinary Romans too much political power would eventually make the rise of tyrannical demagogues inevitable" (87).

This claim that the Romans expounded a democratic conception of liberty is essential for the larger argument of the book. From Niccolò Machiavelli to Jean Jacques Rousseau, it was Rome with its aristocracy, more than democratic Athens, that served as the model of a free and self-governing state. It was with Rome as a backdrop that Machiavelli would argue that only in a free state could individuals "live in security" and "live without fear that their patrimony will be taken away from them."[29]

De Dijn includes these proponents of Rome's mixed regime within her "democratic" tradition. Yet this raises a number of difficult questions. Cicero's opposition to democracy, she argues, was merely about "the best way to maintain…freedom." He feared that unchecked popular power would lead to "tyrannical demagogues" (87). But wasn't this exactly the same fear that motivated Constant and de Stael to be skeptical of unchecked popular power after the French Revolution? And wasn't their answer a kind of mixed regime as well? Why in de Dijn's interpretation does Cicero get to have such worries but not the nineteenth-century liberals? More pointedly, if de Dijn's democratic tradition of liberty had as a priority guarding the security and independence of individuals, and if it could encompass opponents of democracy, it is hard to see what exactly we have lost or forgotten.

It is true, as *Freedom: An Unruly History* emphasizes, that some nineteenth-century liberals had a different plan for balancing popular power than that of the *optimates*. Rather than an aristocratic Senate, which was increasingly untenable in an age of rising democracy, they turned instead to written constitutions. Édouard Laboulaye, a nineteenth-century French liberal who played an important role in the foundation of the Third Republic, and who is enjoying something of a scholarly resurgence right now,[30] was particularly important in defending this approach to preserving individual liberty, which he associated with the United States. By the end of the nineteenth century, as mass democracy seemed inevitable in Europe, a number of liberal theorists would come to admire the American model of a constitution that placed certain fundamental rights beyond the grasp of an unstable popular majority. But, putting aside the fact that a great many other liberals, including Mill, stuck to what we might call the Roman strategy of trying to balance the people and the elite, how is it possible that the powers and influence wielded by the Roman Senate were compatible with a democratic conception of liberty, but a popularly ratified constitution isn't compatible?

What makes de Dijn's criticism of the constitutionalism of Laboulaye and his successors most surprising, however, is her praise of the framers of the American constitution, whom she reads as champions of the democratic conception of liberty. To be sure, there was a strain of thought in the American as well as the French revolution that was uncomfortable with how

[29] Quoted from Quentin Skinner, "The Republican Ideal of Political Liberty," in Gisela Bok, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli, eds., *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1990), 302.

[30] Other recent treatments of Laboulaye are found in Stephen Sawyer, *Demos Assembled: Democracy and the International Order of the Modern State, 1840-1880*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); and Lucia Rubinelli, *Constituent Power: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

constitutions limited the popular will. These more radical revolutionaries sought a unicameral legislature that was unchecked by other powers; they also wanted frequent opportunities for the electorate as a whole to vote on laws.[31] Yet this radical strain was decisively defeated in both revolutions by constitutionalists who wanted to constrain the power of popular assemblies in order to protect the rights of individuals.[32] As with her discussion of Rome, de Dijn claims both sides of this struggle for her democratic conception of freedom. Just as her argument places both the Gracchi and the Roman aristocrats who murdered them in the same tradition of democratic liberty, her discussion of the age of revolution likewise puts genuine democratic radicals like Condorcet together with monarchists like Mirabeau, and defends John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and the American constitution itself, with all of its checks on popular power, as ultimately expressing a democratic conception of freedom.

If Laboulaye and Maine could find the American constitution so inspiring when they were trying to think of ways to restrain popular power under increasingly democratic conditions that threatened to put the suffrage in the hands of the multitude, is it plausible that the figures who wrote it were not also motivated by that aim? Indeed, at the Constitutional Convention, James Madison (who was far more favorable to a democratic republic than many of the other participants) actually foresaw and described precisely the kind of situation in which Laboulaye and Maine found themselves. He noted that the United States did not then have violent class antagonisms. But he predicted they would eventually arise, that universal suffrage would lead to the working class monopolizing the suffrage, and that in such a situation, only the creation of an artificial power to counter-balance the people would protect the rights and property of the wealthy:

> In framing a system which we wish to last for ages, we shd. not lose sight of the changes which ages will produce. An increase of population will of necessity increase the proportion of those who will labour under all the hardships of life, & secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings. These may in time outnumber those who are placed above the feelings of indigence. According to the equal laws of suffrage, the power will slide into the hands of the former. No agrarian attempts have yet been made in this Country, but symtoms, of a leveling spirit, as we have understood, have sufficiently appeared in a certain quarters to give notice of the future danger. How is this danger to be guarded agst. on republican principles? How is the danger in all cases of interested coalitions to oppress the minority to be guarded agst.? Among other means by the establishment of a body in the Govt. sufficiently respectable for its wisdom & virtue, to aid on such emergences, the preponderance of justice by throwing its weight into that scale.[33]

De Dijn portrays the liberal conception of freedom that emerged in the nineteenth century as a profound rupture with the past—as an invader from the outside that made its way into the Western tradition and has gradually taken over. Yet her book also shows why that isn't the case: it turns out that such aims as protecting the independence of the individual, controlling democracy through elite power, and sheltering elites through written constitutions have played a preponderant role throughout the Western tradition. Nineteenth-century liberals did not need to invent anything new in order to pursue these objectives.

Nor, on the other hand, was the liberal tradition that emerged in the nineteenth century as defined by these anti-populist objectives as de Dijn argues. Indeed, during the nineteenth century, political participation became arguably more important and more connected with freedom than ever before. Most authors writing before the nineteenth century believed that political participation depended on a virtuous citizenry. In his speech on "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that

[31] See Richard Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Adam Lebovitz, "Colossus: Constitutional theory in America and France, 1776-1799," PhD. diss., 2018, https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/41121195.

[32] Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972); Lebovitz, "Colossus."

[33] James Madison, "Speech of June 22", in Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787*, vol. 1, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1911), 422.

of the Moderns," Benjamin Constant put forth a much more ambitious claim: that political participation is capable of creating a virtuous citizenry, since it forces citizens to leave their private sphere of occupation and reflect on questions of genuine public significance:

> "Political liberty…enlarges their spirit, ennobles their thoughts, and establishes among them a kind of intellectual equality which forms the glory and power of a people…See our countrymen of all classes, of all professions, emerge from the sphere of their usual labors and private industry, find themselves suddenly at the level of important functions which the constitution confers upon them, chose with discernment, resist with energy…"[34]

This message would be reiterated by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*,[35] by Mill in *Considerations on Representative Government*,[36] and by Bagehot in the *English Constitution*.[37] For nineteenth-century liberals, the kind of political participation made possible by representative government and local politics created individuals who could exercise genuine agency, political and moral, and were not trapped by their particular position in a commercial society. Insofar as individual freedom came to be increasingly viewed as necessary for the development of the individual's moral and intellectual faculties, a powerful tradition of nineteenth-century liberalism claimed that this was impossible without political participation. There remained a strong link between collective self-government and individual agency, just as there was for Herodotus.

Of course, this is only one side of the story. Liberalism and democracy had an extraordinarily complex relationship, and liberals were quite wary of popular power, even as they offered new arguments for the importance of popular political action. They believed with Herodotus that popular (though representative) assemblies were the essence of a free polity, even as they also, like Cicero, feared that such assemblies could be usurped by tyrants and demagogues.[38] But in having a debate over the relationship between individual agency, collective self-government, and popular power, they were no different from the Romans, the Florentines of the Renaissance, or the French and American Revolutionaries. Insofar as we do not, at present, entirely associate freedom with democracy, this cannot be attributed to any radical break that occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century.

It would be preferrable, perhaps, if our present political travails were clearly correlated with a basic philosophical misunderstanding about the meaning of freedom; if the advantages of democracy were endorsed by the full weight of the Western tradition; if the ideas about liberty promoted by the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek and his followers had no deep roots in the Western tradition but were a recent and possibly ephemeral invention.[39] But the past is much more complicated than this. *Freedom: An Unruly History* is worth reading because it brings to life more complicated past than this.

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[34] Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns," Biancamaria Fontana, ed., *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 327.

[35] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, tr. James Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2012)

[36] John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, in J.M. Robson, ed, *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 19 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

[37] Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, ed. Paul Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[38] See William Selinger, *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[39] For a recent account of Hayek and his fellow travelers and their views of liberty and constitutionalism see Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

Response by Annelien de Dijn, Utrecht University

I am extremely grateful to Diane Labrosse for organizing this roundtable, and to Cheryl Welch for her incisive introduction. I am equally indebted to Gianna Englert, Helena Rosenblatt and William Selinger – three eminent scholars of liberalism - for reviewing my book. There is always reason to be thankful to peers who engage with one's work. But this is even more true today, in the middle of a pandemic. As everyone is scrambling to complete even the most routine tasks, Englert, Rosenblatt, Selinger, and Welch somehow found the time to pen remarkably thoughtful and thought-provoking comments. I cannot thank them enough for doing so.

Writing a book on the long history of freedom required me to reach far beyond my original expertise, which is in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century French political thought. Such an endeavor involves risks. I am therefore very happy that the reviewers describe my book as "exciting and provocative," an "engaging achievement" that "should foster a lively and healthy debate" – and indeed as "one of the most ambitious books on Western political thought in recent memory."

Yet all three reviewers also raise important challenges to my arguments. One of the main criticisms put forward by Englert, Rosenblatt and Selinger alike is that I have overstated my case. A key claim developed in my book is that our current conception of liberty – the idea that freedom depends on the limitation of state power - is a dramatic and deliberate rupture with older, more democratic ways of thinking about liberty. For centuries, I argue, people in what we now think of as the "West" identified freedom not with being left alone by the state but with the ability to exercise control over the way in which they were governed. It was only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that freedom came to be increasingly identified with minimal government.

Englert, Rosenblatt and Selinger object that the divide between ancient and modern liberty was not as clear-cut as I make it out to be. On the one hand, they argue, the identification between freedom and democratic self-government was more tenuous before the nineteenth century than I argue. On the other hand, they claim, the main propagators of the new way of thinking about freedom – nineteenth-century liberals – were more committed to a democratic conception of freedom than I make them out to have been.

To buttress their first objection – that the identification between freedom and democratic self-government was more tenuous in antiquity and the early modern period than I claim - the reviewers provide a number of different examples. Selinger objects to the fact that I include not just Athenian democrats among the proponents of democratic freedom, but also advocates of the mixed regime, like Cicero or Niccolò Machiavelli. In Selinger's view, this undermines my claim that there is "an older worthwhile democratic conception of freedom which we have lost."

But this objection is based on a subtle but crucial misrepresentation of my argument. In my reading, Cicero did not claim that the mixed regime is essential to freedom. Instead, Cicero believed that Roman freedom was guaranteed by the democratic element in the mixed constitution. Cicero also recognized that Athens, being a pure democracy, provides *more* freedom to its citizens than Rome. But that freedom was "excessive." The Roman mixed constitution, by contrast, was better at balancing freedom with stability and good government, and is thus preferable to Athens (85-86). Similarly, while Machiavelli recognized that Rome was not a pure democracy, the reason why he believed it was a *free* state was because it was "a government of the people" (141).

Englert and Rosenblatt, in turn, are critical of my reading of John Locke. While Englert agrees that Locke was no proponent of *laissez-faire* liberty, she argues that he can better be interpreted as a proponent of "constitutional freedom – of a government of known rules, powers, and limits" than as an advocate of the democratic conception of freedom. Similarly, Rosenblatt claims that Locke, like other natural-rights theorists, should be understood as propagating submission to the law as essential to freedom rather than popular self-government.

I realize that my interpretation of Locke as being closer, in his thinking about freedom, to Jean-Jacques Rousseau than to Herbert Spencer is a controversial one, as it goes against the grain of a long-established tradition portraying Locke as the founder of classical liberalism. (A tradition that remains remarkably tenacious despite having been criticized by a myth by Locke specialists ranging from John Dunn to James Tully.)[40] But among early-modern thinkers, it might be pointed out, my interpretation was quite commonplace. Richard Price, to give but one example, in his 1776 *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*, defined freedom as "self-government" explaining that this meant that in a free state the laws had to be made by the people or its chosen representatives. Price also remarked that these principles were by no means novel. Instead, they were "the same as those taught by Mr. Locke."[41]

Generally speaking, the main argument put forward in my book is not that the early modern period was teeming with committed democrats. That would be obviously false. It is that early-modern thinkers, to the extent that they talked about freedom at all, had a democratic conception of freedom – meaning, they believed that the best way to preserve freedom for all was by extending popular control over government. That becomes perhaps clearest when we turn from high-brow philosophers to other and more pedestrian sources such as early-modern dictionaries. Vernacular dictionaries explaining the meaning of conventional words came into vogue in continental Europe during the seventeenth century. One of the earliest and most influential examples of this new genre was the *Dictionary of the French Academy*. Compiled under the auspices of the *Académie française*, founded in 1630 by the Cardinal de Richelieu, the makers of this dictionary can hardly be suspected of pushing a democratic agenda. Yet they posited that liberty "in relation to the state" should be understood as "a form of government in which the people has sovereign authority."[42]

By contrast, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a shift to a very different understanding of freedom took place. It now became commonplace to argue that far from being essential to the preservation of liberty, extending popular control over government was more likely to be harmful to individual liberties, as democratic majorities could use their power to make unwise decisions or to further the interests of the numerical majority, notably the poor, to the detriment of everyone else. That is the modern invention – not the antidemocratic agenda as such, but the reconceptualization of freedom to serve an antidemocratic agenda.

That brings me to the second main criticism formulated by the reviewers: that the shift to an antidemocratic conception of liberty in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was not as neat as I make it out to be. Englert, for instance, argues that "liberal attitudes toward freedom in this period were more nuanced and more varied than the book's picture of "modern freedom" suggests." Selinger agrees. While he admits that "liberalism and democracy had an extraordinarily complex relationship," in his view nineteenth-century liberals were more notable for inventing new ways of defending democracy than for criticizing it.

It is of course true that some liberal thinkers, notably Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, penned influential defenses of democracy - in Mill's case including female suffrage. Yet it is important to see that skepticism of democracy was constitutive of liberalism as a political movement, as Helena Rosenblatt has also argued.[43] The political thinkers and actors who began to describe themselves as "liberals" in the aftermath of the French Revolution did not just oppose the Restoration's attempt to turn back the clock to the Old Regime. They also, and equally vehemently, rejected the democratic legacy of the revolutionary period. Liberals tended to lionize the British model, with its many oligarchic features, and when

[40] For an account of the genesis of this myth, see Timothy Stanton, "John Locke and The Fable of Liberalism," *The Historical Journal* 61:3 (2018): 597–622, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X17000450.

[41] Richard Price, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20.

[42] "Liberté," in *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 1st ed. (1694), vol. 1. Accessed through ARTFL.

[43] Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 92-96.

they came to power, the regimes they introduced were highly elitist. The July Monarchy established by liberal politicians in France in 1830, for instance, enfranchised less than 2 percent of adult males.

To be a liberal, in short, implied that one was anti-Jacobin as much as anti-monarchist, and that was reflected in one's thinking about freedom. Liberals were always careful to emphasize that the freedom they sought to achieve was not the freedom provided by popular self-government – the freedom that had led to Jacobinism and the Terror. Rather it was the freedom to peacefully enjoy one's life and goods.

Moreover, liberals remained committed to this way of thinking about freedom even after they gradually became more accepting of democracy as a political system. Édouard de Laboulaye, for instance, an admirer of Benjamin Constant and one of the most prominent French liberals of the 1860s, made it quite clear that he supported manhood suffrage. Yet at the same time, he continued to emphasize that democracy, while necessary for reasons of fairness, posed a threat to liberty. Hence, the dangerous tendencies of democracy had to be checked by hedging in state power and organizing the government along the lines of "laissez-faire, laissez passer" (294).

That is not to say that the democratic conception of freedom disappeared altogether in the nineteenth century. As I make clear, new political movements – led by feminists, civil rights activists, socialists and populists – emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century that can be thought of the as the heirs of the Atlantic revolutionaries. They, and not nineteenth-century liberals, continued to make the case that was also at the heart of the revolutionary tradition, namely that freedom required democratic self-government. Socialists, moreover, added a novel claim as well: that true freedom required extending popular control into the economic in addition to the political sphere.

In conclusion, it is perhaps worth emphasizing that by highlighting the antidemocratic impetus behind nineteenth-century liberalism, it is not my intention to anachronistically judge past political thinkers for failing to live up to the moral standards of the present. As I highlight, nineteenth-century European liberal thinkers had, after all, but very little experience with broad-based, popular governments, and what little experience they did have was not positive. It is not hard to understand why political thinkers living in the wake of the French Revolution, with its spectacular descent into the Terror, were suspicious of democracy. It is not that strange that, in light of their own experience, they believed so passionately that majoritarian tyranny was a greater threat to liberty than the rule of a wise elite or the free play of private interests.

But it is less easy to understand why today, we continue to look to nineteenth-century liberals for guidance, despite the fact that the world they inhabited is so different from ours. If the rollback of state power during these past fifty years, engineered by the intellectual heirs of Herbert Spencer and Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, has made anything clear at all, it is that limiting the sphere of government does not protect the liberties of the most vulnerable among us. Instead, it empowers privileged elites.