

Liberal Read
No 21 | April 2023

The Lost History of Liberalism

BOOK REVIEW

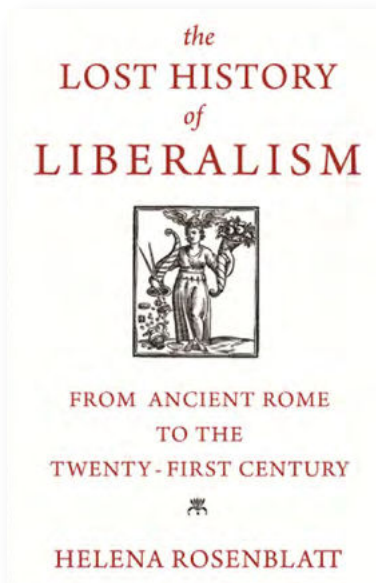
Helena Rosenblatt
The Lost History of Liberalism
2018

By Tirso Virgos

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

The Lost History of Liberalism



What is liberalism? This question seems as present in public debate today as it was decades ago. A liberal in the United States would be relatively different from a liberal in France, and probably none of them would like to be placed under the banner of a concept that has been described as neoliberalism.

Liberal policies, liberal democracies, and even liberal *dispositions*¹ are different ideas, but they share a series of common principles that define every strand of liberalism. At the thin core of liberal ideology, we always find the idea of protection of individual freedom from interference as well as a focus on the idea of the rights of each citizen. Regardless of the commitment to equality of opportunities, the value of autonomy, or limits of the state in matters of perfectionism or redistribution, all liberals share these principles.

However, in her great book *The Lost History of Liberalism*, Helena Rosenblatt argues that what she calls 'the turn to rights', which is mainly focused on avoiding interference in the private sphere, in liberal ideology has been a recent invention and has been based on the Anglo-Saxon liberal tradition. Meanwhile, historical liberalism, which emphasized civic virtue and morals and has its roots in Germany and France, has been nearly forgotten. Thus, the association of liberalism with the United Kingdom and, especially, the United States, is false and obscures a very important part of the liberal tradition that could be used to reconceptualize the term and propose political alternatives in today's world.

Thus, *The Lost History of Liberalism* connects with works such as *The History of European Liberalism* by Guido de Ruggiero or *Liberal Languages* by Michael Freeden. This is an attempt to create an idea of the liberal tradition that connects different thinkers and provides a common genealogy of the ideology. Authors, such as Duncan Bell,² have argued that liberals were never part of an ideological family but just different strands of thought that only agreed on very few issues. In other words, it is ideology with a thin core of ideas. Rosenblatt, however, finds common themes in liberal thought across history, and, in contrast to the authors arguing about the recent invention of the tradition, she says that what has been done is *undoing* a strong tradition of liberalism as a moral force.

In this attempt to trace the genealogy of liberalism from centuries ago, Rosenblatt begins her book in Ancient Rome and progressively advances in time and throughout different

1 Cherniss, J. L. (2021). *Liberalism in dark times: The liberal ethos in the twentieth century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
2 Bell, D. (2014). "What is liberalism?" *Political theory*, 42(6), 682–715.

countries on her way toward the 21st century: from the city-states of Italy in the Middle Ages to the Spanish *Liberales*, the German National Liberals who worked with Bismarck to reform their country, or those who joined forces with socialist movements. She is a true tour de force with an astounding number of sources that help readers understand the different perspectives on what was considered to be a liberal at each moment in time.

From Cicero to Rawls:

The main argument of the book, which is evident from the very first chapter, which is devoted to the history of the Ancient World, the Middle Ages, the Modern Age, and the beginnings of the American Revolution, is the idea of being liberal as a virtue. For two thousand years, she says, being a liberal is demonstrating the virtues of a good citizen with a good disposition toward others as well as liberality, nobility, and generosity. In summary, it is a series of characteristics that would be closer to the idea of civic virtue promoted by Neo-republicans.

In fact, she argues that even liberal totems, such as Adam Smith, were worried about becoming a society of strangers that is bounded only by commercial relationships

instead of generosity and reciprocity, where every person could flourish. Here Smith finds a common ground with authors, such as Michael Sandel, whose idea of the *unencumbered self* and the fight against the influence of money³ across all aspects of life has presented one of the main criticisms against liberalism in the last decades. Thus, it would be a strange turn of events to find that the Neo-republican and communitarian critiques were, in the end, only amendments to the *turn to rights* of later liberalism.

This is not the only argument of the book, apparently, although a good deal of it is devoted to this idea of moral reform sponsored by liberals across time, including those (the majority) that supported the idea of colonialism, that is, to raise those peoples from outside Europe from their lowly standards. Rosenblatt addresses several discussions that remain relevant for liberalism today, such as its relationship with democracy, the problem of charismatic leaders who could be useful for liberal goals, or the role of the state in a liberal polity.

The book provides not only a history of the past of liberal ideas but also blueprint and advice for the present and future. It also vindicates the continental tradition of liberal thought, which is typically discarded in political discourse in favor of a more Anglo-Saxon current, in which John Locke is the father of liberalism, Adam Smith is his son, and thinkers, such as John Rawls or Robert Nozick, become the latest incarnation of the true liberal thought.

³ For example, see Sandel, M. J. (1984). *The procedural republic and the unencumbered self*. *Political theory*, 12(1), 81–96; Sandel, M. J. (2000). “What money can’t buy: the moral limits of markets.” *Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, 21, 87–122. For an answer, see Kymlicka, W. (1998). “Liberal egalitarianism and civic republicanism: friends or enemies?”. In *Debating Democracy’s Discontent: Essays on American Politics, Law, and Public Philosophy*, 131–148.

It is amusing to find out how liberals in France or Germany during the 19th century were worried about the likes of Napoleon III or Bismarck, who they knew were despots without any regard for nascent liberal democracies. However, they were also key pieces in any reformist agenda. Thus, they faced dilemmas with regard to steps to be taken to improve the conditions of workers or to unite the various German states into a single nation, which they hoped would become more liberal than the autocratic Prussia of the Iron Chancellor.⁴ Similar dilemmas are present in our times as we deal with the presidentialization of parliamentary systems as well as the rise of personalized politics with the ever-looming threat of autocracy behind any new prophet of any ideology.

Thus, the book provides not only a history of the past of liberal ideas but also blueprint and advice for the present and future. It also vindicates the continental tradition of liberal thought, which is typically discarded in political discourse in favor of a more Anglo-Saxon current, in which John Locke is the father of liberalism, Adam Smith is his son, and thinkers, such as John Rawls or Robert Nozick, become the latest incarnation of the true liberal thought.

However, Rosenblatt occasionally exaggerates the influence of Anglo-Saxon thought in current liberal thinking. While it is true that the “new liberals” of the 19th century exerted a great influence on a concept today called *social-liberalism*, authors, such as De Tocqueville or Constant, are constantly cited among the most preeminent liberal thinkers. Politicians or citizens who define themselves as liberals may establish a pantheon where Adam Smith, John Locke, or Stuart Mill stand side by side with Constant, and its enduring idea of the freedom of ancients and moderns, which was adapted by Isaiah Berlin, or with De Tocqueville.

Liberalism today: What did we learn?

As previously mentioned, the book undergoes the different conflicts and divisions faced by across its long history. In my view, three topics stand out, namely, the question of the state, the question of the workers, and the idea of the transnational alliance of liberals that represented a danger to autocrats and conservatives across Europe.⁵ In this section, I will analyze the historical perspective of each of these problems and the lessons that the book provides for liberals today.

First and foremost is the question of the relationship of liberalism with the state. In continental Europe, liberalism has become associated with the lack of trust in the powers of the *Leviathan*, which is a lurking presence that, without the appropriate checks and balances, could invade the private sphere of citizens and restrict their liberties. Things are different in the United States interpretation of liberalism, but the urge to restrict excessive state intervention remains today. Rosenblatt, however, argues that this position was confined to a certain group of liberals, that is, the so-called classical liberals today, such as Bastiat or Cobden, while the majority of their colleagues from other strands of liberalism promoted moral reform through state action.

4 For an alternative view on Prussia see Clark, C. M. (2006). *Iron kingdom: the rise and downfall of Prussia, 1600–1947* (Harvard: Harvard University Press).

5 As stated by a Tory newspaper, that said that the Spanish Liberales were a “French party of the worst description” (Chapter 2).

In continental Europe, liberalism has become associated with the lack of trust in the powers of the *Leviathan*, which is a lurking presence that, without the appropriate checks and balances, could invade the private sphere of citizens and restrict their liberties. Things are different in the United States interpretation of liberalism, but the urge to restrict excessive state intervention remains today. Rosenblatt, however, argues that this position was confined to a certain group of liberals, that is, the so-called classical liberals today, such as Bastiat or Cobden, while the majority of their colleagues from other strands of liberalism promoted moral reform through state action.

This debate continues today in which the idea of *negative liberty* or freedom from interference has become a linchpin of liberal thought. However, liberals across Europe have come to terms with the welfare state and the provision of public goods, as well as its decisive role in ensuring a truly free market without monopolies. Rosenblatt's book helps in finding an intellectual tradition that defended liberal policies through the state and a conception of liberty more similar to that of the *ancients* (for Constant) or *positive liberty* (for Berlin). In other words, it refers to possessing the freedom against not only interference but also the development of any autonomous life project that does not conflict with the rights and liberties of other citizens. In this sense, the liberals of today should understand that the state is a useful tool for the defense of liberal ideals, even if a healthy dose of mistrust toward excessive intervention is necessary.

Closely related to the idea of the relationship with the state is another of the key topics in the book: the relationship of liberalism with workers and those in need. This is based on the conflicting relationship with democracy in the aftermath of the French Revolution to the *social questions* in the wake of industrialization. One of the main lines of attack of the opponents of liberalism, such as those from ideologies that accept liberal democratic tenets and those who defend illiberal systems, is that liberalism has always been the ideology of the rich and powerful looking down on workers from its ivory tower. How is this possible given that this is an ideology that aims to tear down barriers, stratus,

and privileges? When did it stop becoming the "ideology of destruction," as Harold Laski would argue, to become that of entrenched privileges?

Rosenblatt finds that the problem was, first, the actions taken by liberals once in power. For instance, she presents the case of France after the Revolution of 1830 and the arrival of the citizen-king Louis Philippe to the throne alongside a cabinet of liberals. The workers demanded higher wages, shorter workdays, and the ban on certain types of machinery that they felt could threaten their jobs. In other countries of continental Europe, liberals were so afraid of revolutions, especially after the spread of socialism, such that they sided with conservative forces to prevent uprisings. They even came to terms with the Catholic Church, which has been one of the main opponents of liberalism since its very first moments, and associated it with Satanism and the demolition of the proper ways of life.⁶

6 See, for instance, De Maistre.

Alongside this betrayal of the principles they sponsored once they felt comfortable in power, Rosenblatt criticizes the diagnosis made by liberal authors regarding the reasons underlying misery and poverty. She argues that many of them stated that workers were no more than *barbarians* without the proper moral development and who needed to be educated before having a say in any electoral process. Similarly, a few classical liberals argued that workers did not understand the *laws of the economy* with a paternalism that only sparked the rage of those living in precarious situations in countries where the economies were growing as fast as the rise of inequalities. Thus, it is unsurprising that many workers supported people like Napoleon III, to whom she devotes a good part of the book, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany, or Church-related social movements and parties that promised better working conditions and universal suffrage, even if it were only as a means of preserving their autocratic regime, as in the case of Napoleon.

Liberal parties experience a very similar situation today, whose voters mainly come from the most educated and affluent strata of society. Given the rise of illiberal movements⁷ the easiest line of attack against liberalism has been its defense of freedom in all spheres. According to its critics, it could be damaging to those without the money to compete in the free market or the social standing to answer against criticisms and attacks in the public sphere, even in liberal democracies. We must not forget that one of the reasons for the decline of liberal parties at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was, precisely, the rise of socialist formations that were able to attract voters away from those who had betrayed them.⁸ Liberals today should pay attention to the increasing inequalities and dissatisfaction with democracy from those with fewer resources to avoid not only the discredit of liberalism but also the growing support toward populists or authoritarian figures who promise a brighter future, such as those analyzed in this book.

Finally, a fascinating view is the first steps of what we know today as liberalism, which was born in the final years of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, in a world less connected than today. These first steps were followed and replicated in very different countries. Rosenblatt spends time to discuss about the relationships of the United States with France, as well as of the Spanish Liberals who gave their name to the movement and fled to the United Kingdom, or the Germans who claimed for a liberal country instead of the devastated leftovers of the Holy Roman Empire. Personal connections, newspapers, books, and manifestos were key elements of the spread of liberalism, which was denounced by the Church and the reactionaries who displayed extremely diverse strands of thought and found common causes against the forces of the status quo.

In Chapter 5, for instance, she speaks about *Caesarism and liberal democracy* and mentions Lincoln, who became a hero for a few authors, such as Montalambert or Laboulaye, in France, for his defense of liberal morals and his ability to defeat a ruthless opponent, which proved that liberal democracies did not need to be weak. However, Rosenblatt warns that Lincoln also suppressed some key freedoms during the war,

7 See, for instance, Zielonka, J. (2018). *Counter-revolution: Liberal Europe in retreat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Luce, E. (2017). "The retreat of western liberalism." *Atlantic Monthly Press*.

8 See Boix, C. (1999). Setting the rules of the game: the choice of electoral systems in advanced democracies. *American political science review*, 93(3), 609–624. A counter-example would be the UK, where the liberals could hold Labour at bay until the end of World War I

Rosenblatt makes a compelling argument for the return to the origins of liberalism, which abandons the turn to rights of the last decades, and states that the threat of the Soviet Union in the post-war years forced liberals to lower their sights and adjust their goals to avoid criticisms of totalitarianism or slippery slopes in the “Road to Serfdom.” In her view, the liberals of today focus heavily on avoiding interference of the state, while forgetting the promotion of moral reform, civic virtue, and freedom against domination that characterized liberal attitudes for the best part of its existence. By assuming mainly Anglo-Saxon conceptions of the individual and the role of the state, liberalism has lost a good part of its drive and its ability to transform society.

moral reform, civic virtue, and freedom against domination that characterized liberal attitudes for the best part of its existence. By assuming mainly Anglo-Saxon conceptions of the individual and the role of the state, liberalism has lost a good part of its drive and its ability to transform society.

However, one must wonder if no good reasons exist for liberals to abandon the promises of moral reform and, instead, embrace the defense of the individual and the protection of the private sphere. When compared to the task of turning citizens into a form of civic heroes who are concerned with the public sphere and interested in participating in all political discussions, then tasks, such as ensuring the rule of law or the protection of

and this did not seem to matter to some liberals. This example demonstrates that liberalism was and continues to be divided with regard to a few of its main tenets, but this is precisely one of its main strengths: being able to gather a wide array of thinkers, politicians, and social leaders under the same umbrella to advance the cause of freedom.

A similar action should be done today. With the International Liberal Order in danger, as proved by the recent invasion of Ukraine, the rise of China, or the cracks within the European Union with regard to countries such as Poland or Hungary, liberals can still find a common ground with those from other countries, beyond national loyalties, or even a certain extend of peripheral ideological differences. Against the attacks on the dilution of frontiers and the conception of individuals as *unencumbered selves*, liberals must join forces and illustrate that transnational alliances help in strengthening our states and their institutions and economies and reduce the possibility of conflicts. The actions of a country can inspire those resisting tyranny in another, and the spread of liberty is always faster than that of fear.

Against perfectionism?

Rosenblatt makes a compelling argument for the return to the origins of liberalism, which abandons the turn to rights of the last decades, and states that the threat of the Soviet Union in the post-war years forced liberals to *lower their sights* and adjust their goals to avoid criticisms of totalitarianism or slippery slopes in the “Road to Serfdom.”⁹ In her view, the liberals of today focus heavily on avoiding interference of the state, while forgetting the promotion of

9 Hayek, F. A. (2009). *The road to serfdom: text and documents--the definitive edition* (Vol. 2) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

private property, are seemingly minor affairs. However, this humble vision of the role of liberalism could be better suited not only for the modern world but also for the prevention of tyranny.

In his book about the liberal ethos, Joshua Cherniss¹⁰ presents different portraits of intellectuals who embraced liberalism at certain points in their lives as well as those who opposed them. Many of them rejected the principles of the dignity of the individual, compassion, and the avoidance of ruthless policies in favor of dreamed societies and, precisely, a moral reform of a type that a more Neo-republican perspective, such as the one defended by Rosenblatt, defends. Evidently, this does not mean that every attempt at improving society or helping people in developing their capabilities will end in tyranny. It should act, however, as a warning tale for those that solely focus on the positive aspect of liberty without much regard for interference.

Instead, perhaps we should try to look for a third way in our conversations about the future of liberalism. Should we leave citizens to pursue any plan of life that they desire if it does not clash with the rights and liberties of others? Or should we promote certain ideas of what the good life is in the hopes that citizens will pursue them? This debate between perfectionism and non-perfectionism is key in the design of liberal projects and liberal public policies. For instance, the debate on the morality of giving basic income to surfers in Malibu,¹¹ who do not reciprocate what they receive from society, would be far from the liberal–republican ideal defended by Rosenblatt.

A third way should consider that the protection of individual rights is the foundation of any possibility of moral development and the free pursuit of plans of life. In addition, excessive state intervention could end up infringing on those rights. At the same time, we must understand that a liberal project based exclusively on the defense of the private sphere is barely exciting and, without any kind of intervention, fosters inequalities, and the impossibility of giving real freedom to citizens for developing their plans. Humble reforms, small steps, and the assumption that no plan of life is wrong, given that rights and liberties are respected (even if the governing party in a liberal democracy or a majority of citizens want to promote a certain idea of the good life) would be the most sensible options. Liberalism should learn from its past and understand that emotions, virtues, and patriotism are relevant for people and that liberalism cannot forget them or use them as an excuse to forget the protection of the rights that it has been conquering since the end of the 18th century.

Rosenblatt's book is a fantastic piece of research, a necessary work to continue tracing the roots, development, and history of liberal ideas. *The Lost History of Liberalism* provides ideas from the past to nurture the debates of the present and fulfills a crucial goal: making the reader understand that liberalism has always been plural and has encompassed many traditions of thought in which all of them join in the cause of the defense of freedom for all citizens against any kind of tyranny.

¹⁰ Cherniss, J. L. (*Ibid.*).

¹¹ Van Parijs, P. (1995). *Real freedom for all: What (if anything) can justify capitalism?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).



European Liberal
Forum
PAPERS

ABOUT ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 51 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

 /europeanliberalforum
 @eurliberalforum
 /eurliberalforum

liberalforum.eu

COVER IMAGE by Marco Chilesse on Unsplash

COPYRIGHT 2023 / European Liberal Forum EUPF

This publication was co-financed by the European Parliament. The European Parliament is not responsible for the content of this publication, or for any use that may be made of it.