## European Liberal Forum PAPERS

**Liberal Read**

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# Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought

**BOOK REVIEW**

Michael Freeden
*Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought*

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**

# Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought
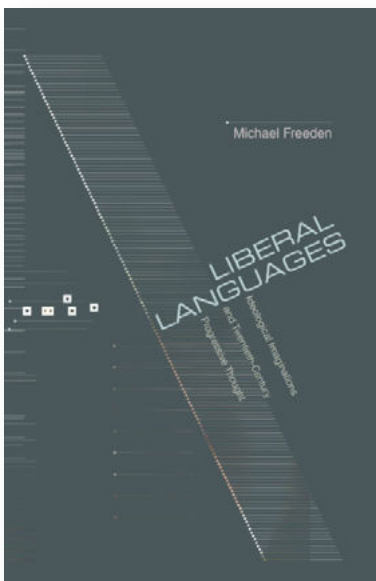
*Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought* is not a classic unitary manuscript in political theory but instead a collection of twelve independent essays by Michael Freeden, one of the foremost contemporary experts on liberalism. In this volume, Freeden explores questions of the role of political ideology, green thought, nationalism and the reconfiguration of the liberal tradition in the UK during the nineteenth century. In particular, he tackles the role of the New Liberals and the influence of their thinking on the development of the ideology of New Labour ideology during Tony Blair's tenure as the Prime Minister.

Despite the considerable innate interest of each of these essays, we focus here on the transformation of liberal thought in the UK during the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. In a previous review,[1] we have already seen how many different strands of liberalism have existed throughout history, and how difficult it is to define the term.[2] In fact, Freeden prefers to speak of liberalisms,[3] and this book draws a clear distinction between the classical liberalism of the Manchester School and Hobson's New Liberalism. Hobson would be considered a 'heretic', in Freeden's words, for his support of a liberalism accompanied by having a sizeable role for the state, taking up the fight against poverty and being based more on the community and not the individual. Hobson became internationally famous for his concept of 'imperialism', which would later be adopted by Lenin, among others.

Hobson, along with others, such as Hobhouse or T.H. Green, was a father of that New Liberalism that shaped the conversation in the British Public Sphere at the turn of the century. Following this, no longer would liberalism be strictly associated with free markets, trade, and laissez-faire, now exhibiting a strand of thought that promoted social and moral reform with the use of state powers. Perceptions of poverty, welfare, and the role of the individual in the community would also change thanks to the spread of this 'social' liberalism.

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1   'The Lost History of Liberalism by Helena Rosenblatt'. Book review by Tirso Virgos, ELF Liberal Reads, Episode 21, https://liberalforum.eu/publication/liberal-read-no-21-the-lost-history-of-liberalism/
2   Bell, D. (2014). What Is Liberalism? Political Theory, 42(6), 682–715. https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591714535103
3   In Search of European Liberalisms: Concepts, Languages, Ideologies. Ed. By Michael Freeden, Javier Fernandez-Sebastian, and Jorn Leonhard, https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/FreedenIn

This review focuses on this transformation, as seen through some of the essays of this book. We begin with the reconstruction and reconfiguration of progressive thought, taken largely through the works of Hobson, as well as the redefinition of poverty or community. Then, we examine how this redefinition affected more than liberal thought in the beginning of the twentieth century but also at its end, with its influence on the New Labour of Tony Blair. We will finish with a reflection on the diversity of 'languages' within liberalism and how they can tackle current problems.

## New Liberalism and the reconfiguration of progressive thought

'Ideology is a structure that both enables and constrains political agency'.[4] Freeden devotes a good part of his book to analysing how ideologies change over time. Although they shape our perception of reality, they are, in turn, at the same time, shaped by economic, social, and historical developments. For instance, Freeden shows how in liberal circles, conceptions of poverty began to change at the turn of the century.[5] Whereas poverty had been framed at first as a problem of criminality and the defects of character among the poor, liberal newspapers began to speak of 'stopping the ravages of apathy, charity and despair'.[6] Hobson argued that poverty was not only a problem of the maldistribution of material wealth but also a collective failure of communities that did not protect the weaker ones within it. Charity was merely 'moral cowardice', and purely individualist conceptions were damning for the poor.

Something similar was seen with the conception of the role of the state. Instead of seeing political power as a menace that 'required the sheltering of individuals from wayward usurpers, tyrant, or bullies',[7] liberals began to see it as a force for good, so long as it was in good hands. The state and its agencies could be used to rebuild a society that was perceived as flawed, and liberals could guide this change through developing a conception of liberty that was more in line with that of 'the ancients', as Benjamin Constant would say,[8] or with 'positive liberty', in the words of Isaiah Berlin.[9]

Some critics have argued that New Liberals, and Hobson in particular, 'hijacked' liberalism for statist purposes.[10] Although this is perhaps too harsh, it is nevertheless true that among the main innovations of the New Liberals was to create a new conception of what constituted the community and the role of citizens vis-a-vis others as well as the state. Hobson considered that complete freedom was the product of a selfish act, where some citizens were getting richer while others were lost in misery. He proposed, instead, an 'organic view of society', where individual freedoms were embedded within a community. In his words, his view was 'One which regards the relation of the individual to society as an intrinsic one; one which recognised that the individual has an independent

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4   Michael Freeden, LIBERAL LANGUAGES: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Though. Princeton University Press 2005. Princeton, New Jersey, p. 131.

5   Freeden, pp. 85-89.

6   Ibid, p. 85.

7   Ibid, p. 108.

8   Benjamin Constant, 'The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns', Lecture to the Athenee Royale Paris, 1819, published in 2017. https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/constant1819.pdf

9   Luke Hallam, 'Two Concepts of Liberty by Isaiah Berlin', ELF Liberal Reads, Episode 19, https://liberalforum.eu/publication/liberal-read-no-19-two-concepts-of-liberty/

10  Goodin, R. E. (2005). Book Review: Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought. Political Theory, 33(6), 899–901. https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591705276454

> Ideologies change across time and space, and what is perceived to be morally acceptable today may be reprehensible in the future. Likewise, conceptions of authority, legitimacy or the rights of 'the community' might also vary across the different languages of liberalism and at certain moments in time.

life of his own, and yet saw that this independent life is nothing other than his social life'.[11]

This conception of the individual and its relationship with society is reminiscent of the communitarian view of an 'embedded self', as opposed to the 'unencumbered self' of classical liberalism.[12] The New Liberals, in spite of their focus on injustices and equality, diverge considerably from John Rawls, due to their historicist and pro-community position, naturally opposed to his attempt to identify finding universal principles of justice.[13] This is also a test of the malleability of ideologies, especially in the case of liberalism, which can unite under the same umbrella the thought of John Locke, Hobson, Susan Moller Okin, Friedrich Hayek and John Rawls. According to Freeden, 'The diverse languages of liberalism – and of any ideological family – are not an aberration, nor are all but one of these variants a deviation from a discursive and ideational norm established by a supposedly correct version. Liberalism's boundaries are permeable because its mainstream is negotiable at its edges and, occasionally, closer even to its core'.[14]

The ductility of political ideologies led to some proposals under the banner of liberalism that would be considered abhorrent today. Freeden devotes one essay to the question of 'Eugenics and progressive thought', showing how it was supported in a transversal manner. Social reformers, for instance, considered industrial and political reforms to be insufficient, and they aspired to elevate the condition of all mankind. Although liberal democracies condemned eugenics following World War II, Freeden reminds us that 'The moral of this story is not that eugenics can be legitimised with ease even in its worth excesses nor that its salient anti-liberal and often fascist leanings can be obfuscated. Rather, it has been to illustrate the inappropriateness of approaching ideologies, or segments of social thinking, in a black and white dichotomous fashion'.[15]

Ideologies change across time and space, and what is perceived to be morally acceptable today may be reprehensible in the future. Likewise, conceptions of authority, legitimacy or the rights of 'the community' might also vary across the different languages of liberalism and at certain moments in time. While New Liberalism adopted this vision of social reform and had a proactive understanding of the role of the state in improving the lives of all citizens, the Manchester School preferred a more classical liberal approach. Both currents, however, can be considered liberal, and they form part of a tradition that spans a wide range of thinkers, countries and ideas.

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11  Freeden, p. 135.

12  Sandel, M. J. (1984). The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self. Political Theory, 12(1), 81–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/191382

13  Thompson, J. (2006). Review of M. Freeden, Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought (Princeton, 2005). Twentieth Century British History, 17, 141 - 143. https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwi069

14  Freeden, p.158.

15  Ibid, p. 197.

### The lasting influence of liberal thought

Two essays in Freeden's book are devoted to New Labour, the famous attempt to combine capitalism and socialism, where the Labour Party embraced markets and policy ideas traditionally associated with the right. New Labour triumphed in the UK for the best part of a decade, and it was a model for social-democratic parties across the European continent during that period and even beyond it.

Freeden argues that most of the influences on Tony Blair that he brought to his famous 'Third Way' were liberal, not social-democratic. In fact, he argues, Herbert Spencer had already, by the beginning of the twentieth century, identified a 'third position' that would the best elements of liberalism and socialism, where society and state would work in partnership instead of clashing. Similarly, Ramsay MacDonald, Labour Prime Minister in the inter-war years, claimed that his socialism shared with liberalism 'an abhorrence of class as a divisive sectionalism'.[16] Can we say that liberalism and socialism were converging at the beginning of the twentieth century and continued to do so at its end?

Freeden states that this was indeed the case, and New Labour decided to embrace the idea of a 'positive liberty', defending the need for self-development and the possibility to choose any plan of life that did not infringe on the rights and freedoms of others. In fact, he argues that Blair and his team went a step further, moving from a concept of welfarism based on rights, entitlements and social justice to one which also put the focus on responsibilities. Politics, for New Labour, had to combine 'ambition with compassion and success with social justice'.[17]

> We should not seek closed visions of what it is to be a 'true liberal' or exclude others from being defenders of 'liberal democracy' in a broad sense. Instead, accepting diverging ideologies that converge in the defence of the basic rights and freedoms of our polities could be a way forward for gathering new allies in the fight for a more prosperous EU and a more prosperous West.

This is very similar to the Jerry Cohen's assessment made of Ronald's Dworkin development of 'Luck Egalitarianism': 'Dworkin has, in effect, performed for egalitarianism the considerable service of incorporating within it the most powerful idea in the arsenal of the antiegalitarian Right: the idea of choice and responsibility'.[18] Dworkin considered that injustices derived from brute luck, where there was no moral responsibility and that were completely arbitrary, should be fought. However, a lack of 'option luck', based on choices made, should not entitle anyone to compensation, as people are each responsible for what they do. In addition, with a combination of rights and responsibilities, the New Labour added another 'weapon of the right' to their arsenal, promoting a vision of the citizen not only as a recipient of help but also as an active part of the community. A citizen who is able to develop but who is also responsible for his or her choices. A vision, thus, embedded in the liberal tradition.

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16  Ibid, p. 210.

17  Freeden, p.219.

18  Miller, D. (2014). The incoherence of luck egalitarianism. In Cambridge University Press eBooks (pp. 131–150). https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139940924.009

Freeden, however, criticises what he considers New Labour's attempt to 'end ideologies', a technocratic conception intended to 'depopulate the public sphere'. With Blair's declaration that ideology was dead and that the 'aim of socialism was to give greater freedoms to the individual',[19] the eternal conflict between socialism and liberalism seemed settled. We know now that the joining of the two was a mere marriage of convenience, and ideology was never truly dead. In fact, Freeden argues, this very conception of the public sphere and the realm of the political is an ideology in itself. Ideologies 'do not have to be grand narratives or closed, doctrinaire and abstract systems. They can be action-oriented patterns of political argument'.[20]

The present moment, when it seems that the power of thin-core ideologies, such as nationalism, is on the rise, while liberalism and social-democratic thinking are on the defensive, it is a good time to remind ourselves of the power of ideologies and the multiplicity of languages that they can speak. We should not seek closed visions of what it is to be a 'true liberal' or exclude others from being defenders of 'liberal democracy' in a broad sense. Instead, accepting diverging ideologies that converge in the defence of the basic rights and freedoms of our polities could be a way forward for gathering new allies in the fight for a more prosperous EU and a more prosperous West.

In addition, we should not reject any aspect of the long and storied liberal tradition. Freeden focuses, following expertise, on the role of the New Liberals and the more 'social' and 'organic' approaches to liberalism that were seen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Studies of those who were more in favour of the free market, moral reform and limitations of political power are equally valuable. For the world of today, liberal theories need to be able to tackle the problems of climate change, the gender pay gap and the failures of the intergenerational and social contract, as well as those of the role, authority and legitimacy of the state, with the virtues and shortcomings of welfarism. Only by understanding the multiplicity of authors, languages and ideas that form the liberal tradition can we stand against the growing current of illiberalism that is shaking the free world.

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19  Freeden, p. 226.
20  Ibid, p. 228.

## ABOUT ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 56 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.

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