



Liberal Read

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Inventing the Individual

BOOK REVIEW

Larry Siedentop

Inventing the Individual

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

Inventing the Individual



Shortly after the publication of the book, Larry Siedentop wrote an article in the *Financial Times* denouncing the 'moral tepidity' of the West.¹ The West obsessively equated liberalism with secularism and neutrality, ignoring the Medieval period, which was associated with darkness, ignorance, and superstition. Siedentop's book, appropriately titled *Inventing the Individual*, provides a new genealogy of liberalism, giving a completely novel account of how the seeds for the appearance of this ideology were sown. Instead of looking to John Locke, Adam Smith or the Enlightenment, Siedentop finds the 'origins of Western Liberalism' in Christianity.

This book is not a *History of European Liberalism*, but instead a history of its roots or the preconditions for the apparition of liberalism.² Siedentop argues that at present, liberalism is obsessed with ideas of neutrality and non-perfectionism and that this weakened the West vis-à-vis the postulates of ideologies such as radical Islamism, which are at odds with these principles. Part of the problem, he says, comes from historical misunderstandings, including the attribution of secularism to ancient Greece and Rome, and to the aspiration to construct political ideologies that are inspired by these false memories. Instead, we should look at the 'Dark Ages' for our origins, an age that has been unfairly mistreated, where the preconditions for the development of the freedoms of today were established.

The Ancient World

On Siedentop's view, the public discourse tends to see Greece and Rome as the societies where secularism existed, where the sphere of the divine and the sphere of the material are clearly divided. It could be argued, however, that this is not the common perception of those two societies, with clear imagery across books, television and movies of rituals being conducted before battles or important events. Nevertheless, both Greece and Rome have captured the imagination of many as paradises of relatively free thought, individuality and flourishing before – and in contrast to – the oppressive period of the Dark Ages.

This, for Siedentop, is deceitful. He states that the Ancient World was 'full' of religion. The polis, which was the city-state of ancient times, was born of the union of different families, and each family had a pater familias who acted as a sort of high priest. Families

1 Remember the religious roots of liberal thought. (2014, January 23). *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/724a3ae0-81cb-11e3-87d5-00144feab7de>

2 Books, F. (2021, February 24). Italian Political Philosophy Books - Five books Expert recommendations. Five Books. <https://fivebooks.com/best-books/italian-political-philosophy-guglielmo-verdirame/#book-61104>

traced their origins back to a mythical hero and had altars to their ancestors in the home. Life was divided between the public sphere, which was the realm of politics, and the domestic sphere, where one did not have any consciousness of oneself as an individual but was as a member of a family. Consequently, the paterfamilias was the supreme ruler, subsuming women, children, and slaves under his command. In the public sphere, the polis or the state was governed for the tribes, the gens, or another stratum, not for the benefit of any individual citizen.

This is related to the idea of the 'liberty of the ancients', in Benjamin Constant's conception.³ According to Siedentop, in ancient Greece and Rome, freedom was associated with participation in the civic life of the polis. It was equated to the core duty of a good citizen, as somebody who worked for the homeland and was willing

According to Siedentop, in ancient Greece and Rome, freedom was associated with participation in the civic life of the polis. It was equated to the core duty of a good citizen, as somebody who worked for the homeland and was willing to die defending it. 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' ('Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country') was a common saying, because losing the homeland meant losing one's status as a citizen and, consequently, losing one's freedom as the main attribute of this status.

to die defending it. '*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*' ('Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country') was a common saying, because losing the homeland meant losing one's status as a citizen and, consequently, losing one's freedom as the main attribute of this status. Commerce, on the other hand, was seen as a sign of effeminacy, and thinking about the self was egoistic and unworthy of a good citizen.

This ancient social order was rooted in the ancient conception of nature itself, in which inequality was normal rather than a problem or injustice. In *The Republic*, Plato put forward a concept of society as divided into strata, with the philosopher-Kings at the top, and this was regarded as the normal in the ancient world. Only the sophists, who were repudiated by many philosophers then and now, argued that any moral position could be defended and that the present vision of society was not necessarily the only acceptable one. John Gray laments, in fact, that Siedentop does not devote more time to the Sophist's criticisms, as they show a plurality of thought in the ancient world that appears to be absent from Siedentop's text.⁴ That text is, undoubtedly, a masterwork in historiography, but given the vast period of time that it covers (around 2,000 years), it would have been impossible to cover all relevant authors and currents. Here, the feeling is that, sometimes Siedentop conveniently omits those who do not fit into or contradict to his

arguments, seeming to force a sense of predestination upon the reader. Siedentop's teleological vision pushes forward the idea of Christianity as the only way forward to

3 Constant, B. (2016). 16. The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns. In R. Blaug & J. Schwarzmantel (Ed.), *Democracy: A Reader* (pp. 108-110). New York Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/blau17412-021>

4 John Gray - Jesus will set you free. (n.d.). *Literary Review*. <https://literaryreview.co.uk/jesus-will-set-you-free>

develop the individual conscience in a world that is trapped in a network of families, honour and war.

This is exactly his main argument: that Christianity broke the collectivist and religious spell of the ancient world and created an era in which the individual was placed in the centre. This was a long process, and even Siedentop himself admits that the Church contained seeds of oppression. However, at times, the reader has the impression that the author is overlooking the darkest pages of the history of organised religion in favour of a tale where the propagation of the Christian doctrine resulted in a world newly centred on the individual and not on the collective.

Inventing the individual

According to Siedentop, St. Paul invented Christianity. Jesus of Nazareth preached about the end of this world and the coming of a new one, but Paul systematised his teachings. The Christian religion put the focus not on families or ancestors but on the equality of all souls before Yahve, the Lord. God gives us both rationality and moral agency, allowing us to save ourselves, even if we are his servants. How can we be free individuals and servants at the same time? Thinkers after Paul would grapple with this problem, and Origen stated:

In the passage: 'Speak to the children of Israel; perhaps they will hear and will repent', God does not say 'perhaps they will hear' as if he were in doubt about it. God is never in doubt and that cannot be the reason... The reason is to make your freedom of choice stand out as clearly as possible and to prevent your saying: 'If he foreknows my loss then I am bound to be lost and if he foreknows my salvation then I am quite certain to be saved'.⁵

The Christian God knows what is going to happen to each of our souls, but he does not tell us, as that would mean that we would not be acting freely as we wished due to the bias that knowledge introduces. This idea of 'free will' was new at the time, as was that of a God who did not enter into human affairs but instead, was able to leave them be and forgive sins. This was prosecuted by the Roman authorities, as it was opposed to the most basic principles of Roman religion. However, Siedentop argues, the new faith resonated across the Roman Empire, due to the similarity between a distant but powerful and caring Emperor in Rome and a similar figure in the God in heaven. Something was changing under the surface.

Christianity began to demolish all of the religious pillars of the ancient world. The first to go was the concept of the hero. The glorious ancestor who died in battle, blessed by the gods, became the martyr who sacrificed his life for Christ and all humankind. Not everyone could be a heroic warrior, but everyone could be a martyr for the cause of Christ. Second came the change of focus away from the community to the family and from public life to the inner self. Christianity encouraged the development of a private sphere for each person, beyond the control of political rulers or the clan, taking the first steps towards real freedom of conscience. Even the Emperor Constantine chose a humble building to be buried in, instead of the magnificent opulence of the tombs of

5 Larry Siedentop. *Inventing the Individual*. 2015. Penguin Books. Penguin Random House UK. MILTON KEYNES, p. 69.

emperors of the past.⁶ No longer was the public image the most important part of life but instead was the preservation of will and soul.

Third, Christianity gained ground among those in marginalised positions – among women in particular – because its postulates appealed especially to them. Siedentop indicates that women were given greater responsibilities and power under Christianity, although he does not account for the lack of progress made in widening their spaces of freedom over the centuries that followed. However, the Christian framework seemed to promise to those living beyond the boundaries of urban nobility and oligarchic families

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a better world, both in this life and the next. Indeed, Christianity, through its monastic communities (referred to by the author as 'democratic experiments'), rapidly extended across rural areas, which helped Christianity spread throughout the Empire.

Siedentop proceeds to examine the evolution of these concepts and that of the organised Church throughout the centuries. He takes the reader from St. Augustin's defence of the possibility of failing and improving, which is a very liberal principle in itself, to Charlemagne's moral reforms and focus on the souls of each of his subjects.⁷ From the division of powers in old feudalism to the moral condemnation of slavery, 'This new universalism attributed conscience and will to all souls, and helped to sound the death knell of ancient slavery. It tended to remove the moral frontier separating free man from the slave'.⁸ This motion went from the hierarchical and inegalitarian world of the past to the constant councils and debates within a Church that ultimately centralised it, but only after a long period of reforms.⁹ However, the main argument remains the same: Christianity provided much of the basis for the birth of liberal principles that we recognise from the eighteenth century on.

Liberal universalism?

We worship the one God... There are others whom you regard as gods; we know them to be demons. Nevertheless, it is a basic human right that everyone should be free to worship according to his own convictions. No one is either harmed or helped by another man's religion. Religion must be practiced freely, not by coercion; even animals for sacrifice must be offered with a willing heart.

⁶ Siedentop, p. 89.

⁷ Ibid, p. 105.

⁸ Ibid, p. 173.

⁹ Ibid, p. 113.

So even if you compel us to sacrifice, you will not be providing your gods with any worthwhile sacrifice. They will not want sacrifices from unwilling offers – unless they are perverse, which God is not.¹⁰

These words are from Tertullian, but they would sound very appealing to liberals of the twenty-first century. The point that Siedentop hammers home throughout this monumental work is clear, and it is convincing. It is obvious that in a book of this magnitude, it is difficult to anticipate and answer all possible objections, but it would strengthen the argument if the author had spent more time dealing with problems such as those posed by the sophists (who rejected the moral absolutism of the ancient world) or the numerous heresies of the early Christian Church. A second look at the history of the Church and its prosecution of infidels, marginalisation of women and forced conversions would also help in providing context to the main topic here.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that *Inventing the Individual* provides a fresh argument against traditionally secular liberal historiography. However, we must consider whether it would be good for liberalism and the West, to accept a 'morally dense' theory, such as Christianity, as its basis. According to Siedentop, this could be arguing against other ideologies, instead of seeking refuge in 'neutrality' or 'non-perfectionism', which are hardly inspiring.

However, if liberalism wishes to be truly universal, can it be based on the values of Christianity? On the contrary, it would seem that establishing liberalism as a Western and Christian-centred ideology would not help convince others of its virtues and universal appeal but would rather foster the sense of an ideology whose goal is to enforce Western values over other parts of the world. For liberalism to broaden its appeal, it would seem more sensible to recognise the possible Christian influence on liberalism but to base its universalism on other principles that do not require appeal to a pre-established idea of 'the good life'. A morally neutral and non-perfectionist liberalism that recognises the plurality of traditions of thought that gave birth to the ideology would be more appealing to seeking to topple autocracies and establish liberal democracies around the world.

In any case, works such as this are necessary to reinvigorate the historiography of liberalism and to develop provocative arguments that can challenge our preconceptions regarding the role of religion in liberalism's origins. If secularism and Christianity were not at odds to the extent we imagined, perhaps we can reconcile elements of other traditions of thought to build a more inclusive version of liberalism. The constant dialogue allowing for the development of an ideology, with its necessary adaptation to the world of today, is never over.

¹⁰ Siedentop, p.78.



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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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