

members of an ideological family will share. In this case it is hard to imagine a liberalism without some combination of: checks on power, liberty, rationality, progress, individuality, mutual interdependence and the public interest – though these will not always have the same weight and meaning in every case.

This shift away from the ambitions of political theory to create an optimal ideology and towards the descriptive approach of history suggests that it would be a waste of time and energy to search for a clear definition of ‘real’ or ‘essential’ liberalism. And, similarly, that it would be a mistake to expect it to offer ready-packaged and conclusive solutions to the dilemmas of policy-making: which can only be dealt with appropriately and humanely through public discussion of a menu of possibilities, producing compromises subject to constant adaptation. But that is the attraction of liberalism properly understood: that it is closer to the uncertainty and ambiguity of life as most people experience it than are many other political ideologies, particularly those of a totalitarian or utopian type which aim for some sort of final closure.

Slippery Liberalism

Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton University Press, 2015)

Review by Tudor Jones

AT THE HEART of this book there seems to lie a persistent ambiguity, arguably even a definitional error, in respect of its subject matter. It purports at the outset to be, in the words of its author, who was a journalist for *The Economist* for more than three decades, ‘a biographically led, non-specialist chronicle of liberalism as a practice of politics’, one that has stretched over two centuries in the West since the early nineteenth century. Yet in the author’s preface to this 2015 paperback edition of his book, originally published the previous year, Edmund Fawcett maintains that its underlying message was ‘that liberal democracy was under challenge and urgently needed repair’, a message that struck him ‘as more pressing than ever.’ At the same time, he states that *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* ‘offered a comprehensive guide to liberalism’s

While it would therefore be not only premature but inappropriate to talk of the ‘triumph of liberalism’, we can say that the liberal tradition has been and still is a central pillar of the modern world: placing human beings at the centre of the social universe, unleashing a critical approach to knowledge, legitimising constant change in public policy, and advocating an appreciation of the diversity of people’s ways of life. Thinkers and politicians who do not take these themes for granted are now generally regarded as somewhat cranky, though of course in liberal polities they are usually still allowed a voice.

It is hard to imagine a better introduction to liberalism than Freedman’s short book and, like all outstanding introductions, it has a lot to offer to those who don’t think they really need one.

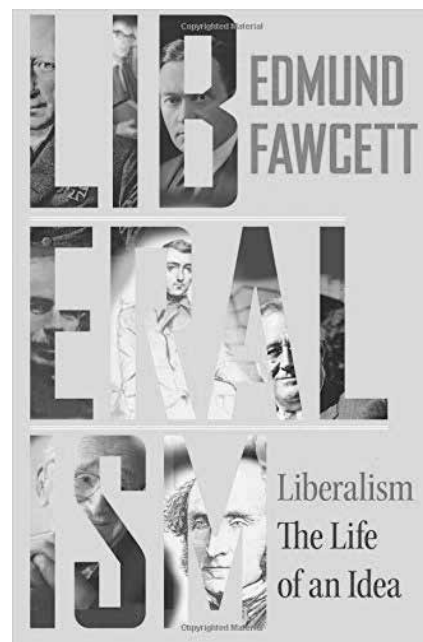
Alastair J. Reid is a Life Fellow of Girton College, Cambridge and author of a number of books on the history of British trade unions written from a broadly liberal perspective, including, most recently, Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain. Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century, jointly edited with Peter Ackers.

foundations in conceptual and historical depth’, thereby providing ‘vital intellectual background for hard thinking about liberal democracy’s future.’ The author points out, too, that Part Two of his book, entitled ‘Liberalism in Maturity and the Struggle with Democracy’ (1880–1945), ‘described liberalism’s long and ever negotiable compromise with democracy from which liberal democracy emerged.’

In such a manner Fawcett appears to blur the distinction, which is both an empirical and a conceptual one, between, on the one hand, liberalism as a broad tradition of political thinking in the West, a particular political ideology, that has developed a distinctive vision of society based on certain core values and beliefs, and, on the other hand, liberal democracy as a type of political regime involving limited, constitutional

government, popular consent, and the political and civil liberties of the individual citizen. At best it could be said that later, throughout his study, Fawcett treats liberalism as a meta-ideology, that is, broadly speaking, the higher, second-order ideology of the industrialised West, which has provided a framework embracing the rival values and beliefs of particular political doctrines. Since at least 1945 there have, after all, been other distinctive ideological approaches to liberal democracy besides those of classical liberalism and social liberalism, specifically, those of conservatism, in its various forms, particularly evident in the United States, as well as those of democratic socialism and social democracy.

From that blurred conceptual distinction, however, between liberalism and liberal democracy, seem to me to stem the two main shortcomings of *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*: its very broad narrative approach and the extremely wide scope of Fawcett’s historical account of Western liberalism as he conceives and defines it. With regard to Fawcett’s historical narrative, it is developed chronologically in three parts: first, the period of liberalism’s ‘youthful definition’ from 1830 to 1880; second, that of its maturation and its ‘historic compromise with democracy’ from 1880 to 1945, from which liberalism emerged in more inclusive form as democratic liberalism, better known as liberal democracy; and, third, the period from 1945 to 1989, when, ‘after near-fatal failures’ in the twentieth century, involving ‘two world wars, political failures, and economic slump’, liberal democracy ‘won itself another



chance', in 1945 after the military defeat of fascism, 'its twentieth-century rival to the right.' In the aftermath of that victory, the manner in which liberal democracy revived and prospered is examined, in Part Three of Fawcett's book, culminating in the eventual demise of liberal democracy's 'twentieth-century rival to the left, Soviet Communism.'

In the book's coda, Fawcett nevertheless avoids striking a prematurely triumphalist note, acknowledging that, since 1989, and in the opening decades of the 21st century, 'the mood has darkened', with new threats posed to liberal democracy by various malevolent, illiberal forces. Towards the end of the book, in an interesting and reflective discussion, Fawcett addresses, too, the question of liberal democracy's future sustainability, socially, economically, and internationally. Avoiding, however, a purely Anglo-American focus, the three main parts of *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* all concentrate on four different Western countries which, since 1945, have comprised liberal democracy's 'exemplary core' – namely, France, Britain, Germany, and the United States of America.

All of this narrative structure would appear historically coherent if the book were expressly a history of the gradual emergence and development of liberal democracy in those four countries. But, while recognising that liberalism, thus broadly equated by the author with liberal democracy, 'is bound to be capacious', Fawcett then seeks to bind that structure together with his own definition of Western liberalism. In his view, 'four broad ideas have guided liberal practice', namely, 'acknowledgment of inescapable ethical and material conflict within society, distrust of power, faith in human progress, and respect for people whatever they think and whoever they are.'

In developing within that very broad conceptual framework his even broader historical narrative, Fawcett draws on an impressively wide range of primary and secondary sources. But, since *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* provides, in his words, 'a historical essay for the common reader', those sources are not referenced in regular footnotes, but are instead listed in detail at the end of the book. Fawcett's narrative, he also points out, 'strays into history, biography, political philosophy, and the history of ideas.' He candidly admits, however, that: 'I am an expert in none of those fields, though as a journalist I have seen a lot of liberal politics over the past forty-five years' in

the four Western countries on which his narrative focuses.

But, as noted above, problems arise from the sheer breadth and density of Fawcett's narrative approach. This is particularly evident in Part One of the book, covering the period from 1830 to 1880, much of which is hard going for the reader. Here Fawcett frequently flits from the ideas of one political or social thinker to another without any developed historical narrative or, in some cases, without any coherent theoretical analysis. A section on John Stuart Mill, for example, while biographically interesting and perceptive, pays barely any attention to the most celebrated part of Mill's *On Liberty*, arguably the most eloquent exposition of the case for freedom of speech and expression in the English language, which comprises one-third of that essay, and which is as clearly relevant today as it was in mid-Victorian England, not least on many American, and some British, university campuses.

In Part Two of the book, too, on 'Liberalism in Maturity' (1880–1945), in a section on Liberal Imperialism, there are too many generalities in place of analysis, and too many sharp transitions made from the ideas of Joseph Chamberlain to those of Ernest Basserman in Germany. All of this is also apparent in a later section covering the ideas and conduct of 'liberal hawks' David Lloyd George, Georges Clemenceau, and Woodrow Wilson.

Fawcett's overall approach of blending biographical detail with historical narrative is, however, more effective when he offers more focused and coherent accounts of the economic ideas and theories of Hayek, Keynes, et al., in a section on 'Liberal Economics in the Slump', as well as in Part Three, on the period after 1945, in a section on what are very broadly categorised 'left-liberal' democrats in the 1950s and 1960s, namely, Pierre Mendès-France in France, Willy Brandt in West Germany, and Lyndon Johnson in the United States. The sheer breadth, however, of Fawcett's historical narrative does lead on occasion, perhaps for that very reason unsurprisingly, to some factual errors or flaws in theoretical analysis. To take two examples from a British perspective, the British Liberal Party was not reduced in the Labour landslide of the 1945 general election to, as he states, only six seats in parliament, but rather twelve. It did not suffer the fate of only six seats until the 1951 election. In addition, when Fawcett

eventually mentions later and briefly John Stuart Mill's defence of free speech, he refers to Mill's 'sunny confidence in a vigorous, open contest of opinion.' Mill was in fact anything but confident about the inevitable advancement of truth as an effect of freedom of discussion. In *On Liberty* he wrote that: 'The dictum that truth always triumphs over persecution, is one of those pleasant falsehoods which men repeat after one another till they pass into commonplaces, but which all experience refutes.'

The very title of the final section of Part Three of Fawcett's study, namely, 'The Breadth of Liberal Politics in the 1950s–1980s', underlines what appears to be the book's second main shortcoming, that is, the extremely wide scope of his conception of Western liberalism in the four countries under scrutiny. To illustrate that point vividly, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, Francois Mitterand, and Helmut Kohl are thus all considered within the broad category of 'right liberalism in the 1970s–1980s'. Of Thatcher in particular, Fawcett writes that she 'was right-wing and for all her talk of freedom was over-fond of power, but she was still liberal.' Such a judgement is simplistic and manifestly too broad, as Thatcher herself would probably have pointed out, unless, that is, 'liberal' is intended here as a supporter of the ideals and institutions of liberal democracy, or unless, too, 'liberal' is narrowly equated with economic liberalism. It also seems to be a serious omission that in the entire content of Part Three of Fawcett's book, covering the post-1945 period as a whole, the only British Liberal thinker, in the sense of an exponent of the ideas and policies of organised party Liberalism in Britain, who comes under consideration is William Beveridge.

Liberalism: The Life of an Idea is a well-researched study that contains in some parts valuable historical observations and much insightful biographical detail. Its intellectual and literary aims are also admirable. But it simply tries to cover too much ground, and its perspective on Western liberalism as developed in its concentration on four exemplary nation-states is only broadly valid if, as noted previously, liberalism itself is considered as synonymous with liberal democracy, or else regarded as a meta-ideology. An examination of the differences, as well as the shared common ground, between classical liberalism and social liberalism, in itself by no means a hard-and-fast ideological distinction, as they developed

in Britain, France, Germany, and the United States, would, in my view, have provided the material for a more historically focused, less cluttered, and more intellectually coherent study.

In his preface to this 2015 paperback edition, Fawcett did concede, it should be added, that his book ‘acknowledged the slipperiness of the label “liberal”, the complexity of liberalism’s key ideas and the absence of any decisive fact of the matter that would put marginal thinkers or politicians clearly in or clearly out of

my large liberal tent.’ He also mentioned that among the original reviews of his book, when it was first published in 2014, Samuel Brittan objected in *The Financial Times* ‘that after 1945 my liberalism included everybody but “authoritarians and totalitarians”.’ To that Fawcett responded that had Brittan ‘added “populists and theocrats” to those I excluded, I would have taken his complaint as praise.’ This reviewer, however, while recognising the value of parts of Fawcett’s study, and of its underlying purpose,

tends to broadly concur with Samuel Brittan’s judgement.

Dr Tudor Jones is Hon. Research Fellow in History of Political Thought at Coventry University. His publications include The Revival Of British Liberalism: From Grimond to Clegg (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). A revised and fully updated edition of that book, entitled The Uneven Path of British Liberalism: from Jo Grimond to Brexit, will be published by Manchester University Press in 2018.

Research in Progress

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65)

Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete digital edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/cobdenproject). *Dr Anthony Howe School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk.*

Dadabhai Naoroji

Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917) was an Indian nationalist and Liberal member for Central Finsbury, 1892–95 – the first Asian to be elected to the House of Commons. This research for a PhD at Harvard aims to produce both a biography of Naoroji and a volume of his selected correspondence, to be published by OUP India in 2013. The current phase concentrates on Naoroji’s links with a range of British progressive organisations and individuals, particularly in his later career. Suggestions for archival sources very welcome. *Dinyar Patel; dinyar.patel@gmail.com or 07775 753 724.*

The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper

Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830–49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842–46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. *Brian Smith; brian63@inbox.com.*

The Liberal Party in Wales, 1966–1988

Aims to follow the development of the party from the general election of 1966 to the time of the merger with the SDP. PhD research at Cardiff University. *Nick Alderton; nickalito@hotmail.com.*

The emergence of the ‘public service ethos’

Aims to analyse how self-interest and patronage was challenged by the advent of impartial inspectorates, public servants and local authorities in provincial Britain in the mid 19th century. Much work has been done on the emergence of a ‘liberal culture’ in the central civil service in Whitehall, but much work needs to be done on the motives, behaviour and mentalities of the newly reformed guardians of the poor, sanitary inspectors, factory and mines inspectors,

education authorities, prison warders and the police. *Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; i.cawood@newman.ac.uk.*

The life of Professor Reginald W. Revans, 1907–2003

Any information anyone has on Revans’ Liberal Party involvement would be most welcome. We are particularly keen to know when he joined the party and any involvement he may have had in campaigning issues. We know he was very interested in pacifism. Any information, oral history submissions, location of papers or references most welcome. *Dr Yury Boshyk, yury@gel-net.com; or Dr Cheryl Brook, cheryl.brook@port.ac.uk.*

Russell Johnston, 1932–2008

Scottish Liberal politics was dominated for over thirty years (1965–95 and beyond) by two figures: David Steel and Russell Johnston. Of the former, much has been written; of the latter, surprisingly little. I am therefore researching with a view to writing a biography of Russell. If any readers can help – with records, other written material or reminiscences – please let me know, either by email or post. *Sir Graham Watson, sirgrahamwatson@gmail.com; 9/3 Merchiston Park, Edinburgh EH10 4PW.*

Liberal song and the Glee Club

Aiming to set out the history of Liberal song from its origins to the days of the Liberal Revue and Liberator Songbook. Looking to complete a song archive, the history of the early, informal conference Glee Clubs in the 1960s and 1970s, and all things related. *Gareth Epps; garethepps@gmail.com.*

Policy position and leadership strategy within the Lib Dems

This thesis will be a study of the political positioning and leadership strategy of the Liberal Democrats. Consideration of the role of equidistance; development of policy from the point of merger; the influence and leadership strategies of each leader from Ashdown to Clegg; and electoral strategy from 1988 to 2015 will form the basis of the work. Any material relating to leadership election campaigns, election campaigns, internal party groups (for example the Social Liberal Forum) or policy documents from 1987 and merger talks onwards would be greatly welcomed. Personal insights and recollections also sought. *Samuel Barratt; pt10seb@leeds.ac.uk.*