

Reviews

balance of central–local powers? It's what Radical Joe and Chocolate George would have wanted.

Philip Davis is a Birmingham Labour Councillor, ex-Leader of Telford Council, and

former chair of the West Midlands Regional Assembly. He is City Heritage Champion.

1 Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities: Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Middlesbrough, Melbourne, London* (Penguin, 1990).

Liberalism: An outstanding introduction

Michael Freeden, *Liberalism. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

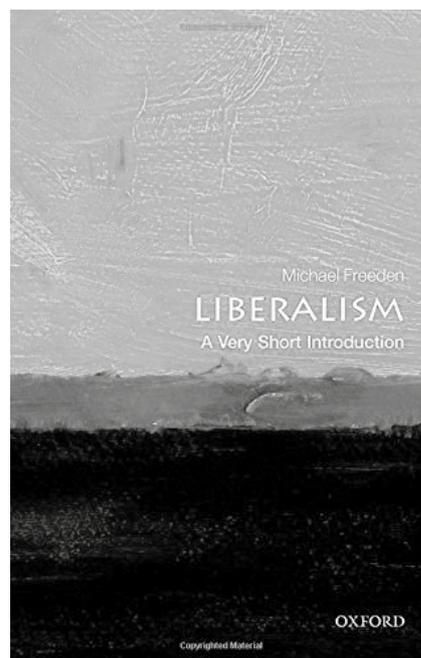
Review by **Alastair J. Reid**

WHAT AN APPROPRIATE name for a writer on liberalism! My keyboard kept anticipating it as 'freedom'... And Michael Freeden has indeed written a generous and open book, which manages to combine a helpful account of its immediate subject with an overview of a distinctive approach to ideologies more generally. Moreover, there is enough repetition of its main ideas in different forms and contexts to make them easier to digest and remember.

Primarily about British liberalism, though with many interesting side-ways comparisons with other countries, the book steers us quickly and skilfully from John Locke's proto-liberalism; through the Manchester School's economic utilitarianism; John Stuart Mill's exploration of individual development; the 'new liberalism' and state welfare (in T. H. Green, L. T. Hobhouse and J. A.

Hobson); to pluralism and the dilemmas of contemporary identity politics. This sequence deliberately leaves out so-called 'neoliberalism', which he sees as such a thinned-out version as to cross over the boundary into conservatism.

However, in the course of this survey Freeden emphasises varieties of legitimate members of the family. First, varieties within political liberalism: especially the well-known distinction between classical liberalism restraining the state and social liberalism using the state to promote human well-being. But then, second, less well-known varieties outside the sphere of strictly political thought and action: especially the university liberalism of early nineteenth-century Germans, emphasising the spontaneous cultivation of intellectual and moral powers; and the philosophical liberalism of late twentieth-century North Americans, emphasising the rational



clarification of norms of justice, democracy and individual rights.

Throughout, the book has a productive dual eye on history, without which the nature of liberalism could not begin to be understood, and the present day, which is what we can assume most of its readers will be interested in. Freeden develops a very useful image of 'layers' rather than successive stages: '... liberal ideas originated at different times, from diverse sources, and with varying aims in mind ... they are a composite of accumulated, discarded and retrieved strata in continuously fluctuating combinations'. But he accompanies this with the concept of 'morphology', that is, a basic shape or set of core ideas which all

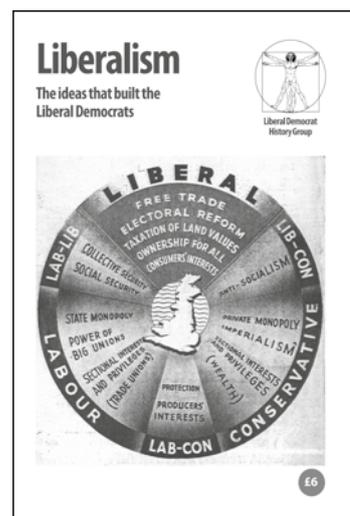
Liberalism

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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

