

Report

Liberalism in the United States

Evening meeting, 6 July 2021, with Professor Helena Rosenblatt and James Traub; chair: Layla Moran MP

Report by **Neil Stockley**

THE MEETING'S CHAIR, Layla Moran opened the meeting by confessing to an 'insane fascination with American politics'. She also noted how different liberalism in the United States often seems from the British version. In America, she suggested, the word 'liberal' often seems to be used almost as an insult. The meeting sought to trace the origins and core beliefs of American liberalism from the colonial era, through its triumphs and crises in the twentieth century to more recent developments.

Helena Rosenblatt, professor of history at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, contested the very notion of an 'early American liberalism'. We are used to hearing that liberalism is an Anglo-American tradition, she said, with many people citing John Locke, J. S. Mill and Adam Smith as its 'deep English roots'. According to this familiar account, liberal ideas were transported to the American colonies during the Enlightenment and found a place in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The new nation then set about exporting liberalism to the world. But this account, she was clear, was a 'complete myth'.

Professor Rosenblatt explained that liberalism first appeared in the early nineteenth century, in reaction to the French Revolution. The word 'liberalism' was coined in 1812 and its leading theorists were Madame de Stael and Benjamin Constant. They had four central concepts: the rule of law; civic equality; constitutional representative government; and individual rights, among which freedom of religion and of speech and assembly were most prominent.

Otherwise, she asserted, liberalism 'was never a codified set of principles, cast in stone'. The early liberals argued

over almost everything, Professor Rosenblatt said, including the merits of laissez faire, free market economics versus government intervention in economy, where they found no consensus. They also disagreed over who should have the vote and female suffrage. 'Liberalism was not one thing,' she maintained, 'it was contested from the very beginning, continued to be contested over its history and also evolved over time.'

This early liberalism was considered 'very French', she added, which many saw as dangerous, because it was 'so revolutionary'. In the early nineteenth century, liberalism was a pejorative word, which its opponents depicted as synonymous with atheism, anarchism, permissiveness and 'too much freedom'. Nineteenth century popes went so far as to call liberalism 'devil worship'. As a result, Madame de Stael and Constant avoided using the term. Nevertheless, this first, 'French moment' of liberalism lasted a few decades.

Professor Rosenblatt then described the second, 'German moment', which arrived in the middle of the nineteenth century. As urbanisation brought endemic poverty and disparities in wealth, a group of German political economists began to question whether laissez faire, free market ideas worked in practice. They advocated government intervention in the economy to alleviate unemployment, along with state provision of health, education and other social services. The Germans' contribution to liberalism had been largely forgotten following the two world wars, but it was nevertheless significant, Professor Rosenblatt argued, as their ideas were disseminated widely around the world, including to the United States. In Britain and elsewhere, self-described 'social liberals'

or 'liberal socialists' called for government action to increase 'the capacity' of poor people and 'enable them to be truly free'.

This last development was important because, as Professor Rosenblatt pointed out, the nineteenth century liberals were not democrats. Constant and de Stael, for instance, did not agree that women or poor people should have the vote, on the basis that they did not have sufficient income, the time, the property or the education to consider the common good. The 'social liberals', or 'New Liberals', responded that the state should act, to enable poor people to improve their material situation.

Others, who called themselves 'classical' or 'orthodox' liberals, rejected such thinking. They advocated a small state with little or no government intervention in the economy and on the latter point, became increasingly radical. The American philosopher John Dewey spoke of 'two streams of liberalism', with one favouring government intervention and social legislation and another advocating laissez faire economics.

The third moment, in the early twentieth century, was what Professor Rosenblatt called 'the Americanisation of liberalism'. As the United States also became more industrialised and urbanised, massive disparities in wealth and income developed. The Republican progressives, from 1912 onwards, and then the Wilsonian Democrats, after 1917, argued that government should take on a larger role in the economy and society. The latter group soon defined themselves as 'liberals'. A liberal approach to foreign policy also emerged. In his 1917 'peace with victory' speech, President Woodrow Wilson spoke 'for liberals and friends of humanism'. Later, he claimed that 'liberalism was the only thing that could save civilisation from chaos'.

The two streams of liberalism continued to exist in the United States. Herbert Hoover, who presided over the 1929 stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression, claimed that his 'small government' policies represented true liberalism. Hoover resented the way his successor,

Franklin D. Roosevelt, described his own New Deal as a liberal programme. Hoover eventually conceded the argument, leaving FDR to become, as Professor Rosenblatt put it, 'an icon and embodiment of American interventionist liberalism'. When Henry A. Wallace nominated FDR for re-election at the 1944 Democratic National Convention, he used the word 'liberal' fifteen times to describe the president and called him 'the greatest liberal in the history of the United States'.

Even so, Professor Rosenblatt was clear that American liberalism, like that found in other countries, had no codified body of ideas. American liberals, she said, had at different times been pragmatic reformers, centrists and incrementalists as they faced new challenges. What they all had in common, she said, was 'a belief in progress, science, enlightenment, truth and an openness to different perspectives'.

Professor Rosenblatt concluded by discussing why liberalism was perceived as an Anglo-American tradition, with the French and German contributions largely forgotten, as well as being synonymous with individual rights and property rights. She pointed to the two world wars, when it was necessary to remind Americans why they were fighting and making sacrifices. The rationale needed to be as different as possible from Nazism and later, during the Cold War, liberalism had to be distinguished from any form of socialism.

Journalist and author James Traub picked up the story with a brisk account of post-FDR, post-Second World War American liberalism. He explained that the foundation in March 1947 of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) by the historian Arthur Schlesinger, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and the labour official Walter Reuther as a liberal, anti-communist organisation marked the beginning of 'Cold War liberalism'.

Schlesinger's 1948 book, *The Vital Center*, became the movement's unofficial founding text. It sought to carve out a new space 'between the abyss of totalitarianism and the jungle of private enterprise' and warned that 'the wish for equality cannot allow us to

be beguiled by totalitarianism and the wish for individual liberty cannot allow us to descend into social Darwinism.' Schlesinger's central assertion was that communism was not an over-zealous version of socialism but a form of totalitarianism equal in evil to fascism. Communism was also much more dangerous, Schlesinger argued, because it appealed to 'romantic left-wing ideals of human equality and social justice'. The context for this anti-totalitarian liberalism, James Traub explained, was the growing appeal of communism to many intellectuals and artists, as shown by the rise of many leftist 'Popular Front' groups.

James Traub illustrated the story of Cold War liberalism using the political career of Hubert Humphrey, vice chair of the ADA and crusading, progressive mayor of Minneapolis in the mid-1940s. In breaking the communist stranglehold over the Minnesota Farmer Labor Party and forming a new party, he had already put Schlesinger's strategy into action. In early 1948, Humphrey, now a candidate for the US Senate, agreed to a request from the ADA leadership to champion a progressive civil rights platform, including anti-lynching and fair employment laws, at the forthcoming Democratic National Convention. The ADA saw civil rights as one of the unfinished moral issues that the New Deal had not addressed, because southern Democrats were so powerful in the Senate. They also recognised that Henry A. Wallace's newly founded Progressive Party, which had a strong civil rights platform, threatened to peel away liberal votes and allow the Republicans to win the presidential election.

Defying the party establishment, Humphrey 'gave the greatest speech of his life' in favour of the civil rights plank. He and his ADA colleagues won the vote, in part, James Traub explained because the big city bosses recognised that black voters, having migrated to the northern cities where their voting rights were not challenged, were now a crucial electoral bloc in key states such as New York, Pennsylvania and Illinois.

In civil rights, Cold War liberalism now had a defining issue that combined

its now-established commitment to social justice with an anti-communist crusade. James Traub argued that the Cold War was really a struggle of ideas which, Humphrey and his colleagues contended, the United States could only win by showing that 'democracy worked better'. Such was the key theme of Humphrey's speeches over the following decade.

James Traub stressed that post-war American liberalism differed from the 'free market' version in that it advocated both the market economy and 'social democracy'. The latter was exemplified by President Harry Truman's 'Fair Deal', which increased federal spending on health, education and housing. 'But what makes American liberalism so distinctive and what gives it both its heroic as well as tragic aspects is the way it's tangled up with the issues of race and the Cold War and thus America's place in this global struggle,' James Traub argued.

The Cold War liberals made little progress during the 1950s, however. Southerners in Congress continued to stymie civil rights bills and the public simply did not buy Humphrey's argument that America could prevail in the Cold War by proving its commitment to social justice at home. In other ways, James Traub suggested, liberalism almost became part of America's DNA during this prosperous decade. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Republican president, accepted the New Deal and liberals mostly accepted the market economy, even if they sought to tame its worst excesses.

In 1961 John F. Kennedy became president, but he saw the civil rights crusade as 'a loser', James Traub said. Whilst he may have been something of a 'Fair Deal' liberal, Kennedy's main domestic issue was the promise of a tax cut. In any case, his real priority was foreign policy where Kennedy had 'a romantic vision of what prevailing against the Soviet Union would mean'. He introduced the Civil Rights Act in June 1963, but only after Americans had seen terrible violence in Birmingham, Alabama, when the local public safety commissioner, 'Bull' Connor, set dogs on peaceful demonstrators. James Traub argued forcefully that the

Report: Liberalism in the United States

protests and sacrifices of Martin Luther King and other civil rights activists, rather than Humphrey and his colleagues, were the decisive drivers in the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which Kennedy himself did little to promote.

James Traub recounted how the mid-1960s saw 'the second high point of liberalism' as Lyndon Johnson rolled out his 'Great Society'. Congress passed the Equal Opportunities Act, the Voting Rights Act, Medicare, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Johnson set up programmes such as the Jobs Corps and Head Start. As Humphrey observed, liberals 'achieved in the 1960s the ADA resolutions of the 1950s'.

This new dawn of post-war American liberalism proved to be short-lived, however. James Traub recounted how, at the 1968 presidential election, Humphrey, 'the incarnation of liberalism', was not just defeated by Richard Nixon, but 'abandoned by the left, rejected by the ADA and despised by many people in the white working class'. He offered two explanations for this reversal of fortune.

First, the Great Society showed that paying targeted rather than universal benefits presents its proponents with great political difficulties. In making the case for the New Deal, FDR had been able to appeal to Americans' self-interest, James Traub recalled. Many of the benefits were targeted on unemployed people, but millions were out of work. In selling the Great Society, by contrast, LBJ had to appeal to 'their

conscience', arguing that after generations of neglect, the government now had to help poor people. Moreover, LBJ's war on poverty had what James Traub called 'an inevitable zero-sum aspect' as it involved spending billions of dollars 'to make whole the poor people who had unjustly suffered' that others had to pay for through their taxes. Liberals had to acknowledge that desegregating schools or housing disadvantaged some groups, he said.

James Traub did not exactly spell it out, but there was a racial element to these equations, as white working class and middle-class voters resented some of the programmes that catered mainly to African Americans. He recounted how Governor George Wallace, the Independent Party presidential candidate, told these core Democratic constituencies that the liberal elites were 'gouging you', while hardly ever mentioning race. Wallace also ran against the 'the sixties ... permissiveness ... the kids' and for 'law and order'. For many disenchanted voters, Humphrey came to symbolise these wedge issues, James Traub explained.

Second, he contended that 'the Vietnam War was fought in the name of Cold War liberalism'. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations tried to contain communism in Asia, as their predecessors had done elsewhere. The war also represented what James Traub called the liberals' 'romantic crusade', which was based on the belief that the United States could transform poor countries. Humphrey himself had even

suggested that the United States could establish a 'Great Society' in Asia. All this turned out to be, as James Traub put it very well, a 'tragic illusion'.

The question session started to explore the reasons why 'liberal' has become almost a swear word in American politics over recent decades. James Traub traced this development back to the Reagan era, as liberals sought out new ways of defining themselves, such as the word 'progressive'. I would have liked to have heard more discussion of the crisis of American liberalism in the 1970s and 1980s, and why Reagan's attacks proved so effective, but the Zoom account was suddenly and unexpectedly hijacked by party HQ. For most attendees, the meeting came to an abrupt end.

A few of us regrouped with the speakers, who were able to finish on a positive note. James Traub believed that liberalism was a set of processes to build a humane society and, even though it was always under attack, he believed that in Joe Biden, America now had the first true liberal in the White House since LBJ. Helena Rosenblatt argued that liberalism had re-invented itself before and needed to do so again, to confront new challenges, such as climate change, automation, data and the rise of China. Liberalism may have huge enemies, she said, but it was a 'fighting faith'.

Neil Stockley is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group executive.

Think history

Can you spare some time to help the History Group?

The Liberal Democrat History Group undertakes a wide range of activities – publishing this *Journal* and our Liberal history books and booklets, organising regular speaker meetings, maintaining the Liberal history website and providing assistance with research.

We'd like to do more, but our activities are limited by the number of people involved in running the Group. We would be enormously grateful for help with: improving our website; helping with our presence at Liberal Democrat conferences; organising our meeting programme; publicising our activities, through social media and more traditional means; and running the organisation.

If you'd like to be involved in any of these activities, or anything else, contact the Editor, **Duncan Brack** (journal@liberalhistory.org.uk) – we would love to hear from you.

