associates, he was also friendly with Oscar Wilde, Edward Carpenter and the poet Walt Whitman. Said to have exceptional good looks and 'an irresistible charm', he was able to continue this double life until 1902 when, with Battersea almost 60 years of age, he was arrested for homosexual offences. Jordaan states that influential members of society charged with such offences were given twenty-four hours' notice of their impending arrest, so that the individual could flee the country or even, in some cases, commit suicide. Battersea stayed put and, with the benefit of intervention by upper class sympathisers, including the then prime minister, Arthur Balfour, and, it is said, the monarch, Edward VII, the charges were dropped. However, the two young victims were sentenced to ten years' and five years' imprisonment respectively.

As Cyril Flower, his political career began when he joined the Liberal Party in 1875, having been persuaded to do so by Lord Rosebery. He was adopted as the candidate for Brecon in 1878 and gained the seat at the 1880 general election. The constituency boundaries were redrawn, and he lost the seat in 1885. Later that year, he fought and won the Luton seat, which he held until created Lord Battersea in 1892, even though he had earlier argued for abolition of the House of Lords. He rarely spoke in the House of Commons but addressed meetings in most by-elections around the country. In 1886, Gladstone appointed him as a whip, and Flower changed sides over Ireland in order to back Gladstone's campaign for home rule. Jordaan states that his parliamentary career was 'undistinguished' and that he was not take seriously as 'he was thought to lack conviction'.

Although he left a considerable sum on his death, his unfortunate wife discovered that he also had massive debts, which she had great difficulty in discharging, even with her considerable wealth. Through all his vicissitudes, Constance stood by him and, after his death, she destroyed many papers. Peter Jordaan has done a remarkable amount of research for his biography of Lord Battersea, and it is a good addition to Victorian political biographies, even if somewhat prolix. ■

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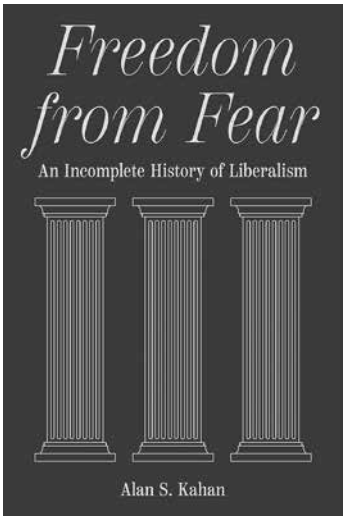
Liberalism and populism

Alan S. Kahan, *Freedom from Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism* (Princeton University Press, 2023)
Review by John Powell

Alan Kahan's most recent book is, like all of his intellectual histories, learned and elliptical. It is the product of two related but disparate concerns – a lifelong interest in liberal political theory and a resurgent nationalistic populism that has called liberal politics into question. By tracing 'the complex and layered nature' of contemporary liberalism (p. 6), the author attempts to explain the declining effectiveness of liberalism during the past two decades. Kahan argues that populism now threatens the nominally liberal landscape of the Western world, mainly because liberal thinkers increasingly abandoned moral principles of governance (pp. 379, 401). Building on the work of Christopher Lasch and David Goodhart, he argues that the modern liberal has placed so high a value on autonomy, mobility and novelty



that they have neglected 'group identity, tradition and national social contracts (faith, flag and family)' (p. 431). In a final chapter the author seeks to explain why liberals generally have been surprised by the appeal of populism, and acknowledges that no one has yet developed an effective response to it.

This is an important study which, in its tone and assumptions, rather than strictly in its argument, illustrates the conundrum of modern liberal politics. Kahan's concluding chapter is infused with the unequivocal voice of the modern well-educated liberal.

> Education was the greatest determiner of whether one voted for Brexit or Trump in 2016. The uneducated, whether American Trump voters, British Brexiteers, or French *gilets jaunes*, feel unrepresented in liberal cosmopolitan policymaking, and unfairly deprived of equal influence with their better-educated peers (p. 427).

Kahan does know that there are well-educated populists who sometimes live in cities, but he – like many left-leaning political commentators in the wake of the American presidential election of November 2024 – tends to excuse liberal failures on a populist misunderstanding of liberalism. Herein lies the problem. Blaming political losses on the victors in a democracy is unlikely to produce a winning strategy for the future.

Kahan begins by describing liberalism as 'the search for a society in which no one need be afraid'. The traditional liberal characteristics of equality, natural rights and constitutional guarantees may be 'bulwarks against fear', but they are not, in his view, integral to particular forms of liberalism across time. Our contemporaries, he notes, 'are not liberals for the same reasons Locke or Kant might have been'. Kahan's 'proto-liberalism' of the pre-Revolutionary era was rooted in a 'primordial fear of despotism', which evolved in its fears of 'religious fanaticism, revolution and reaction, poverty and totalitarianism'. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, liberalism grew by accretion, 'like an oyster', into a variety of liberalisms, each focused on particular fears: 'liberalism proper; modern liberalism and its classical liberal opponents; and anti-totalitarian liberalism' (p. 6). Western citizens of the short nineteenth century (1800–1873) feared the revolutionary moment as well despotism and religious fanaticism, and thus focused their efforts on limiting state power, the movement Kahan labels Liberalism 1.0. The second wave, Liberalism 2.0, emerged between 1873 and 1919, with increasing fear of poverty and an expectation of greater support from the state, but divided between 'modern' and 'classical' streams that differed over the necessary impact of a growing bureaucracy. Fear of totalitarianism following the First World War was the focus of Liberalism 3.0. By the late twentieth century, liberals were 'increasingly divided between egalitarians and their libertarian and neoliberal opponents' (p. 11). Finally, with the global rise of populism during the early twenty-first century, Kahan argues that an undefined fourth wave of liberalism (4.0) is needed. 'The existence of a large number of unhappy, relatively deprived, culturally alienated people,' he notes with an air of discovery, 'has serious consequences for the legitimacy of liberalism' (p. 429).

In explanation of liberal failures, Kahan observes that its successes generally had rested in various combinations upon the three pillars of freedom, markets, and morals. Once again defending liberal successes in taking into account more fears of more people around the globe,

he concludes that the believers in liberalism must find a way to restore the 'moral/religious' pillar that had so often been central to the liberal project in the past. But how can this be done without allowing, or at the very least tolerating, illiberal principles? Kahan has no plan, but he clearly lays out the problem – that 'liberals must find a solution that will prevent the illiberal from making others afraid without giving the illiberals themselves avoidable causes of fear' (p. 443).

As a work of political theory, *Freedom from Fear* works. But it is, as the subtitle suggests, incomplete. The author intends this to mean that it is not yet possible to imagine a 'theory of democratic liberalism as a counter to populism' (p. 449). That must be obvious if one comes to such a work as a 'history' of liberalism. It is, however, more fundamentally incomplete in its narrow regard of liberalism as a movement of ideas. It would be wrong to insist on too much politics in a work of political theory, but in a book that openly laments the lack of a liberal response to populism, most readers (and voters) would expect there to be at least some practical connections between political philosophies and their product at work. Kahan very occasionally nods to politics, but he is more concerned with tracing the ideas of Locke, Constant, Mill and Montesquieu forward through the theories of Hayek and Berlin, up to the more contemporary ideas of Friedman, Shklar, and Nozick and Rawls (pp. 346, 352, 392, 398, 402). The detachment of liberal theories from practice is glaring. For instance, not a single policy prescription or legislative achievement of William Gladstone's four ministries is mentioned, much less analysed, while the liberal critiques of L. T. Hobhouse and Edward Dicey are given a fulsome fourteen pages (pp. 265–79). The philosophies of Milton Friedman and John Rawls are carefully explicated (pp. 385 ff.), while the party restructuring and legislative achievements of Tony Blair and New Labour are mentioned only once in passing.

Kahan is almost pure in his devotion to ideas, and, as a result, his conclusions are palpably detached from the political processes actually required to transmute works of political philosophy into public policy. This cultivated detachment is at the heart of the book's thesis and clear from the first sentence, in which he defines liberalism as 'the search for a society in which no one need be afraid'. The explanatory footnote is a perfect guide to the liberal mind operating at some distance from the ground:

> Though 'contextualists' might 'object that this definition is not actually used by most people who call themselves liberals, I would reply that it meets Quentin Skinner's criterion …' (p. 3).

In imagining that political philosophy can successfully be interposed between the grievances of the populists and the next election, he is reenacting the liberal illusion that ideas can be detached from the perceived welfare of the voter.

Because he is liberal, Kahan does not quite despair. If populism dies, well, it will be 'a poor reflection on human nature in general and Western civilization in particular', but the implication is that all will be well because liberalism is 'a work in progress' (p. 449). If one is a little uneasy with this unsteady foundation for liberal optimism, there may be a more pragmatic approach. According to Tony Blair, who knows something about the vicissitudes of both liberal ideas and politics, 'if you have the right policy and the right strategy, you always have a chance of winning' (*A Journey: My Political Life*, p. 4). This may be a little rosy, but it rests on some credible results. While Milton Friedman was imagining that Britain might slip into a dictatorship of the left, Blair was tinkering with the practical aspects of selected elements of neo-liberalism. This may or may not be a prescription to one's liking, but it offers more practical advice than does a review of the political theory of liberalism. ■

Dr John Powell recently retired as Professor of History at Oklahoma Baptist University. He is currently at work on a biography of 'Young Gladstone'.