American studies at the university. Non-Manchester topics are largely left unexplored or dealt with briefly. This includes Ernest's national political career, his chairmanship of the BBC and his commitment to such causes as population control, leaving a lot of questions for further research. One wonders, for example, how his belief in curbing population related to the eugenicist ideas that were not unusual in Fabian and progressive liberal circles before the Second World War. Similarly, Shena's suffragism and feminism are dealt with in a broad-brush way. Charlotte Wildman writes that Shena was deeply sympathetic with the suffragette movement but, financially dependent on her parents, 'she could not join in suffragette militancy, as they were opposed to it.' It might be added that, from 1912 (during the peak of militant suffragette activity), she had to contend with a mother-in-law who was an active anti-suffragist. This leaves many questions unanswered. Like many women of her class and political orientation, Shena's engagement with the suffrage question and militancy – and indeed Emily's with the opposing camp – may well have been complex and nuanced and would benefit from further dissection. More detail about Shena's activity in the women's movement, both in Manchester and nationally, would also be welcome. It is emphasised that she was a close friend of Virginia Woolf and other leading feminists, but it is unclear from the book whether and how far she participated in the lively interwar feminist organisations and debates. One puzzle that is not mentioned at all is what motivated Ernest to stand in the parliamentary by-election held in 1946 on the death of Eleanor Rathbone, the celebrated feminist MP, thereby splitting the progressive vote and frustrating the election of Mary Stocks, Rathbone's political heir, who incidentally was also a close friend of the Simons and indeed, later, Ernest's first biographer.

It is no surprise or criticism that both the fresh subject-matter and original perspective of *The Simons of Manchester* throw up many further questions and lines of research to be explored. The book also provides a model that could be usefully followed to examine the traditions and contribution of other notable local Liberal dynasties: the Colmans of Norwich, the Markhams of Chesterfield, the Hartleys of Southport and the Browns of Chester, to name but a few. ■

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Reclaiming Liberalism

Alexandre Lefebvre, *Liberalism as a Way of Life* (Princeton University Press, 2025)
Review by David Howarth

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) is a landmark in liberal political philosophy. It attempted something many believed no longer possible: to give liberalism a basis that was both normative and rational. Its methods, asking what political principles and institutions reasonable people would choose if they had no idea of their own individual commitments, advantages or disadvantages ('the original position behind a veil of ignorance') and then asking how those judgments could be made maximally consistent with one another ('reflective equilibrium') provided Rawls with a way to argue that a just state would be a liberal state. Using only arguments that appeal to universal human capacities and not to particular ethical or spiritual traditions ('public reason'), Rawls claims that we would establish a basic political structure that

maximises equal political liberties, makes sure that those liberties were exercisable in practice and not just in theory (that individuals would receive their 'fair value'), and ensures that the only persistent inequalities would be those that enhanced the lives of those who were least well off ('the difference principle').

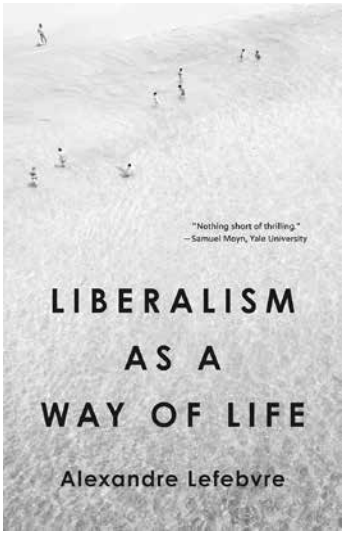
One point that Rawls insisted on, especially in his later work *Political Liberalism* (1993), was that his theory was about politics not about individual behaviour. He was not arguing for liberalism as a 'comprehensive doctrine', which is to say a view about how people should behave in their everyday lives, but only as a political doctrine, about how people with different ethical or religious views could live together successfully in a just state. In *Liberalism as a Way of Life*, however, Alexandre Lefebvre has decided to ignore Rawls's limitation and to ask how Rawlsian liberalism would work as a comprehensive doctrine in its own right, as a theory about how to live. At first sight, this is a terrible idea. Structuring a polity is a completely different activity from structuring one's own life. It is like using thoughts about the best way to organise a tennis tournament as a guide to how to play tennis. The results are, perhaps predictably, not entirely convincing, although the book does generate some interesting insights along the way.

Lefebvre's reasons for embarking on his project are themselves an amalgam of the interesting and the not entirely convincing. He thinks that our society is suffused by liberalism ('the water in which we swim') but at the same time that liberalism has been compromised by other ideas (capitalism, populism, nationalism, meritocracy and others), as a consequence of which liberalism, at least in its Rawlsian sense, has not been established. We live, he says, not in liberalism but in 'liberaldom', a condition in which liberal values are ideologically dominant but not put into practice. Lefebvre offers his programme of more rigorous individual commitment to liberalism in everyday life as a way for liberals to cope with living in liberaldom.

The idea of 'liberaldom' encapsulates something about a society in which the rhetoric of liberal values seems to have outlasted the practice of liberalism, but is liberalism really 'the water in which we live'? The problem is, who are the 'we' Lefebvre is talking about? From the examples he uses, drawn mainly from American popular culture of ten to twenty years ago (including an extended discussion of *Parks and Recreation*), one guesses that 'we' are college educated North Americans born after 1975, people who are shocked by racist and sexist language and by any form of cruelty. It might well be true that such people swim in liberal waters while living in a society tainted by illiberalism and that their situation is causing them discomfort. But the experience of liberals in most places is very different. They ('we') are more often an embattled minority struggling to withstand wave after wave of nationalist or religious bigotry. They ('we') live in a world in which cruelty is the norm, not only under anti-liberal regimes (Russia, Iran, China), but also everywhere infected by 'social' media and by the speeches of President Trump.

Another not entirely convincing aspect of Lefebvre's starting point is the implication that the best way for liberals to react in the situation he describes is therapeutic rather than political. Lefebvre places 'self-care' (in Foucault's admittedly quite bracing sense of reconstructing oneself in the light of telling oneself hard truths) at the heart not only of his programme of behaviour change but also at the heart of liberalism itself. This is a misstep. It turns liberalism into a form of quietism, disengaged from politics and at risk of looking complacent or even smug. Since the end of the First World War, liberalism, and individual liberal lives, have been in danger. Turning inward sounds like giving up. Max Weber and Simone Veil would be appalled.

Turning to the content of Lefebvre's recommendations, he proposes three 'spiritual exercises' for liberals, one flowing from Rawls's original position behind a veil of ignorance, one drawing



on Rawls's idea of reflective equilibrium and the third using Rawls's notion of public reason. The first exercise requires us to ask ourselves what we would think about a problem if we mentally stripped ourselves of our advantages and disadvantages, including our social position, and then decided what to do based on an imagined conversation with other similarly neutralised people. In effect, it asks us to strip away what many people nowadays confusingly call our 'identity' – the categories into which other people put us and our attitudes towards those categories. Lefebvre points out that this exercise forces us to adopt a position of impartiality not only as between other people but also as applied to ourselves. It helps us to combat our tendency to give ourselves special favours. If we do this repeatedly, Lefebvre claims, we approach an ideal of impartiality while at the same time retaining our autonomy, in the sense of being able to choose what to think. We also encourage ourselves to be less snobbish, more humble and less self-centred. Whether this would work in practice is an interesting psychological question, but it has at least an air of plausibility. The habits of thought and feeling it aims to develop – especially putting oneself into the shoes of others and not treating oneself as special – are the kinds of habits that liberals have or at least should have. But one aspect of the original position is not very helpful. The imagined conversation behind the veil of ignorance is with other people who have themselves been neutralised in terms of their endowments and identities. That works in *A Theory of Justice* itself because Rawls is thinking about what might count as an impartially arrived at set of basic institutions. But it works less well as a means for encouraging empathy. It is too sterile – a conversation about what people might be like rather than about what they are like. To attain empathy, the people in the imagined conversation would need to have real lives, including capacities, beliefs and attachments. Or better still, we might try a spiritual exercise consisting of interacting with real people.

The second exercise involves reflective equilibrium, the process of bringing one's convictions into harmony by identifying inconsistencies and eliminating them by adjusting or dropping convictions that are less important. As Lefebvre recognises, the method of reflective equilibrium is not inherently liberal. Fascists can use it to become more coherent fascists. Lefebvre makes two claims about the method when used by liberals. The first claim is that the process of worrying about which aspects of one's commitments to change or abandon makes one more tolerant of other people's struggles with their values and so furthers the liberal virtues of humility and tolerance. His second claim is less convincing: that the process of reflective equilibrium helps us to achieve harmony between our private selves and our public selves by eliminating any difference between them. The argument only works if one believes that the society in which we live, in which our public selves operate, is itself safely liberal. Lefebvre believes that it is, and it might be so for people living in Princeton, NJ or in Cambridge, Mass. Many places, however, including public places online, are not safe for liberals. Being liberal in an illiberal world means suffering from having one's public and private lives pitted against one another.

Lefebvre's third exercise is the most contentious. Public reason is the requirement, which Rawls himself applies only to debates about basic structures such as constitutions, that participants give reasons for their positions that do not depend on belief

systems that not everyone shares but only reasons that could be persuasive for all people. Those who dislike the principle characterise it, not wholly inaccurately, as banning references to holy scripture in political debate. Lefebvre wants us to stick to public reason in far more aspects of life than disputation about constitutional arrangements. The benefits that he claims we can gain from the exercise of only giving reasons that anyone could accept are extensive, even extravagant: delight in others and tolerance, because practising public reason requires one to listen to others before speaking; keeping cool and civil in interactions with others, because public reason requires thought before speaking; and cheerfulness, because it engenders a feeling of common purpose and community. In addition, Lefebvre claims that public reason can somehow replace religion in our lives because it 'redeems everyday life'. Lefebvre is indeed here referring to important liberal virtues – openness is the ultimate liberal trait and Keynes (in 'Liberalism and Labour' (1926)) mentions 'a certain coolness' as a liberal characteristic. And Lefebvre makes an important point when he says that trying to see the world from a point of view that everyone can share regardless of differences of culture and religion is a unifying, community-building habit.

But there is a high cost for Lefebvre's liberals if they combine his public reason exercise with his reflective equilibrium exercise, a cost that he acknowledges at the very end of the chapter on the third exercise. To be 'liberal all the way down' so that one's public and private lives match and so that one confines oneself to public reason leads to a position where liberals cannot have any separate private reasons. That means, as Lefebvre eventually admits, that his view is that one cannot be both a comprehensive liberal and religious. This is not a conclusion that many active liberals conducting their own exercises in reflective equilibrium would want to endorse.

The problem with Lefebvre's conclusion that comprehensive liberalism is incompatible with religion is not just that it ignores liberal history and not just that it seems to endorse the kind of purism that Lefebvre himself wants to avoid when he talks of 'delight in difference'. It is also that it seems to apply to any kind of transcendent experience through art, music, literature, mathematics or science. It is impossible to describe the value of transcendence to someone who has not experienced it, and so public reason is stuck with deadly dull and not always persuasive arguments about the economic value of the creative industries and the development of new technologies out of basic science, arguments that following Lefebvre's logic, liberals are supposed to accept as their private reasons too. Lefebvre has a long footnote in which he expresses his frustration with the communitarian philosopher Charles Taylor not so much for Taylor's criticism of what might be thought of as a liberal way of life but because Taylor assumes that 'anyone who seeks a full and complete life in liberalism is bound to be disappointed'. But Taylor might have a point at least about Lefebvre's version of liberalism, which closes liberals off from important aspects of life.

Perhaps the mistake was to look for a comprehensive liberalism in the first place. Comprehensiveness involves a form of perfectionism, but liberalism is about the imperfect not the perfect. It is not utopian but consists of an unending struggle. A better starting point for liberalism on a personal level than Rawls's structural political liberalism might be the Japanese concept of *wabi sabi*: that nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect. Liberalism is an active, open, hopeful, generous response to an imperfect world. Lefebvre certainly captures part of liberalism's spirit, but he has locked it away in a place from which it will want to escape. ■

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