

Reviews

legitimate criticisms that could be made of the Liberal Democrats' attitude to public services during the Charles Kennedy era, and possibly through to the present. The party could at times appear as a rather old-Labourish, uncritical defender of the public sector, reluctant to disagree with, for example, teaching and medical unions. This attitude was parodied by the Lib Dems' semi-official satirist as 'Liberals against choice'. It was not only

hard-core libertarians or professional provocateurs who took the party to task for being excessively statist.⁴

Whichever way, though, this is an excellent, thought provoking yet accessible introduction to Liberal history in Britain over the past two centuries, which can act as both a primer for the uninitiated and an entry point to those who want to read more of Parry's work, and indeed that of the many

other historians who are cited and acknowledged here. Both individually and together, these two volumes are highly commended as important contributions to the study of Liberal, and indeed British, political history. ■

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Liberalism and Socialism

Matthew McManus, *The Political Theory of Liberal Socialism* (Routledge, 2025)

Review by William Wallace

What's the difference between a social liberal and a liberal socialist? Matthew McManus's scholarly book claims John Stuart Mill as 'the first liberal socialist'. He develops his theme by examining Marx's critique of liberalism, the writings of Keynes, C. B. Macpherson, John Rawls, Chantal Mouffe, Norberto Bobbio and many others, in what is presented as a work of 'retrieval' of a neglected thread in the history of political thought.

This is very much a book written within the North American intellectual context – by a young Canadian teaching at the University of Michigan – which liberals in Britain and the European

continent will find stimulating for that reason. American and Canadian authors are examined in detail, with European thinkers woven into the framework of North American debates. 'Cold War liberalism', McManus argues, dismissed Marxian analysis of entrenched economic power in capitalist economies, condemning all Marxist theories as authoritarian and statist. C. B. Macpherson's critique of 'possessive individualism' rightly criticised American liberalism's neglect of the importance of 'the developmental ethic' and the social context in which human capacities develop, as a necessary balance to 'the acquisitive ethic'. McManus, who describes himself as 'effectively a Marxist

Rawlsian or Rawlsian Marxist', sets out to rescue 'left liberalism' from an overemphasis on individual identity and culture, while persuading radicals and Marxists to come together by rediscovering the overlapping roots of liberalism and socialism.

He thus presents an alternative history of political thought to that taught in British universities. He starts, like others, with Hobbes and Locke, underlining the revolutionary implications of liberal ideas, and the contradiction between Locke's defence of property and support for (political) revolution. He then moves on to Thomas Paine, who had more impact on the American colonies than in Britain. He



portrays the 1790s as an era of the triumph of liberalism in the USA and in France – in contrast to the British experience of an era in which conflict with France entrenched conservatism and social hierarchy.

He follows with a full chapter on Mary Wollstonecraft. ‘Along with Mill, Wollstonecraft is perhaps the most complete liberal in this book’: examining social – and male – domination, inequality of wealth and the social context of human autonomy. Then he provides a refreshingly different interpretation of J. S. Mill, with all his flaws as a defender of empire but as a self-declared socialist in his later writings, placing individual development within a broader social and economic framework. This is balanced by an analysis of Marx’s critique of liberalism, which is also an attempt to rescue Marx from condemnation as an anti-individualist authoritarian. The search to retrieve elements of liberal

socialism in Marx, however, takes McManus into intellectual obfuscation. ‘Marx was a compatibilist in a Spinozist/Hegelian vein who held that a recognition of determining forces enables the forms of reflection necessary to become more self-determining over time.’

Readers are next introduced to ‘a wider array of liberal socialist theorists’, from R. H. Tawney and his Christian and ethical socialism, emphasising education as a key to human development, to Eduard Bernstein and his social democratic critique of Marx, and John Maynard Keynes, who described himself on several occasions as a liberal socialist. Carlo Rosselli is ‘probably the most obscure figure in this chapter – at least to Anglo-American audiences’. Like Gramsci, he was writing in an Italian prison under the Fascist regime; his only book, *Liberal Socialism*, was published shortly before he was murdered during the Spanish Civil War. Each of these theorists, McManus notes, was writing in reaction against the authoritarian threats of communism and fascism, seeking to reconcile personal and political freedom with social cohesion and equal citizenship.

The chapter on Rawls begins with a quotation from his *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* that the ‘ideal descriptions ... of property-owning democracy and liberal socialism ... include arrangements designed to satisfy the two principles of justice.’ Rawls’s

thinking was, however, rooted in the welfare capitalism of post-war America, and – McManus notes – failed to take the broader international dimension of the capitalist market system into account. The intended American audience justifies a full chapter on ‘racial and black radical liberalism’ – in particular on Charles Mills – which is balanced by a discussion of recent European ‘agonistic liberal socialism’, including Mouffe and Laclau, Bobbio, and the ‘left-Hegelian social theory’ of Axel Honneth.

McManus promises to outline ‘a liberalism for the new millennium’ from this intellectual history. But the final chapter is brief and does not address the challenges to liberalism posed by globalisation, climate change and the necessary shift towards a more sustainable economy. Social liberals and liberal socialists, ‘left-liberals’ with different self-descriptions, still have much hard thinking to do in redefining the liberal approach in the contemporary context. This alternative history of the liberal tradition, meanwhile, will widen their reading and their understanding of the tradition they have inherited. ■

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