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Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism, from Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*

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the
LOST HISTORY
of
LIBERALISM

FROM ANCIENT ROME
 TO THE
 TWENTY - FIRST CENTURY

HELENA ROSENBLATT

- 1 A specialist of French liberalism, Helena Rosenblatt has written extensively on some essential figures of the French Enlightenment like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or, more at length, on Benjamin Constant, whom she identifies as the philosopher who theorised contemporary French liberalism. Liberalism is therefore no uncharted territory to her, albeit in the much narrower framework of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. Her 2018 book, *The Lost History of Liberalism*, aims both at continuing this study of liberalism, from Roman times down to the twenty-first century, and to give heart to today's liberals as their doctrine seems to have lost its original sense of purpose ("Liberals should reconnect with the resources of their liberal tradition to recover, understand, and embrace its core values. This book is meant to relaunch that process" 277). As she undertakes "a word history" of liberalism (5), Rosenblatt presents readers, liberal and otherwise, with a very vast array of writers and thinkers, mainly from France, Britain, Germany and the US, who all contributed to define and redefine the concept over the centuries. Some of them are well-known while others have now fallen—unjustly, she argues—into oblivion. She tries to make sense of shifting meanings of the word, by staging transatlantic dialogues between European and American authors. Eight chronological chapters span the odd twenty-two centuries separating Cicero from Hayek—and beyond.
- 2 Rosenblatt usefully reminds readers that things "liberal" originally were the hallmark of citizens who had received a liberal education and were expected to behave liberally—liberal was derived from "*liberalitas*" rather than from "*libertas*," even if only free citizens could be expected to display liberality. Going all the way back to this Latin etymology is enlightening as it helps better apprehend the paradigmatic shift that occurred when "liberal" came to be related to "liberty" (and individual rights) more than to liberality (as a set of duties to the public). Chapter 3 helps understand how this very change was applied to economics: to political economists, free trade and laissez faire, which entailed the repeal of tariffs and taxes on international trade, were ways of

behaving liberally with one's trading partners. It was a way of abandoning the commercial competition inherent in mercantilism in order to embrace the more generous principles of Montesquieu's *doux commerce*.

- 3 However, as political economy claimed recognition as a new scientific field, liberal regimes no longer sufficed. Rosenblatt shows that a liberal king or ruler was understood as one who liberally granted freedoms to his people. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though, "*libertas*" came to compete with "*liberalitas*" as the most frequent meaning for "liberal," and the doctrine of individual liberties construed as natural rights gained credentials. Whereas *liberalitas* was aristocratic in its essence, natural rights were democratic and vested in all individuals. From the late seventeenth century in Britain, and even more so after the American and the French Revolutions in the wider western hemisphere, freedom of religion, of expression, of the press and so on came to be identified with liberal regimes. Freedoms granted by a liberal ruler could be taken away at a whim by the same, or a later ruler. By contrast, no one could rightfully strip individuals of their natural rights. This leads Rosenblatt to dedicate long developments to religious questions. In a nutshell, she demonstrates that the most dogmatic religions (Catholicism in France, the best established Protestant denominations in Britain, Germany and the United States) were at odds with liberalism as they expected it to cause the downfall of traditional society. A specialist of Constant and Germaine de Staël, she mainly focuses on French Catholicism to show how the Church (both in France and in Rome) sapped liberal attempts at reforms throughout the nineteenth century until it decided to try and infiltrate it, as it were, so as to devoid it of its substance from within.
- 4 The nineteenth century was replete with debates that stirred the passions of self-styled Liberals. After free trade became the norm, the question of how much a government was supposed to step in on behalf of the people became central in the political arena. As socialism and communism were on the rise, John Stuart Mill—among others—embraced some of their principles and pleaded for a brand of liberalism generous to the poor too. Gladstone, the "Liberal icon" (177) gathered crowds of workers around him when he delivered public speeches. His Conservative adversaries accused him of demagoguery. And yet, though he supported individual rights at home, Gladstone sided with the South during the American Civil War, and, ultimately, the Conservative Disraeli was deemed to have done more for the people than him. In the US, Abraham Lincoln embodied the arch-Liberal figure as the Civil War unfolded and as he represented the North determined to set the slaves free. What Rosenblatt leaves out, however, is the wider economic context. Indeed, Lincoln's young Republican party embraced classical economic liberalism that gradually superseded protectionism, especially in the era of Big Business in the Reconstruction years. Although no single book could possibly address both the political and institutional nature of liberalism and how it impacted the evolution of economics within some 300 pages, Rosenblatt fails to highlight how the Reconstruction era and Big Business in its aftermath, contributed to the rise of American laissez-faireism that ran deep and mitigated Rooseveltian attempts at setting up a generous, European-like welfare state for example.
- 5 Rosenblatt also illustrates how Liberals had to battle with Caesarism throughout the nineteenth century. Napoleon I had put an end to the liberal aspirations voiced by French revolutionaries and by B. Constant and de Staël. Napoleon III did much the same in the second half of the century, modelling his imperial persona after Julius Caesar. In

Germany socialism became so irrepressible that Bismarck was the first Western ruler to adopt measures that pertain to a welfare state. Essential voices that contributed to liberalism's transformation into a more social and interventionist movement in the nineteenth century were those of Wilhelm Roscher, Bruno Hildebrand and Karl Knies who founded the Association for Social Politics, and denounced classical liberal economics in the process. To them, "it was morally abhorrent to claim that egoism and unbounded competition should serve as the basis for any viable and just economy" (222). Like German and French liberals, British and American academics welcomed these thinkers to their universities, their brand of social liberalism spread to the industrialised world and "new liberalism" gained the moral high ground. Traditional liberalism, on the other hand, receded and merged with Conservatism—even more so in Britain as the Liberal Party fell apart on the question of Irish Home Rule.

- 6 Colonialism and imperialism were two sides of the debate over the growth of Britain's hold on wide chunks of the world. Though Liberals were not opposed to colonialism as they considered it was the only way of introducing whole parts of the world to the principles of liberal government, they opposed imperialism that aimed at suppressing indigenous cultures. As Darwin's theses on the evolution of species and the subtle interplay of cooperation and competition between species gained ground, the Liberals also became divided on the question of eugenics. Like Conservatives, Liberals were wary of an alleged degeneration of the human race and of the risks of seeing this trend worsen if the "unfittest" were left to their own devices when it came to reproduction (237). In the US, this was made even plainer by Woodrow Wilson's acceptance of schemes to deter black people from having children. Rosenblatt might have insisted more on how pervasive these eugenicist ideas were, as even socialists like the Webbs advocated socialist measures for eugenicist reasons (i.e. if the State did not relieve poverty, then charitable giving would go to the poorest who were precisely those who were the most likely to weaken the race).
- 7 One of Rosenblatt's challenges (one that she sets to herself at least) is to revive the voices of long-forgotten authors, notably German ones. John Locke and John Stuart Mill are indeed present in the book, but not necessarily as much, or where, readers would expect. Locke is mostly discussed for his writings on tolerance and education, rather than those on government—which Rosenblatt can hardly be blamed for as Locke has already been amply researched. Neither J.S. Mill nor the Fawcetts are mentioned in the sub-chapter dedicated to the question of female suffrage. When Rosenblatt bemoans that too few women and men were inspired by American feminists in the mid-nineteenth century, she fails to shed light on little-known early socialist figures who did claim equal property and civil rights for women as soon as the 1810s. She also makes it sound as if American feminists were a majority in the US, which they were not.
- 8 This somewhat artificial dialogue across centuries and continents (between American and European feminists, or between American and French Liberals in the days of Napoleon III) often brings more confusion than light regarding liberalism. Indeed, Rosenblatt often tends to confront diverging interpretations of liberalism with too little definition or background for the reader to really understand what has to be concluded—other than that it is an elusive concept. A different organisation of the book, perhaps one focusing on the contradictions between economic and political liberalism,

with the former attached to unbridled competition and individualism and the latter synonymous with dedication to the greater good, might have proven more insightful.

- 9 Another issue this reviewer has with *The Lost History of Liberalism* is the apparent neglect with which primary sources are referenced in end notes. Instead, Rosenblatt repeatedly uses the mention “quoted by,” which makes it much more complex for readers to find the original quote in order to research the wider work from which interesting quotes are excerpted. Very short passages are taken out of their context and pitted against one another, sometimes a German one against a French or American one, making it close to impossible to understand whether the authors cited really entered a dialogue through their works, or whether it is the historian’s task to make sense of piecemeal references. This is true even in the last chapter that aims at demonstrating why the US has adopted liberalism as its dominant, or even as its only, doctrine. Liberalism means different things to different people: Hayek indeed often used it on its own where others would use “neoliberalism” in order to signal that they are not discussing Roosevelt’s brand of liberalism as implemented in his New Deal. Here too, more historical background would have made the evolution of liberalism easier to decipher. Rosenblatt regrets that in the twentieth-century United States, liberalism has come to be equated with a movement focussing on individual rights and freedoms only, thereby relinquishing the commitment to the greater good it had in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. This leaves out the whole Civil Rights movement and the passing of the Civil Rights Acts by the Democratic administration of Lyndon B. Johnson in the late 1960s. It even brushes aside more recent measures like Barack Obama’s Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act 2010. Although it can be argued that healthcare and health itself are private issues, Obama’s system rested in a large degree on the fact that all citizens had to commit and to take out insurance so that premiums might be more affordable to all.
- 10 All in all, *The Lost History of Liberalism* sketches out the evolution of the word “liberal” from its ancient aristocratic overtones to its democratisation. The shift from a commitment to liberality and self-sacrifice for the greater good to a defence of individual natural rights attached to the person is quite enlightening. So is the stress on the many ways in which liberals staged their differences with their conservative or socialist contemporaries over the centuries and in industrialising and industrialised countries. However, the complexity of the term is such that “liberalism” remains quite blurry. The conclusion suggests that to Rosenblatt, true liberalism is a form of latter-day civic humanism: commitment to the greater good in a democratic framework.

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Mots-clés: libéralisme, Lumières, France, Grande-Bretagne, Allemagne, Etats-Unis, éducation libérale, libéralité, liberté, économie politique, droits naturels, religions, catholicisme, protestantisme, libre échange, laissez-faire, socialisme, communisme, césarisme, concurrence, colonialisme, impérialisme, eugénisme, individualisme

Keywords: liberalism, Enlightenment, France, Britain, Germany, the US, liberal education, liberality, liberty, political economy, natural rights, religions, Catholicism, Protestantism, free trade, laissez-faireism, socialism, communism, Caesarism, competition, colonialism, imperialism, eugenics, individualism

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