Helena ROSENBLATT, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*

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RÉFÉRENCE

Helena ROSENBLATT, 2018, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 368 p.

- 1 “It is never a waste of time to study the history of a word.” It is with these suggestive words of the French historian Lucien Febvre that Helena Rosenblatt begins her last book *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*. By studying the history of the word liberalism, Rosenblatt attempts a clarification of what happens to be a catch-all term encompassing very different thinkers, political actors and followers. While liberalism is often seen as a mainly Anglo-Saxon tradition of thought, Rosenblatt argues that it was the French Revolution that gave birth to liberalism as we understand it, while the concept was refined mostly by French and German thinkers during the 19th century. In opposition to the widespread notion of a tradition of thought broadly committed to the supremacy of private rights and individual choices, *The Lost History of Liberalism* explains that many liberal thinkers accorded a prominent place to family, religion and duties. Furthermore, Rosenblatt elegantly exposes the ambiguities of 19th-century liberal thinkers about questions such as colonialism, economic *laissez-faire*, and eugenics.
- 2 She explains that the adjective “liberal”, which indicated a form of aristocratic generosity inherited from Ancient Rome and the Renaissance, come to signify, during the Enlightenment, a set of traits of character, sentiments and ideas that supposedly increased the gentleness, refinement and degree of civilization of mankind. But the history of liberalism, according to Rosenblatt, does not begin with the Roman Republic

or with the political thinkers of the Enlightenment. In her reconstruction, the origin of liberalism is to be traced back to the French Revolution, not before. Although many aspects of her argument are persuasive, one might regret that the intellectual context of the French Revolution itself is lightly analysed, in fact, the book contains only a dozen pages on the subject. She, however, explains well why the period between 1789 and 1830 is crucial to liberalism, because it saw the rise around Europe of the first liberal parties, which were influenced by French Revolution's notions of equality before law, representative government and freedom of speech. For her, it is in Benjamin Constant's *Principles of Politics* that we find the great theorization of liberal government during the 19th century. Surprisingly for a great specialist of Benjamin Constant, Rosenblatt does not mention Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès in her study, in spite of his central role in the political thought of the Revolution (especially on representative government), and in Constant's career. We might regret this oversight, since Sieyès's writings and discourses are regarded as seminal for liberal ideas, such as the famous opposition between the liberty of the moderns and of the ancients that Constant refined in his famous speech of 1819 at the *Athénée royal* (see Pasquale Pasquino, 1998, *Sieyès et l'invention de la constitution en France*, Paris, Jacob, p.31-49).

- 3 Starting from this point of view, the book follows the sequence of the main French political events of the 19th century and its four revolutions (1789, 1830, 1848, 1870). According to Rosenblatt, France led the way on many liberal battles and stances about the extension of suffrage, of the *laissez-faire* doctrine, the social question, colonialism, and clericalism. She deftly exposes the contradictions amongst 19th-century Liberals on these topics. The case of colonialism, in particular, crystallizes numerous ambiguities and contradictions of liberals at that time. Some of them, while being in favour of free trade, were opposed to colonial expansionism (e.g. Cobden), while other leading figures like Alexis de Tocqueville or John Stuart Mill were in favour of their country ruling foreign nations for economic and moral reasons (e.g. the French "civilizing mission").
- 4 Helena Rosenblatt's book does not forget to speak about liberal economic ideas, but she does not make the distinction between "economic liberalism" and "political liberalism". While she does not explain this choice, her chapter 3 on the social question suggests that she regards "economic liberalism" as nothing more than few liberal principles applied to economic affairs. According to her, the emergence of the "social question", in Europe during the first half of the 19th century, led to the rise of an opposition between what would be later called "old" and a "new" liberal thinkers around the question of state's regulation of the market. She argues that "old liberalism" emerged from a radicalization of the Anti-corn Law league's interpretation of Adam Smith by French economists like Frédéric Bastiat under the July Monarchy (1830-1848). From this interpretation of liberal ideas emerged a strong doctrine pleading for *laissez-faire* politics and the negative role of government in the economy—doctrine that we commonly call "old" or "orthodox" liberalism. With the deterioration of living and working conditions of the labouring classes of the industrial Revolution, liberal thinkers started to disagree on the right way to respond to the "social question" (i.e. rise of poverty, appalling working conditions, etc.). Roughly put, some liberals thought that the social question would be best solved by the free market than by government; while others were pleading for some State interventions in that regard.
- 5 Helena Rosenblatt argues that German political economy of the second half of the 19th century played an important role in that part of the story, by building an argument

against orthodox liberal views. On the base of empirical evidences, German thinkers came to believe that *laissez-faire* politics were making the life of a majority of people worse. More than just empirically flawed, German thinkers thought that old liberal ideas were founded on a moral misconception: individuals were not solitary and self-interested, they were social beings with ethical obligations towards others. From that consideration, they developed a conviction that state had a moral obligation to tend to the common welfare. These German ideas were diffused to France, England, and in the United States, and led to the late 19th-century division between “old” *laissez-fairist* liberals and “new” liberals more in favour of State interventionism.

- 6 By mostly basing her study on the sequence of French political history, Rosenblatt confirms Mill 1849’s comment she quoted at the beginning of chapter 3 that “the whole problem of modern society will be worked out [...] in France and nowhere else”. On balance, Rosenblatt gives us several good reasons to place France at the centre of the history of liberalism for the Western World during the 19th century. If this chronology seems relevant for a European history of liberalism, one might wonder whether it could be applied to the development and transformation of liberal ideas in the Global South. For instance, while the great Indian political thinker Rammohan Roy observed and reacted to the French Revolutions of 1789 or 1830, he was also directly concerned with major British political events such as the electoral debates leading to the Great Reform of 1832, or controversies about the East India Company’s corrupted rule in India (Christopher A. Bayly, 2007, « Rammohan Roy and the Advent of Constitutional Liberalism in India, 1800-30 », *Modern Intellectual History*, 4-1, p.25-41). So, we might wonder whether there is yet another story to be told that this book fails to convey.
- 7 Methodologically, Rosenblatt makes an original choice to clarify a complex notion: she focuses, on the one hand, on what the word “liberalism” and “liberal” meant for people who used them, and, on the other hand, she explores the way in which liberals defined themselves and what they meant by liberalism. Because of the ambiguity of the terms and concepts related to liberalism, such history of words and concepts is a particularly difficult task, which *The Lost History of Liberalism* successfully accomplishes. If we can concur with Febvre that studying the history of a word is never a waste of time, I am, however, not entirely convinced, after reading Rosenblatt’s study, that a history of words is sufficient to build a compelling argument in intellectual history. For demanding readers, following the book’s general argument might be like landing on a rolling stone because of the frequent changes of topics: it is sometimes difficult to follow the narrative, and the argumentation, from time to time, lacks the necessary details in intellectual history to buttress the main thesis.
- 8 Yet, these criticisms should be nuanced at least on two accounts. Firstly, *The Lost History of Liberalism* is a relatively compact book for such a complex and broad subject—a history of liberalism within c. 300 pages from Ancient Rome to the 21st century! Considering this limitation, Rosenblatt’s study constitutes a well-written and thought-provoking book of initiation to the European history of liberalism. Secondly, it demonstrates persuasively that liberalism has at least as much to do with France and Germany as with Great Britain and the United States of America. In other words, with her last book, Rosenblatt contributes to de-centre the history of liberalism from the dominant Anglo-Saxon perspective.

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