

Introduction

It is never a waste of time to study the history of a word.

—LUCIEN FEBVRE, 1930

“LIBERALISM” IS A BASIC and ubiquitous word in our vocabulary.¹ But liberalism is also a highly contentious concept, one that triggers heated debate. Some see it as Western civilization’s gift to mankind, others as the reason for its decline. A never-ending stream of books attacks or defends it, and hardly anyone can remain neutral. Critics accuse it of a long list of sins. They say that it destroys religion, the family, the community. It’s morally lax and hedonistic, if not racist, sexist, and imperialist. Defenders are just as emphatic. They say that liberalism is responsible for all that is best about us—our ideas of fairness, social justice, freedom, and equality.

The truth is, however, that we are muddled about what we mean by liberalism. People use the term in all sorts of different ways, often unwittingly, sometimes intentionally. They talk past each other, precluding any possibility of reasonable debate. It would be good to know what we are speaking about when we speak about liberalism.

On that score, available histories of liberalism are seldom helpful. First, they are often contradictory. According to one recent account, for example, liberalism originates *in* Christianity.² However, according to another, liberalism originates in a battle *against* Christianity.³ Second, genealogies of liberalism ascribe its origins and development to a canon of great thinkers, but the cast often fluctuates. John Locke is frequently conscripted as a founding father.⁴ But some speak of Hobbes or Machiavelli instead; still others of Plato or even Jesus Christ. Some include Adam Smith and a list of economists; others do not. None of these early thinkers, it should be known, considered themselves liberals or espoused anything called liberalism, since neither that word nor concept were available to them. And it goes without saying that our notions of liberalism will vary according to our choice of key thinkers and how we read them. Someone who begins with Machiavelli or Hobbes is likely to be a critic of liberalism, one who begins with Jesus Christ a defender.

In this book I aim not to attack or defend liberalism, but to ascertain its meaning and trace its transformation over time. I clarify what the terms “liberal” and “liberalism” meant to the people who used them. I illuminate how liberals defined themselves and what they meant when they spoke about liberalism. This is a story that has never been told.

Most scholars admit that there is a problem defining liberalism. They begin their work with an acknowledgment that it’s a slippery or elusive term. What’s strange, however, is that most of them then proceed to stipulate a personal definition and construct a history that supports it. This, I contend, is to argue backward, and in this book I untangle our thoughts and set the story straight. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

There are additional puzzles and curiosities. In colloquial parlance in France and other parts of the world today, being

liberal means favoring “small government,” while in America it signifies favoring “big government.” American libertarians today claim that they are the true liberals. Somehow these people are all supposed to be part of the same liberal tradition. How and why did this happen? I offer an explanation.

What I propose, then, is, fundamentally, a *word history* of liberalism.⁵ I feel certain that if we don’t pay attention to the actual use of the word, the histories we tell will inevitably be different and even conflicting. They will also be constructed with little grounding in historical fact and marred by historical anachronism.

My approach leads to some surprising discoveries. One is the centrality of France to the history of liberalism. We cannot speak of the concept’s history without considering France and its successive revolutions. Nor can we ignore the fact that some the most profound and influential thinkers in the history of liberalism were French. Another discovery is the importance of Germany, whose contributions to the history of liberalism are usually underplayed, if not completely ignored. The truth is that France invented liberalism in the early years of the nineteenth century and Germany reconfigured it half a century later. America took possession of liberalism only in the early twentieth century, and only then did it become an American political tradition.

We will see that many individuals who are relatively unknown today made significant contributions to liberalism. The German theologian Johann Salomo Semler invented religious liberalism. The French nobleman Charles de Montalembert may have invented the term “liberal democracy.” Yet other key players contributed to the American journal the *New Republic* and thus imported and disseminated the concept in America.

Liberals who are usually regarded as canonical, such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill, do play important roles in

my story, but, as we shall see, they were deeply immersed in the debates of their times. They conversed with and were inspired by French and German thinkers. They spoke directly to their contemporaries, not to us; they addressed the problems of their times, not ours. In addition, I highlight figures who *unintentionally* contributed to the history of liberalism, such as the two Napoleons, the Austrian chancellor Clemens von Metternich, and many counterrevolutionary figures, who forced liberals to hone and develop their beliefs.

Finally, I elucidate what I think is a crucial fact that has been lost from history. At heart, most liberals were moralists. Their liberalism had nothing to do with the atomistic individualism we hear of today. They never spoke about rights without stressing duties. Most liberals believed that people had rights *because* they had duties, and most were deeply interested in questions of social justice. They always rejected the idea that a viable community could be constructed on the basis of self-interestedness alone. Ad infinitum they warned of the dangers of selfishness. Liberals ceaselessly advocated generosity, moral probity, and civic values. This, of course, should not be taken to mean that they always practiced what they preached or lived up to their values.

As I also endeavor to show, the idea that liberalism is an Anglo-American tradition concerned primarily with the protection of individual rights and interests is a very recent development in the history of liberalism. It is the product of the wars of the twentieth century and especially the fear of totalitarianism during the Cold War. For centuries before this, being liberal meant something very different. It meant being a giving and a civic-minded citizen; it meant understanding one's connectedness to other citizens and acting in ways conducive to the common good.

From the very beginning, liberals were virtually obsessed with the need for moral reform. They saw their project as an ethical one. This concern for moral reform helps to explain their constant concern with religion, and another aim of this book is to recalibrate our discussions to make room for this important fact. I show that religious ideas and controversies drove debates about liberalism from the very beginning and that they polarized people into hostile camps. One of the earliest attacks on liberalism called it a “religio-political heresy,” setting the tone for the centuries to come. To this day, liberalism is obliged to defend itself against unrelenting charges of irreligion and immorality.

The fact that liberals saw themselves as moral reformers does not mean that they were without sin. Much recent work has uncovered a dark side of liberalism. Scholars have exposed the elitism, sexism, racism, and imperialism of many liberals. How could an ideology dedicated to equal rights, they ask, have supported such heinous practices? I certainly do not deny the uglier sides of liberalism, but by placing liberal ideas in the context of their time, I tell a more nuanced and complex story.

My treatment cannot pretend to be exhaustive. Although I reference liberalism in other parts of the world, I focus on France, Germany, Britain, and the United States. This choice may seem arbitrary or overly restrictive to some. Of course, other countries contributed to the history of liberalism. But I do believe that liberalism was born in Europe and spread outward from there. More specifically, liberalism owes its origins to the French Revolution, and wherever it migrated thereafter, it remained closely linked to and affected by political developments in France.

I begin with a chapter on the prehistory of liberalism. Starting with the Roman statesman Cicero and ending with

the French nobleman the Marquis de Lafayette, in chapter 1 I explain what it meant to be liberal when its corresponding noun was “liberality” and the word “liberalism” did not yet exist. This deep history of the word “liberal” is good to know, because self-titled liberals over the course of the following centuries continued to identify with this ancient *and moral* ideal, and dictionaries continued to define “liberal” in this traditional way. In the mid-twentieth century, the American philosopher John Dewey still insisted that liberalism stood for “liberality and generosity, especially of mind and character.” It had nothing to do, he said, with the “gospel of individualism.” The first chapter tells the story of how a word initially used to designate the ideal qualities of a Roman citizen was Christianized, democratized, socialized, and politicized, such that by the late eighteenth century it could be employed to describe the American Constitution.

The main part of the book then focuses on four key events in the intertwined histories of France and liberalism, namely the revolutions of 1789, 1830, 1848, and 1870, and the transatlantic debates that these revolutions engendered. The story of liberalism effectively begins in chapter 2, which recounts the coining of the word and the controversies that surrounded it. Some of the topics discussed in this chapter are liberalism’s relationship with republicanism, colonialism, laissez-faire, and feminism, all of which are themes that are developed further in the rest of the book. Perhaps the most important issue of all is liberalism’s fraught relationship with religion, whose origins in the radical politics of the French Revolution are discussed here as well. Chapter 3 tells the story of liberalism’s evolution from 1830 to the eve of the Revolutions of 1848, paying close attention to the emergence of new political ideologies like socialism, on the one hand, and conservatism, on the other, and to how they inflected liberalism, as France careened toward yet

another revolution. Chapter 4 deals with the perceived failure of liberalism in the upheavals of 1848, and how liberals sought to address this failure. They focused overwhelmingly on institutions like the family, religion, and Freemasonry in what they saw as an essentially moralizing and educational project. Chapter 5 turns to the topic of liberal governance and, with a focus on Napoleon III, Abraham Lincoln, William Gladstone, and Otto von Bismarck, recounts how their leadership engendered new ideas about the relationship between morals, liberalism, and democracy. The idea of a “liberal democracy” was born. Chapter 6 considers France’s fourth revolution in 1870 and its repercussions. It describes the battles of the French Third Republic against the Catholic Church in the effort to create what republicans called the most liberal educational system in the world. Chapter 7 recounts how a new liberalism, friendly to socialist ideas, was conceived toward the end of the nineteenth century and how a “classical” or “orthodox” liberalism was conjured as a response. A great battle took place over which of these—the new or the old—was the “true” liberalism. Finally, chapter 8 recounts how liberalism entered the American political vocabulary in the early twentieth century and came to be seen as a uniquely American intellectual tradition, wrapped up also in the notion of American world hegemony. Policy makers now debated what exactly American liberalism meant in terms of foreign and domestic affairs. In the epilogue I offer some suggestions as to why we have come to believe that liberalism is so fundamentally centered on private rights and individual choices. I discuss how the mid-twentieth-century Americanization of liberalism came to eclipse the history recounted in this book to the point that many of us today don’t remember it at all.