Introduction

The Practice of Liberalism

If you think that liberalism is in jeopardy and worth defending, then it matters to see liberalism for what it is. To see something for what it is, you need to recognize its kind. If you ask what kind of thing liberalism is, you are likely to be told that it is a political ideology, an ethical creed, an economic picture of society, a philosophy of politics, a rationale of capitalism, a provincial Western outlook, a passing historical phase or a timeless body of universal ideals. None of that is strictly wrong, but all of it is partial. Each of those answers makes one aspect of liberalism the whole of liberalism. None puts liberalism in its proper category. Seen in the round, liberalism is to be taken as a practice of politics.

Liberalism has no foundation myth or year of birth. Its intellectual and moral sources go back as far as energy or curiosity will take you, but it arose as a political practice in the years after 1815 across the Euro-Atlantic world and nowhere significantly before. Liberalism responded to a novel condition of society, grown suddenly larger with expanding populations, energized by capitalism and shaken by political revolution in which, for better or worse, material and ethical change now appeared ceaseless. In that unfamiliar setting, the first liberals sought fresh terms for the conduct of political life that would serve their aims and honor their ideals.

People before them had not imagined such an ever-shifting world. Thinkers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment had encouraged the idea that people might understand and change society. Hume and Kant had welcomed liberty from ethical tutelage. Adam Smith had spied the first fruits of modern capitalism. None had experienced the true force
of either. None had understood, let alone felt, a new state of affairs in which society was changing people, often at unprecedented speed and in ways nobody understood. That restless novelty, welcome in some ways, bewildering in others, argues for an early nineteenth-century opening to the liberal epic. To look for political liberalism before then is like searching for the seventeenth-century carburetor or the eighteenth-century microchip.

Neither dynasties, presidencies nor revolutions mark liberalism's life. Four rough periods, given sharp dates for clarity, stand out. The first (1830–1880) was a time of youthful self-definition, rise to power and large achievements. In its second period (1880–1945), liberalism matured and struck a historic compromise with democracy. From that compromise, hard-fought and unstable as it was, liberalism emerged in a more inclusive form as democratic liberalism, better known as liberal democracy. After near-fatal failures—imperial overreach, globalized rivalries and world wars, political collapse, economic slump—liberal democracy in 1945 won itself a second chance with the military defeat and moral ruin of fascism, its twentieth-century rival on the right. That third period of reparative success and intellectual vindication (1945–89) ended in seeming triumph with the surrender of Soviet Communism, liberal democracy’s twentieth-century rival on the left. In a fourth period (1989 to the present), self-doubt returned amid bewildering shocks and anxious concern that liberal democracy’s many recognized complaints might no longer be treatable on their own but were threatening to run together and become fatal.

Liberalism’s Sources

The four broad ideas that have guided liberals in their history had roots of various kinds. The first idea, acknowledgment of conflict’s inescapability, drew on fresh memories of religious warfare and on the realization that economic change and intellectual fragmentation were together throwing stable societies into upheaval.

The second liberal idea, distrust of power—be it the power of the state, of wealth or of the social community—drew on old human wisdom that power grew implacable if not checked, as well as on the mod-
ern realization that undivided authorities could not command complex societies.

Faith in human progress, the third liberal idea, rose out of a human urge to improve, tidy, and repair, but more immediately and more articulately out of religious awakening and Enlightenment zeal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, each a version of this-worldly hopefulness, often found together in one and the same liberal. No more than Kant did early liberal statesmen such as Guizot or Gladstone take faith and reason to exclude each other.

Lastly, civic respect—that is the law-backed respect by state and society for people and their projects, whatever they thought and whoever they were—had roots in religious acknowledgement of people’s intrinsic worth and insistence on their moral responsibility for themselves. It had roots also in law, particularly laws of property and inheritance. The political demands of liberal respect, however, were wider in range and more specific in content. Liberals enjoined power not to intrude on people’s privacy, not to obstruct their aims and not to exclude anyone from those first two promises whether by debarment or neglect. In fortifying and extending civic respect, liberals built on the modern emergence of toleration for unorthodoxy as well as on the yet newer thought, promoted in political economy, that law and tradition ought not to stand in the way of people’s fruitful innovations and productive enterprises.

Insisting that state and society must respect everyone, whoever they were, was a democratic seed in an otherwise undemocratic creed. Liberalism promised the boons of divided power, human progress and, in its several domains, civic respect. Only democratic liberals insisted on those boons for everyone. Liberalism laid out the feast. Democracy drew up the guest list. Much of the liberal story has involved an unending struggle between liberalism for some and liberalism for all. That contest is described in its three domains—political, economic and cultural—in Part Two (1880–1945). Not till the twentieth century’s second half could democratic liberals claim to have won. The twenty-first century fear was that success might have been a passing phase.

Once liberalism had found footing and spread, liberal thinkers spun from a shared frame of mind a more articulate outlook. They mixed disputed legal, philosophical and economic terms of art—rights, individu-
als, free markets—with the loose banner language of the political street, notably “Liberty!” They drew on intellectual precedents going back past sixteenth- and seventeenth-century defenders of toleration and antimonarchical republicanism through the conciliarism and ethical rationalism of the scholastic church doctors to arguments about power, duty and justice of the ancient Greeks, all of which gave rise to unsettled arguments about when liberalism began.

No one version of the liberal outlook ever became canonical. Liberalism had no accredited doctrinalists, no Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, no Marx-Engels Standard Edition. No one philosophy spoke for its ideas. Millian Utilitarianism and Hegelian idealism served alike in the nineteenth century as justificatory narratives. In the English-speaking world after 1945, a rights-based liberalism came to dominate political philosophy. Given such variety of common terms and suggested vindications, liberalism’s outlook was bound to be loose fitting, open to interpretation and unsettled argument. Liberal philosophers strive to justify liberalism. The rivals of liberalism strive to defeat liberalism. Liberals vie among themselves to own liberalism. In the thicket of liberal ideas, it is good to be clear which argument you are having.

Hopes and Fears in a Strange Predicament

Liberalism began in a predicament. The first liberals were looking for a new political order after the upheavals of early industrial capitalism and two late eighteenth-century revolutions—American and French—had thrown society into fruitful but unending turmoil. The principal liberal challenge was that order from now on would be dynamic, not static. When thrown out of balance, society might come to rest again but never, save by remotest luck, in its former place. Continuity of life imagined as a comforting return home was gone for good. Thrown into an unfamiliar world of nomadic modernity, liberals were thrilled and horrified. Neither their political temperament nor their political ideas can be understood without seeing the hold on them of that thrill and horror together. In searching for an acceptable political order in a destabilized world of ceaseless change, liberals had accordingly a hopeful dream, a nightmare and a daytime picture of human society that combined both good and
bad dreams in an unsteady, creative tension. Liberalism from the beginning was as much a search for order as a pursuit of liberty.

The hopeful dream imagined a myth of order in a masterless world: a peaceful, prosperous place without father figures or brotherhood, chieftains or comrades, final authorities or natural-born friends. It was an appealing myth shaped by distrust of powers, monopolies and authorities, by faith that the worst human ills of warfare, poverty, and ignorance were corrigible in this world, and by unbreachable respect for the enterprises, interests and opinions of people, whoever they were. Those convictions attracted and were first voiced by educated, propertied men keen to get ahead and to prevent existing elites from standing in their way, but the appeal of liberal ideas was not confined to such people, and in democratic times the appeal broadened without limits of social category. Liberalism’s ideas served as guides in a world of ever-shifting novelty where interests clashed and argument never ended. Liberals were not sleepwalkers. They worked hard to convince themselves that their guiding ideas, ambitious and exacting as they were, might interlock and reinforce each other.

Liberals hoped for ethical order without appeal to divine authority, established tradition or parochial custom. They hoped for social order without legally fixed hierarchies or privileged classes. They hoped for an economic order free of crown or state interference, monopoly privileges and local obstacles to national markets. They hoped for an international order where trade prevailed over war and treaty prevailed over force. They hoped lastly for a political order without absolute authorities or undivided powers that all citizens might understand and accept under lawful arrangements honoring and fostering those other hopes.

The liberal nightmare pictured a world in disorder. The nightmare drew on the direct experience of revolution and warfare in 1789–1815 as well as on collective memory of the fratricidal conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It mingled fears of a return to historic intolerance and religious strife with revulsion at the terror and counterterror, popular unrest, vengeful repression, levée en masse and unlimited warfare that had recently swept over the European and Atlantic world. European liberals shuddered at riotous mobs in burgeoning cities. American liberals feared reprisal for the cruelties and wickedness of slavery. Ever deeper poverty in the countryside was bleakly forecast as
growing populations threatened to outstrip agricultural capacities. Liberals everywhere worried that whereas the benefits of progress were commonly diffuse and would be seen over time, the costs of progress tended to be local, sharply felt and abrupt.

Liberalism resolved hope and nightmare into a desirable picture of society as an unfraternal place without natural harmony from which clashing interests and discordant beliefs could never be removed but where, with luck and wise laws, unceasing conflict might nevertheless be turned to welcome ends in innovation, argument and exchange. That picture of conflict channeled into peaceful competition made a mystifying, fluid and constantly surprising society intelligible to liberals, and thence in some sense justifiable or acceptable.

Appealing reasons existed to suppose the elements of the liberal dream might work together and hopes might be achieved. Ethical order would become self-fulfilling with the spread of education and material independence, as people learned to take responsibility, to choose well and wisely for themselves and to respect each other's choices. Social order would be self-sustaining as the cumulative benefits of technical and economic change outweighed their costly disruptions. Economic order would be self-correcting, for when one market failed, another market could provide, and when a whole economy faltered, prosperity would return so long as the economy was left to rebalance itself without lasting or ineffective interference. International order similarly would prove self-imposing as the mutual gains from trade and openness outgrew the spoils of war. Political order, finally, would be self-fulfilling as subjects became rulers, the master-state became a servant-state and the only rules citizens had to obey were those they had in some sense accepted for themselves. As hopes go, those were big hopes.

Liberalism's ambition struck its rivals from the start as extravagant if not Utopian. Hope for masterless order among contented people asked a lot of steady material gains, which came, but not steadily. It asked a lot of rising forbearance among reasonable citizens within nations, which was visible in good times but vanished with frightening speed in bad. It asked a lot of declining belligerence between nations, which did indeed lessen for the kinds of reasons liberals gave only to return to their consternation in ever more destructive forms. In new guise, those same challenges are as stark now as in the nineteenth century. Hope for order

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from horizonless innovation, open borders and limitless social freedom asks a lot of people who do not all share the gains, who long for stability and who do not always want to be reasonable or forbearing with neighbors they do not particularly like.

Dream and nightmare, success and wreckage mark the liberal story and, with them, wide swings of mood: politically, from over-confidence to self-doubt; intellectually, from unbounded universalism to worldly-wise damage limitation. At the top of the cycle, liberals could always be found spying calamity ahead. At the bottom of the cycle, liberals could always be found reminding shaken colleagues of the upturn to come. Like up-and-down capitalism itself, liberalism's mood swings are comforting only to a point. Cycles in history, like trends in nature, can come to an end.

Liberalism's Four Guiding Ideas

Liberalism's first guiding idea—conflict—was less an aim or ideal than a description of society, though hardly a neutral description. Conflict of interests and beliefs was, to the liberal mind, inescapable. If tamed and turned to competition in a stable political order, conflict could nevertheless bear fruit as argument, experiment and exchange. By treating society not as an extended tribe or a household writ large but as a field of peaceable competition, liberals put constraints on what prescriptive ideals to follow. Their ideals, that is, had to suit a competitive society. When liberals took conflict for inevitable and competition, its peaceable form, for desirable, they excluded or demoted social virtues that their political rivals favored. To liberals, competition in the town square, laboratory or market place encouraged bargaining, creativity, and initiative, whereas social harmony stifled or silenced them. Conservatives, who saw harmony in tradition, and socialists, who saw harmony in fraternity, were each quick to insist that liberal ideals grossly distorted the true picture of society. The liberal picture was, to their minds, a portrait painted to flatter liberalism's self-image, a picture not of how society was but of how grasping liberals wished it to become.

In thinking about conflict, American and British liberals have tended, in hopeful imitation of economists, to treat it individualistically as in-
volving two single bargainers or contestants that could without distortion be magnified to social scale. French and German liberals have tended to treat conflict more socially as taking place among shared mentalities and self-standing groups. With that contrast in mind, it will be suggested at the end of Part One that liberalism can be but does not need to be defended in contentious “individualist” terms.

Hopeful early liberals such as Constant, Tocqueville and Mill welcomed diversity and distrusted social unity. They saw in modern fragmentation the sunny potential of material and intellectual creativity. Liberalism, however, soon had to reckon with people who would rather fight than trade. It had to find something to say to people with little or nothing to trade, nothing, that is, of the marketable kind that liberal capitalism characteristically valued. Faced by those difficulties, later liberals, particularly after 1945, often tried to fool themselves that society was not after all in inescapable conflict. With a measure of bad faith, they were tempted to fall back on the fond belief that modern people’s interests and convictions were converging on the common goals of social peace and material plenty. On that wishful picture, conflict in liberal modernity was not so much tamed as expunged.

To shaken liberals in the twenty-first century, it is not the least clear that modern society reliably turns conflict to net advantage or that liberal capitalism has achieved a wished-for steady-state of concord in discord. Theirs is not the sunny view taken by mid-nineteenth century liberals of vigorous argument and fertile competition. Nor is it the self-confident post-1945 liberalism of moderate government-aided economic convergence in a nevertheless open and diverse society, but a bleaker view of unremitting conflict and division reinforced by doubts about the liberal foundations. Rattled liberals nowadays are likelier to see the intellectual and material fractures of society more with the eyes of Jean Bodin or Thomas Hobbes, though without the recourse to absolute powers, a plausible solution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but in liberal modernity neither acceptable nor achievable.

As for liberalism’s second guiding idea, human power was implacable. It could never be relied on to behave well. Whether political, economic or social, superior power of some people over others tended inevitably to arbitrariness and domination unless resisted and checked. Power might stop people from doing what they chose or make them do
what they would rather not. The kind of power that mattered first in politics was public power, of state over citizen, wealth over poverty, majorities over minorities. Public power took a variety of forms. Power might come as hard, lawful coercion by the state. It might come more softly as overbearing economic pressure in the market or socially as constraining orthodoxy. Each form carried a characteristic “or else,” exacting compliance by threatening respectively punitive restraint, the infliction of penury or social ostracism.

Power might on occasion be resisted by open violence or, in the thrilling grand soir of radical imagination, by popular uprising. But power for liberals could be peacefully and durably resisted only by law and institutions, themselves forever contested by competing interests eager to capture lawful authority. Liberal resistance to power needed accordingly to be watchful in several domains. It was best understood by what it excluded and what was proposed instead: not autocratic rule, but division of constitutional authority; not economic monopoly, but economic competition; not intellectual orthodoxy, but free enquiry and open argument.

Liberal resistance called, demandingly, on citizens one by one not to submit to undue power. The ideal liberal citizen was self-possessed and ready to answer back to authority. Yet liberalism was not a call to martyrdom. Effective resistance had to be collective. Liberalism called accordingly for a shared commitment to laws and institutions that prevented any one interest, faith or class from seizing control of state, economy or society and turning it to their own domineering purposes. Liberal resistance, that is, required lasting arrangements that recognized “the radical illegitimacy of all absolute power” in Guizot’s words. Creating institutions, however, was but a first step in collective resistance. The liberal task of standing up to power was never over. Resistance was rarely secure, for power was remorseless and cunning.

The first defense against arbitrary power, law and government, was itself a power, hence an abiding problem for liberals. The problem dogged them in the nineteenth century as they strove to make government not smaller or weaker, as appropriative later caricature insisted, but more capable and less corrupt. It dogged liberals in the mid–twentieth century, by when they had come to accept wide socioeconomic responsibilities for government but at growing cost and with open-ended
demands for government to do ever more. It dogged small-government liberals in the late twentieth century who forgot the powers of wealth and orthodoxy and became fixated on government as the only power to resist. The task of finding a balance between containing and empowering the state dogged the liberal democracies in the twenty-first century, by when it had become clear that denying, belittling and neglecting government’s responsibilities did not magically make them go away.

In thinking about the proper level of state power, liberals throughout staked a lot on progress, their third guiding idea, which they trusted would make society and its citizens less unruly. The first liberals stressed progress in various ways, as their story will show. Humboldt, Guizot and Mill emphasized the progress made possible by education. The economists Cobden, Marshall, and Walras stressed the progress of economic advance and spreading prosperity. Smiles and Channing saw progress in personal advance, respectively as self-improvement or moral uplift. High officials such as the Benthamite Chadwick looked to government to answer social ills and improve the common welfare. That social-minded tradition of liberal progress was taken up and widened by the “new liberals” early last century, Hobhouse, Naumann, Bourgeois and Croly. The scope and timing varied, but after 1945 the social tradition of liberalism—whether written as in France and Germany, half-written as in the United States or unwritten as in Britain—was constitutionally embedded in Western politics. Welfare capitalism, which included universal education and cradle-to-grave social security, became the liberal model of human progress across the Atlantic world. For the next 70 years it often seemed as if the deep, enduring question in Western politics was the cost and sustainability of liberal progress.

The fourth liberal idea was that there were limits to how superior power could treat and above all not mistreat people, or exclude people. Liberals called on state and society to respect people themselves, whoever they were, whatever they believed. Liberals were not repeating the banal truth that might was not right. They were neither inventing the idea that moral restraints existed on power nor rediscovering the ancient maxim that sensible rulers must avoid cruelty, theft and disregard for the people’s will. Liberals were applying a common moral and prudential inheritance in new circumstances where a new kind of citizen was making new demands. As Constant, Tocqueville, and Mill all
grasped, modern citizens demanded ample room for public maneuver together with a secure private space, and had the self-possession to stand up for what they wanted.

As people faced a variety of impositions from state and society, the demands of civic respect came in several domains and took various forms. Again, they could best be put negatively. In setting limits to what superior power of some over others should not do, liberal respect insisted on nonintrusion, nonobstruction and—the democratic “whoever”—nonexclusion. Intrusive power might intrude on people’s private world, interfere with their property or gag their opinions. Obstructive power might block creative aims, entrepreneurial ventures and technical innovations. Exclusive power might deny protections and permissions to the poor, to women, to the unlettered or the unorthodox. Power might deny them to anyone that is typed undemocratically for inferior citizenship by markers of social difference.

Civic respect promised people reliable protection from oppressive or unwanted power. It was a public, not personal, requirement addressed to state and society, hence the “civic.” It called impersonally for restraint from the powers of those “cold monsters”: state, wealth and society. It set high standards on what those behemoths owed each of us. It did not call on power to like, admire or take a personal interest in people, a misplaced hope like asking gravity to be nice to us. Taken democratically, civic respect was demanded for everybody, whoever they were. So understood, it was to be extended without the discriminations of favor or exclusion, neutrally, impartially and in blindness to people’s given or adopted social clothes, a requirement of complexity and ambition, giving rise to unending dispute in thought and practice.

Particularly after 1945, liberals began to think of the permissions and protections offered by civic respect less in Utilitarian terms of their general benefits than in terms of personal rights. The shift involved a conceptual reduction and a pragmatic inflation. Philosophically, in looking for legitimizing answers to why power must desist from intruding on or obstructing us, liberal thinkers re-elaborated new contractarian versions of old natural-rights doctrines. Described in chapter 12, that modern search for the bedrock on which to rest inviolable rights started in the United States where methodological individualism dominated the social sciences, law courts played a leading part in politics, and every
kind of social conflict could be framed as a legal dispute between two parties, often one of them an agency of the state. The so-called rights explosion, however, was neither confined to the university world of political philosophy, nor was it purely American. Politically, post-1945 liberals everywhere tended to fall into a habit of treating any aspect of what state and society owed us by way of respect as a matter of personal rights that could be legally codified and in principle defended in court, an inflationary sequence described in chapter 11 on human rights after 1945.

The liberalism of rights was in time flanked by a neo-Hegelian liberalism of recognition. It too involved a reduction and an inflation. As his twentieth-century interpreters read him, Hegel described a contest between the unrecognized and powerless against the recognized and powerful until all recognized all in equal acceptance of a law-governed state. History, in that picture, became a struggle for recognition. The metaphor electrified neo-Hegelian liberals, who likened the impersonal respect owed by power towards people to the personal recognition that people owed each other. It was but a step to treating every public intrusion, obstruction or exclusion as a denial of recognition, and to a blurring of the line, precious to political liberals, between the public and the private spheres, between the political and the personal.

Intellectually, whereas the liberalism of rights had succored mid-twentieth century movements for non-discrimination and civil rights, the liberalism of recognition succored a problem stepchild of those great campaigns, the politics of identity. As described in Part Four in the chapter “Nationhood, Citizenship and Identity,” unifying campaigns to end exclusion and win civic respect for all risked becoming divisive campaigns to celebrate difference. When pursued in separatist spirit, identity politics, for all its virtues, divided the left, gave weapons to the right and weakened the democratic idea of equal citizenship.

It’s about more than liberty.

The triple structure of civic respect made it irresistible for liberals to simplify. Faced by the historic intrusions of rulers, bailiffs, tax collectors, book censors and priests, reliable protection from undue power was
what people had immemorially spoken of as liberty. In their several contests against unchecked power—political, economic and social—the first liberals seized on the idea of liberty, borrowing heavily against the moral capital of the parallel movement to free slaves. Eager to release vigorous new enterprise from old strictures against unequal bargains and unfair wages, liberal economists and lawyers worked hard to embed into nineteenth-century commercial law the idea of free contract. In facing down its twentieth-century rivals, fascism and communism, liberal democracy fought a successful contest of geopolitics and principle under the all-purpose banner of freedom.

Liberals, it is said, believe in liberty. Indeed, they do, but so do most nonliberals. Standing up for liberty does not distinguish liberals or what they believe in. Just about every modern rival to liberalism has claimed to stand somehow on the side of liberty. *Le Conservateur*, a French journal founded in 1818 to promote tradition and reaction, announced its aims as a defense of “king, religion and liberty.” In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels looked forward to a classless society in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” In 1861, the American Confederacy’s vice president, Alexander Stephens, defended the newly formed government of the slave-holding South as securing “all our ancient rights, franchises and liberties.” The encyclical *Libertas humana*, which Pope Leo XIII addressed to Roman Catholics in 1888, held that shaping human law so that everyone might better conform to “the eternal law of God” comprised the “true liberty of human society.” The charter program of the Nazi Party in 1920 announced its goal as “Germany’s rebirth in the German spirit of German liberty. Benito Mussolini described Italian fascists as “libertarians” who believed in liberty, even for their enemies.

Maybe so, but those nonliberals were surely thinking of different things from what liberals think of when they invoke liberty. That objection, telling perhaps on its own, would have more weight if liberals themselves agreed on what liberty amounted to and why it mattered in politics. But they don’t. Although often spoken of interchangeably, freedom and liberty are not quite the same. Freedom implies absence of obstruction or constraint, which may be natural (a tree across the path) or social (a police officer’s “Stop!”, a no trespassing sign or a ticket barrier). When liberals talk of liberty politically, they have in mind
freedom of the second, social kind, particularly freedom from the prohibitions and intrusions of coercive authority. Yet even here, liberals do not all agree.

Some liberal thinkers would ask more of liberty in politics than simply the absence of outside constraint. Liberty would be of small worth in their eyes without capacities and resources to exercise liberty or without the assurance that liberty might not at the whim of power be snatched away. Other thinkers would push liberty yet further, taking it as the civic ideal of a self-possessed, autonomous citizen who chooses their own path in life but accepts nevertheless public responsibilities in the society to which they belong. Whichever of those several conceptions of liberty—negative, positive, or republican, to use labels from political philosophy, or some combination of the three—the democratic question would remain whether liberalism’s promises of permission and protection were to be taken as extended to some people or to all people. Democratic liberals would take liberalism’s promises as made for everyone. If driven to allow liberals one and only idea, democratic liberals would say that equality, not liberty, was its dominant idea. Other liberals, refusing to be driven, would deny that liberalism had one idea, be it equality or liberty, that somehow dominated the others and on which liberalism could be made to rest.

Liberty has held the stage in the monodramas of liberal history. In its Hegelian or Whig variants, the tale is essentially the same. History as Hegel imagined it was a kind of super-agent for the ever fuller realization of human liberty—for whatever counted in practice, that is, towards the extension of people’s powers and capacities, both mental and material, in successive stages of society. As the common focus of people’s drive for freedom, history on Hegel’s account moved stage by stage towards its end or goal in an enlightened and law-governed constitutional monarchy. Only such a state, to his mind, could provide the ordered liberty that citizens needed to best achieve their proper ends. A twentieth-century Italian liberal, Guido de Ruggiero, told a Hegelian story of liberty’s advance in his classic History of European Liberalism (1924), though with a different goal in view. For Ruggiero, the spread of liberty was tending to a condition of society in which each citizen had bankable opportunities to develop their capacities and realize their aims, a democratic commonwealth, that is, where everyone’s hopes and chances in life were equally respected.
In the Whig epic of emancipation, liberty’s agents were flesh-and-blood particulars—early Christians, medieval townspeople, reforming Protestants, seventeenth-century parliamentarians, anti-Stuart 1688-ers, anti-tax American colonists, French 1789-ers—knocking away one barrier or another to their advancement, motivated willy-nilly by private conscience, urge for gain or an expansive sense of self. Liberty on such accounts was a common human possession, ever at risk of hostile capture and in need of protection or release. The Protestant Macaulay’s History of England (1848–61) celebrated the anti-Stuart revolution of 1688 in England as a restoration of ancient liberties lost to absolutism and intolerance. The Catholic Acton’s posthumous History of Freedom (1907) tracked from antiquity to modern times a long campaign by personal faith to fend off suffocating authority. In the medieval contest for supremacy between church and crown that neither were in position to win, Acton spied a modern recovery of liberty and the creation of a lasting space for civic freedom.

Liberty-driven history survives in the recent fashion for books that recount modernity’s unstoppable success as a happy ménage à trois of free enquiry, unobstructed new technology, and liberal politics. In biological mode, such tales make liberty an all-purpose reproductive advantage in the evolution of social forms. They credit just about every aspect of human betterment and social progress since Galileo spotted Jupiter’s moons through a handmade telescope to liberty’s selfless sharing of her bounty. The tale has dazzling appeal. But are the boons of universal schooling, democratic suffrage, and penicillin all forms or consequences of liberty?

There are simpler versions of the liberty narrative. They follow a memorable rule of three: political liberty’s first victory was constitutional freedom (early nineteenth century), its second victory was economic freedom (later nineteenth century) and its final victory was democratic freedom (mid–twentieth century). That tidy sequence helps itself to the disputable claim that liberty is the one underlying value that representative institutions, free markets and democratic participation all embody. History is wilier than attempts to catch it in one trap allow. It concerns itself solely with liberty no more than liberals do. Obviously, you cannot leave liberty out of the liberal story. Like the king in chess, liberty comes into its own, but nearer the end of the game. For all its crowning appeal, liberty is the wrong place to begin.
The “L” Word

An irksome verbal difficulty must be faced. It would be neat if all and only liberal politicians, thinkers, parties and voters called themselves “liberal.” The word itself would then mark who was a liberal and who not. Most liberals, however, have called themselves something else. Apart from Britain’s long-lived Liberal Party (1859–1988), most small-l liberal parties in the four countries under focus here never took the capital-L name “Liberal” at all. In addition, “liberal” is not an all-or-nothing term. You can be more or less liberal. You can be liberalish. The word, besides, had non-political uses before there were ever liberals in politics. It could mean generous, open-handed or lenient, even to a fault. When used of trade as by Adam Smith, for instance, it meant unrestricted trade. The word, lastly, had a bewitching etymology, linking “liberal” with freedom as if by definition, whereas the word entered politics more by accident.

The first to adopt the term “liberal” openly in politics were the Spanish liberales, members of the Cortes or parliament demanding a return to constitutional rule. In 1814 Spain’s vacillating Bourbon king suspended the two-year-old constitution under the combined pressures of Catholic resistance, European reaction and colonial revolt against Spanish rule in Latin America. The liberales hoped that reviving the constitution would restore customary liberties and persuade the colonies to remain Spanish in a new commonwealth. They contrasted themselves with the serviles, slavish supporters, as they saw them, of the crown. European reaction defeated Spain’s constitutionalists, but as a label for an emerging outlook, the term “liberal” itself survived. Quickly it spread from Spain to France and thence across Europe.

To begin with, “liberal” characterized constitutional opposition to autocracy. On Napoleon’s return from exile in March 1815, Benjamin Constant wrote in his journal that however “liberal” the ex-emperor’s intentions, the results would more likely be “despotic.” After Napoleon’s final defeat, the term “liberal” was a pejorative to conservatives restored to power. In 1819 Austria’s chancellor, Prince Metternich, told his political secretary, Friedrich von Gentz, that “ultraliberalism” was to be extirpated without pity. Britain’s Tory foreign secretary, Viscount Castle-reagh, called Whig advocates of electoral and other reforms in the 1820s
“our English libéraux,” as if the Frenchness of the word was itself enough to damn the parliamentary opposition as disloyal and unsound.

By 1830, there were not only liberal views, but people who embraced such views: liberals. In France un libéral meant loosely anyone, monarchist or republican, who favored constitutional government and opposed a return to the ancien régime. In The Charterhouse of Parma (1839), the French novelist Stendhal wrote mockingly of his fictional Italian tyrant, Ernest IV, alone at night and afraid, who had only to hear the parquet squeak to “leap for his pistols, fearing a liberal under the bed.”

Germany’s liberals took many names. The first liberals called themselves Progressives. They split into right-wing National Liberals and left-wing Freisinnigen or Independents, who split in turn into an Independent Union and an Independent People’s Party before in 1910 becoming Progressives again. In the Weimar Republic after 1918, the National Liberals renamed themselves with wounded pride the German People’s Party and the left liberals became the German Democratic Party. After 1949, in the western half of a divided Germany embarked on recovery from national shame, the liberals renamed themselves Free Democrats.

The mainstream of French politics in the Third Republic (1870–1940), Fourth Republic (1944–1958) and Fifth Republic (from 1958) was liberal in character, though never in name. Many have fallen for the bluff assertion of Emile Faguet, a French literary critic who wrote in 1903 that there were no liberals in France and never would be. Elie Halévy, a French historian of English thought, who understood politics better than Faguet, grasped that you could be liberal without calling yourself liberal. Halévy described himself in 1900 as being “anti-clerical, democratic, republican, not socialist, against intolerance—a ‘liberal’, in other words.” With the rediscovery of French liberalism in the 1970s and 1980s, such verbal puzzles came to seem less taxing. A French historian of ideas, Cécile Laborde, judged in 2003 that “the dominant language of politics in France is republicanism, not liberalism,” but added the decisive rider that republicanism had “historically occupied the ideological space of liberalism.” Different words, that is, might voice the same ideas. The bad odor of liberalism has, all the same, never left. Neo-liberalism in particular is widely taken in France for foolish and unfrench. The word “libéral”
itself has come to mean a heartless, mindless free-marketeer even on the lips of the former banker and centrist liberal Emmanuel Macron, who campaigned successfully for the presidency in May 2017 on the slogan “Ni libéralisme, ni nationalism.”

With the two exceptions of the short-lived Liberal Republicans, led to defeat in the presidential election of 1872 by the redoubtable newspaper editor Horace Greeley, and the mid-twentieth century Liberal Party of New York, a moderate wing of the local Democrats, the main parties in American politics avoided the name. After the 1850s, two loose coalitions, the Republicans and Democrats, each with liberal and less liberal wings, monopolized the nomenclature of party competition.

By 1945, “liberal” in the United States had taken on a local and an international use. When used of politics in the United States, “liberal” indicated a supporter of the New Deal and civil rights, normally a Democrat. Internationally, “liberal” contrasted an American-led West with a Communist East. The term in the use was interchangeable with “free,” “open” and “democratic.” The label “liberal democracy,” barely recorded before the 1930s, became common, its share of occurrence in publications jumping, according to Google Books Ngram, five times between then and 1980 and another seven times in the next two decades.

The conservative right in the United States was by then using “liberal” as a term of abuse for almost anyone it disagreed with, and the ending of the Cold War soon, as it seemed, robbed “liberal” of use as a term of geopolitical contrast. Partly in result, “liberal” became scarcely usable in serious political studies without asterisks, qualifications and neck-covering disclaimers about separate referents or conflicting senses.

Never lost to view, despite the verbal and conceptual puzzles, was a recognized practice of politics that four notably varied Western societies serving here as an exemplary core—France, Britain, Germany and the United States—all uncontroversially converged upon after 1945. That familiar, stable-seeming practice became in the first decades of the new century, a focus of anxious concern, not because it was hard to define, but out of fear that it might not survive. The practice merited a label, and “democratic liberalism,” or more conventionally “liberal democracy,” has struck most people as apt. Difficulties with the word “liberal” or with the concept liberal are as big or small as you want to make them. Particularly in times as now, when some people are thrilled by
liberalism’s travails and others are afraid for its life, everybody can be taken to know what they are talking about. The challenge is not to identify liberalism but to describe and understand it well.

Liberalism’s Distinctiveness

Liberalism’s four guiding ideas were distinctive. Taken one by one, they distinguished liberals from nonliberals and antiliberals. Taken together they stood out in relief against the competing outlooks of liberalism’s chief nineteenth-century rivals, conservatives and socialists.

Both arose in reaction to liberalism, which they pictured as source and celebrant of blind, restless change. In the name of stability, conservatives appealed to the fixity of the past. They took society for a harmonious, orderly whole before critical modernity promoted self-seeking disaffection and liberal capitalism sowed discord between classes. They believed in the unchallengeable authority of established rulers and custom. Power, to the conservative mind, was to be obeyed, not questioned or made to justify itself. Conservatives took human capabilities for largely fixed and society’s scope for wholesale improvement as small or nonexistent. They looked on liberal respect for people’s chosen enterprises and opinions, especially when those took unwelcome or disruptive form, as harmful to orthodoxy and good order. Civic respect, to the conservative mind, undersanctioned human willfulness, overcelebrated private choice and scanted the demands of duty, deference and obedience.

Socialists also disagreed with liberals, point for point. In the name of brotherhood, socialists appealed to the fixity of the future. Conflict divided society at present, they accepted. But conflict was neither enduring nor ineradicable. For conflict, they believed, would end once its sources in material inequity were overcome. Socialism here stands for the many nineteenth-century families of the left that grew out of Jacobinism and popular radicalism to include Utopian collectivists, Fourierists, Marxists and early labor unionists. Socialists, like liberals, believed in resistance to power, but not all power. Wealth’s power was their primary target, and to contain that power socialists flanked and blended with democratic movements for suffrage extension and political reform.
Socialists trusted by contrast the power of society, thought of as coextensive with the working people. Anarcho-socialists took society for self-organizing, hence in no need of protection from its own power. State-minded socialists took state power to express popular power, intuited by elected or self-appointed tribunes. Liberals, by contrast, distrusted all power, including the power of the people, however thought of or spoken for.

Like liberals, socialists had faith in human progress, but taken in contrary ways. For socialists, progress meant radical transformation of society, whereas liberals took progress for gradual improvement within society as it largely was. Some socialists would reach their goal gradually by the ballot, others in a revolutionary leap. All hoped for a postcapitalist society of effective material equality assured by commonly owned or collectively managed property. For socialists, lastly, liberal respect for people one by one overplayed privacy and self-interest at the expense of comradeship, class loyalty and solidarity. Nor were socialists persuaded that liberal respect operated evenly across its several domains. Liberals, in socialist eyes, respected private enterprises and private property above all else and, despite cries of denial, stood accordingly athwart genuine progress.

The early twentieth century was generous to liberal self-understanding with two defining Others: fascism and communism. Both rejected liberal values and adopted but perverted the democratic promise of universal inclusion. Fascism appealed to a false unity of nationhood, particularly nationhood based on the fiction of race. Communism appealed to a false unity of class, particularly the unity of the working class as somehow representative of humankind. To fascism there was no higher power than nation or race, to communism none than the working people. The mystical authority of each, as interpreted by an elite party, was absolute. Personal progress was thought of in terms of socially imposed templates rather than as a growth of capacities along privately chosen paths. Social progress was equated to progress of nation, race or class, from the benefits of which those in the wrong nation, race or class were excluded. Neither fascism nor communism offered benchmarks for civic respect, or indeed any clear lines that society might not overstep in its pursuit of the common good. As the more thoughtful liberals recognized, communism was an extremism of hope, fascism an extremism of
hate. They were nevertheless alike enough on those four counts to provide liberalism with a captivating image of itself in negative.

The comprehensive disgrace of fascism (1945) and a closing of the book on Soviet communism (1989) left liberalism, as it seemed, without a global rival against which to compete historically or define itself conceptually. That sense of an ending was short-lived. In the expanded field of the twenty-first century, it was soon clear that liberalism had attractive, competing "isms" that overplayed power, underplayed civic respect and acknowledged fault on neither score: one-party authoritarianism, state capitalism, democratic nationalism, theocratic Islamism and illiberal populist movements of left and right.

Unity and Shape of the Liberal Outlook

Liberalism's four guiding ideas may be taken for liberal answers to hard questions facing any political outlook. Is the conflict of interests and faiths in society inescapable? Is power implacable and, if so, is it controllable? Are human society and human capacities static or dynamic? Are there moral or prudential limits on how those with more power may treat those with less? Answers give political outlooks a characteristic shape.

Liberals accepted the fact of conflict but distrusted power and sought to limit power. To provide for order, they counted accordingly less on power to impose control on society than on human progress to foster self-control among citizens. Liberalism's rivals, conservatism and socialism, made themselves simpler choices, given their contrasting pictures of society's true character. For conservatives, society was an organic harmony, social conflict was a malady, and people were not at root improvable. In a harmonious society, progress was not needed to create order, and, if temporarily lost, order could be restored only by power, not by progress. Progress to the conservative mind, that is, was unnecessary or ineffective. For socialists, society was a fraternal harmony, distorted at present by resolvable conflict provided material inequity was removed. Radical progress for socialists, unlike gradual progress for liberals, meant a leap out of conflict into fraternity. Once arrived in fraternity, people and power would merge, removing any need to protect the one

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from the other. There was a pattern here. To the hard questions about conflict among people and about tension between people and power, conservatives and socialists alike each answered in ways that lightened the burdens of containment and resolution placed on political action. Liberals, with their answers, made the burden on politics heavier.

There is no tidy answer to what made liberal answers liberal. If a satisfying, noncircular definition of “liberalism” is still wanted none is available. Looking for liberalism in semantic space or conceptual space is looking in the wrong places. Historically, liberal answers to the hard questions of politics were answers liberals gave. In addition, liberal answers and the outlook that came with them marked out clear differences with rivals on a familiar ideological map. Neither point will satisfy someone demanding the essence of liberalism or a decisive specification of the cultural kind liberal. The liberal outlook can, nevertheless, be seen for distinctive in a third, more helpful way.

Just as liberals would not simplify the hard questions, so they would not subordinate some guiding ideas to others, despite their inner tensions. Liberals held to all of them together, neglecting none. Whether taken as pragmatic open-mindedness or pluralism of a more theoretical kind, that second-order acceptance of tension and conflict among their own guiding ideas was itself characteristically liberal. Liberals, when being liberal, did not drop one requirement from their outlook in order to make that outlook neater to formulate or easier to follow. The liberal outlook is not a cohesive structure like the chemistry of a natural element. Some parts of the liberal outlook cohere, some conflict. Nor can the outlook be given intellectual coherence or persuasive appeal by reducing all its requirements to one overriding idea, such as liberty or equality. Liberals give their outlook coherence when pursuing its discordant aims together, and they are not acting like liberals unless they do.

Among liberalism’s guiding ideas, resistance and civic respect reinforced each other. Respect and progress pulled against each other in tension. As to that first pairing, resistance and respect each bore on the proper relationship between power and people, but a relationship viewed from different sides. Resistance enjoined citizens to restrain power by law and institutions, and if that failed, by dissent. Respect enjoined power to desist from undue use of power against citizens. There was one play but two roles, rulers and ruled, each with distinct kinds of
duties to the other that did not neatly reflect each other, unlike counterpart duties between spouses or friends or the inverse exchanges of buyers and sellers. Civic respect was about what power may not do to people. Resistance was about how people together could arrange matters so that power acted with respect. Out of resistance came arrangements and institutions for constraining power: divided authority, representative elections with the negative sanction of removing unwanted governments at the ballot, laws to restrain wealth and provide for need, independents courts to defend the exercise of those arrangements. Out of respect came guaranteed permissions and protections from power that people could count on by right or law.

As for the tension, respect conflicted with progress. Liberal respect stressed a negative aspect of human power, the harms it could do to people when not checked. Human power had positive aspects, however. Not only was human power, when expressed as skill, excellence, or virtuosity, valuable in itself. Human power, like natural power, could do work and yield results. It could bring benefits, including benefits needed for social and human progress. To improve society, power was needed, imposing here, obstructing there. To improve people, particularly by education, you had to shape or interfere with their chosen ends or those of their families, the “you” here being the familiar agencies of state and society. To improve the world, in short, you had to interfere with the world. Liberals were sincere in prizing diversity and individuality. They were sincere in wanting to let people alone and protect them from power. In the liberal breast, however, was also to be found the domineering teacher and liberal imperialist. With characteristic pith, Lord Acton nailed the difficulty in a letter to a friend in 1887: “My liberalism admits to everyone the right to his own opinion and imposes on me the duty of teaching him what is best.”

Liberal Deviations and Alliances

The complexity of the liberal outlook allowed for deviations and alliances. Among deviations, anarchism in the nineteenth century and its late twentieth-century cousin, libertarianism, both promoted respect for people on their own into a super-principle, to the neglect of liberalism’s other guiding ideas. Despite their local appeal, neither idea was
practical in large, complex societies. Libertarian thought, particularly of a strong free-market kind, has nevertheless stamped present-day sensibilities, encouraged underestimation of the need for countervailing powers, and fed distrust of politics and government.

An opposite pull, towards progressive authoritarianism, fostered the liberal goal of social progress at a cost to civic respect, especially the inclusive, democratic element in respect. Social progress pursued in illiberal ways has often tempted liberals as a temporary second-best, as nineteenth-century examples will show. In good economic times, twentieth-century liberal economists tended to relax with the thought that economic progress, whatever the cost, would in time meet other liberal goals.

As open-minded negotiators at the political center, liberals were ever available for party alliances to their right and left. By the late nineteenth century, right-wing liberals had allied with market-minded conservatives in a defense of wealth and property against economic democracy. That rightward tendency in liberalism was noted early. After the German liberals’ rout in their failed revolution of 1848 against absolute rule and princely privilege, Helmut von Moltke, the future Prussian field marshal and creator of Germany’s general staff, wrote about liberal prospects in a letter to his sister-in-law. For all their stormy talk of change, Moltke told her, liberals would quickly see where their true interests lay. Before long, he predicted, “the most radical deputy will be carrying on like a monocled toff.” Moltke was only half right. By the late nineteenth century, as will be seen, many left-wing liberals had embarked on the historic compromises that led after 1945 to democratic liberalism. In that compromise, government parties of the right soon joined. However, by the twenty-first century, a hard right, illiberal in its disregard for countervailing powers and undemocratic in its economic exclusions, had re-emerged and reasserted its distinctiveness.

Who Is Liberal and Who Isn’t

There was always a question of who was and who wasn’t a liberal. Every liberal had to hold to all four liberal ideas without sacrificing one to the others, but that left scope for variation, degrees of liberalism and mar-
ginal cases. Tocqueville yes, Marx no, although some have thought he was a liberal. Being or not being liberal came in degrees. Guizot and Mill were both unmistakably liberals, but Mill, who admired Guizot as a thinker and historian but not as a politician, was more liberal. Herbert Hoover was a liberal of a kind but less liberal than Franklin Roosevelt. Much had to do with who you took for allies. Business-minded liberals by the end of the nineteenth century were, as just noted, often hard to tell from business-minded conservatives. Social-minded liberals were similarly often hard to tell after 1945 from liberal-minded socialists.

If exemplars are demanded, Gladstone and Lincoln were exemplary liberals in the nineteenth century, Beveridge and Lyndon Johnson in the twentieth. Mill, Weber and Rawls were exemplary liberals among thinkers. There were also intriguing outliers and marginal cases. Among nineteenth-century politicians, Richter in Germany and Laboulaye in France were minority liberal voices in illiberal regimes. Among thinkers, neither Sartre nor Oakeshott were straightforwardly liberal. Each scorned the label. Mentioning either of them in a work on liberalism provoked dismay or charges of incomprehension from reviewers of this book’s first edition. It would be odd, however, not to hear something liberal in Sartre’s philosophical veneration of sovereign personhood or in Oakeshott’s mocking suspicion of systems and planning.

Liberal Passions

Speeches, talk and fiction have mattered for liberalism as well as treatises. To follow liberalism’s story, you need a scalpel for its ideas, but also an ear for the moral sentiments, passions and attachments that gave those ideas force. In Anna Karenina (1873–78), Tolstoy described “the true liberalism” of Anna’s amiable, shambolic brother, Stiva Oblonsky, as being “in his blood.” Oblonsky’s was not the doctrinal liberalism he read about at the club in his liberal newspaper, but a deep-rooted set of moral sentiments. That temperamental liberalism, Tolstoy told us, rested on “a leniency founded on a consciousness of his own defects” and on a profound sense of human equality which “made him treat all men alike whatever their rank or official position.” The American poet T. S. Eliot took a less flattering view of the liberal temperament. “He is a liberal,”
Eliot said of his friend and fellow poet Stephen Spender, "and therefore tends to intolerance and to judging others; and he tends to take an unctuously superior tone on the basis of very imperfect understanding."

There are many feelings in the liberal breast.

Characteristic social sentiments and moral emotions lent strength to liberalism’s guiding ideas: hatred of domination (resistance); pride or shame in your society (progress); outrage at maltreatment and exemplary wrongs (respect); zest for competitive challenges (conflict). None were liberal property. When such feelings were brought into politics, liberalism gave them a characteristic voice. Those liberal feelings had also darker counterparts. The powers that came with strength, excellence, wealth or moral splendor provoked liberal envy and resentment. Liberal zeal for progress could mask self-punishing scrupulosity towards blameless collective ills. Insistence on civic respect for people was ever open to the distortions of selective indignation. Blithe acceptance of conflict could tip to its opposite, undue fear of disorder and anxious longing for calm. Liberalism’s sharper critics to left and right—Joseph de Maistre, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Maurras, and Carl Schmitt, for example—all made hay with that shadow side of liberal sentiment. Liberalism’s great orators, Guizot, Lincoln, and Gladstone; liberalism’s great talkers, Clemenceau and Lloyd George; and liberalism’s great writers, Orwell, Camus, and even semiliberal Sartre, all understood liberal sentiments, the bright and dark ones alike. To understand liberalism, you need to keep in mind its characteristic temperament and its shifting moods.

Liberalism as a Practice

As a practice of politics, liberalism can be taken naturalistically for a norm-governed adaptation to modern historical circumstance. Like any broad human practice, liberalism has a history, practitioners and a distinctive outlook to guide them. Practices are familiar. They may be thought of as cultural kinds, whose members are open to observation and inspection much like natural kinds. Law, marriage, religion and art are examples. Politics is another. As politics is a practice, liberalism strictly is a subpractice or the practice of a practice. So are its rivals,
conservatism and socialism, each of them being ways to practice a practice. Once that is understood, it is simpler to avoid the stutter and speak of liberalism as a practice without ado. By “practitioners” is meant simply liberals, the men and women who have engaged in, voted for and thought about liberal politics. The term “practice” could be replaced by “tradition.” Which one is preferable depends on the ear. If a term of art is wanted, “ideology” could replace “outlook.” Talking of a liberal ideology rather than a liberal outlook is harmless so long as it is remembered that liberals have guiding ideas but that liberalism itself, taken as a practice or tradition stretched out in historical time, cannot be a set of guiding ideas, something abstract and in need of mental labor to pull to earth.

Nor, to avoid a related mistake, is liberalism a philosophy of politics. To take it for one involves a confusion of levels between politics and history on the one hand and philosophy on the other. Political liberalism has had high-order justifications for its guiding ideas in abundance: Kantian, Hegelian, Utilitarian, neo-idealist, neo-Lockian, Popperian, Rawlsian, neo-Hegelian and pragmatist. Without first identifying the liberal outlook, you cannot analyze or justify that outlook philosophically, indispensable as both tasks are to liberalism’s higher self-understanding. To identify the liberal outlook without tying it to particular philosophies, you need to see how that outlook has guided liberal practice historically. The same is true of other attempts to anchor the liberal outlook in some nonpolitical discipline. Liberalism as such may, but has no need to, appeal to speculative anthropology, sociological methodology or, as the chapter on Spencer will suggest, evolutionary biology.

The Liberal Story

Part One (1830–1880) of this book recounts liberalism’s arrival in political argument and ascent to government power. After a sketch of the historical setting, its first seven chapters describe the lives and thoughts of the founders of liberalism, often in contrasting pairs to dramatize a contest of ideas. Humboldt, a professor, stressed human advance through education. Constant, a social outsider, the growth of individuality in private pursuits. Against the looming power of mass society,
Tocqueville promoted voluntary association; against that of the mass market, Schulze-Delitzsch promoted economic localism and cooperatives. Chadwick worked for social progress by government action, Cobden by expansion of free markets. Smiles took personal progress for self-improvement, Channing for moral uplift, each distinct from socialist class advance or from conservative doubt that people deeply change at all. Mill made a philosophic attempt to square liberal respect for people with social progress understood as expansion of the general good. Lincoln and Gladstone, great users and expanders of government, exemplified liberal ideas in office.

Part Two (1880–1945) describes liberalism in command together with its successes and failures as it compromised with democracy. Liberalism in this period went a long way to meeting its aims and honoring its ideals. It also survived, barely, calamities of its own making. Constitutionally, state power was segmented and controlled even as the reach of government grew. Chapters on Walras, Marshall and the business press illustrate how states were resisted on behalf of markets. The power of the market was tempered by the beginnings of a welfare state, as the parallel careers of the “social” liberals, Hobhouse, Naumann, Croly, and Bourgeois, will show.

Liberalism (1880–1945) made peace with democracy. From that historic compromise emerged the practice of liberalism known as liberal democracy. The grand bargain between liberalism and democracy involved political choice, economic power and ethical authority. In each area liberals abandoned whatever monopoly hopes they may once have entertained as a rising elite of educated, propertied men intent on supplanting previous régimes. Liberals accepted popular sovereignty across those three domains. In return, popular forces accepted liberal rules of procedure, protections of property and respect for personal choice. The compromise was neither smooth nor automatic, but grudging and hard fought. Least of all was it historically inevitable or conceptually necessary. Liberal democracy is contingent and reversible.

In the decades after 1880s under pressure of class conflict, governments enacted sweeping social reforms and gave the state new tasks, welcomed by most liberals as an application of liberal principle to new circumstance, though resisted by an unconvincing minority as an abandonment of liberal principle. Education and cultural progress did not,
first of all, eradicate prejudice and intolerance or create reasonable, dispassionate citizens as reliably as liberals had hoped. Aggressive nationalism, jingo imperialism, anti-Catholicism, white racism, anti-Semitism and other exclusionary hatreds proved winning vote-getters, to which liberal elites often responded opportunistically when not offering active encouragement. The varied early twentieth-century careers of Bouglé, Alain, Baldwin and Brandeis illustrate the challenges of embedding civic respect for all and protecting unorthodoxy and diversity against society’s pressures, challenges not met until the human rights and civil rights movements after 1945.

Trade and economic interdependence, secondly, did not ensure peace and amity. They brought a rivalry of liberal imperialisms, illustrated by the parallel careers of Joseph Chamberlain and Ernst Basser mann. In 1914 came an unexpected and bewildering world war that many took to mark liberalism’s end. That war introduced two new political types that came to prominence in the twentieth century, the liberal hawk defending liberal values by military strength, and the liberal internationalist, promoting multilateral negotiation and peaceful cooperation among competing nations. Nor, lastly, during the decade-long slump of the 1930s could liberals convincingly persist in the laissez-faire doctrine that when markets capsized, they righted themselves. Their after-runners have made of them warring prophets, but as the chapter on them makes clear, Keynes, Fisher, and Hayek were all aiming to save capitalism.

Part Three (1945–1989) describes liberalism’s restabilization and success. Liberal democracy survived economic collapse, world war and moral ruin to enjoy a second chance after 1945. The liberal world took that chance, and succeeded beyond expectation. The story opens with human rights, liberal democracy restored in full to Germany and the expansion of the liberal welfare state. Representative liberal thinkers of the 1950s–80s occupy the next five chapters, followed by the turn of liberal economists against the state. Three politicians each from the liberal left and the liberal right close the years 1945–89.

Were 1989 the end, the narrative arc would be simple: liberalism is up, it’s down, it’s up. The liberals of 1830–80 drew the blueprint. The liberals of 1880–1945 built the house and then almost burned it down. Liberals took their second chance in 1945 and by 1989 liberalism was the pride of the neighborhood. That was then.
Part Four, “Liberal Dreams and Nightmares in the Twenty-First Century,” recounts liberal democracy’s upheavals and disappointments in the century’s first two decades. It recalls the dream of masterless, self-fulfilling order with which liberalism began and asks how pursuable the dream continues to be in its several domains. It describes the rise of a hard right, both illiberal and antidemocratic, economic travails, liberal democracy’s growing geopolitical loneliness and apparent division into unfriendly European and Anglo-American camps, as well as widespread intellectual disaffection, all of which shook liberal confidence in the democratic achievability of their hopes. The conclusion is bleak, not despairing. The book ends with a plea to resist the lure of mechanism, those beguiling stories that tell us that irreversible social, economic, historical or even evolutionary trends ensure that democratic liberalism is bound to fail or must succeed. It urges liberals to accept instead the primacy of politics, the availability of options and the thought that whether liberal democracy survives or fails depends to no small degree in how well it is understood and defended.

Democratic Liberalism in the Round

Liberalism arose as a practical response to the predicament of capitalist modernity. It offered an ethically acceptable order of human progress among civic equals without recourse to undue power. It appealed especially to modern-minded, self-possessed people who would not be bossed about or pushed around by superior power, be it of state, wealth or society. Liberalism offered to improve people’s lives and to treat them and their enterprises with equal respect. Liberals took moral and material conflict in society as inevitable but hoped that conflict could be made fruitful in argument, experiment and exchange. Their four guiding ideas—conflict, resistance to power, progress and civic respect—underlay and gave point to liberalism’s familiar and contested banner terms, “liberty,” “the individual,” “rights,” and “equality.” Liberalism’s promises were not narrowly Western or bourgeois. Their appeal was universal. It remains a matter of conflict how far liberal promises may be met democratically, that is, for everyone whoever they are.

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