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Introduction

Ewa Atanassow and Alan S. Kahan

Liberalism today has perhaps more supporters and adversaries than any other political movement. This book traces its global ascent through chapters about twenty-four of the thinkers and actors who contributed to liberalism's rise and spread. To write about a tradition of political thought as rich as liberalism is something like trying to carry water in a leaky bucket – the bucket is never full at the end. Readers who are inspired to learn more can follow the suggestions for further reading located at the end of the book. The chapters included here are designed for readers with little or no previous background in liberal thought as much as for those seeking to fill gaps in their knowledge. They are intended to convey the wide scope, chronological, intellectual and not least geographical, of liberalism as it has developed across the globe since the French Revolution. By probing how and why liberalism found itself in today's leading position, we hope to contribute towards a better understanding of its current situation and offer readers the opportunity to develop some insight into its future prospects.

What is liberalism? Liberalism is both a constellation of ideas about the individual and society expressed in characteristic language, and a set of political practices engaged in by people in specific historical circumstances. If unobjectionable, this description is just an empty shell, and any attempt to give it some content will inevitably result in controversy. By reading the chapters that follow, readers may go some way towards creating their own definition of the conceptual ideas and language, and of the political practices at the heart of liberalism. In general, one can say that in both theory and practice, *freedom* or *liberty* has always stood at the centre of liberal concerns.¹

As befits a movement for which freedom is central, however, there is no steel cage within which one may confine liberalism. Liberalism is a widely extended family, whose members sometimes dispute the legitimacy of one or another branch, and whether a distant cousin really deserves a place at the family table. This fuzziness mostly does not bother liberals, who tend to be

confidently heterogeneous (to borrow a phrase from Kalyvas and Katznelson). Liberal thinkers, moreover, frequently celebrate heterogeneity as a prerequisite of freedom.² Nevertheless, this diverse body of thought and practice, however varying over time and place, is united by a shared concern with individual liberty and by the quest to understand and bring about the preconditions for its exercise.

There are some widespread features of liberal thought, characteristic of the family, even if one can always find some self-described liberal who lacks one or two of them. These include an emphasis on individual rights and interests, government that is legitimized by some form of consent, a distinction between the public and the private sphere, suspicion of concentrated authority (be it moral, political, social, economic or theological) and calls for constitutional guarantees to protect citizens from potentially harmful interference by authority. These concerns translate into a range of institutional forms, legal and cultural practices, and modes of reasoning and public discourse. Not merely abstract theories, the liberal ideas featured here were also political interventions by their authors, many of whom took an active part in shaping their own societies while contributing, often self-consciously, to a global discourse of liberty.

Liberalism, we would suggest, is the first truly global political movement. Asserting that the vocation of humanity is to be free, liberalism rapidly found champions across the planet, as the chapters in this book demonstrate. In this, as in so much else, socialism – liberalism's most ardent modern competitor – was merely an imitator and offshoot of the liberal tradition. Liberalism may be seen as a secular heir to the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, attempting, like them, to offer salvation to all of humankind. Like the monotheistic religions and socialist thought, liberalism rests on a universal conception of humanity. Yet it is also characterized by a profound appreciation for human diversity and for the complexity and particularity of time, place and culture. Liberals have often argued whether liberalism in general, or particular liberal measures, is a suitable goal for a given society at a particular moment. This debate over whether liberalism ought to be universally practised represents a real paradox of the world's first global political movement, but paradox, after all, is often characteristic of liberalism, as the chapters demonstrate.

Liberalism's tendency to paradoxical political formulations can be seen as a strength quite as much as a weakness, however, if only because it seems faithful to some of the paradoxical qualities of human nature. More concretely, it is in the nature of liberalism, unlike many of its religious predecessors and ideological competitors, to remain open to the problem of reconciling diverse

and often incommensurate interests and values, or balancing social and ethical contradictions that cannot be eliminated without violence. Liberalism has also historically been amenable to accepting the validity of many kinds of political and social solutions to the problems of creating and maintaining a free society. With the passage of time, the universality of liberalism has become less contested by liberals, as becomes evident over the course of this book. But the persistence of a wide variety of liberal solutions to the problem of freedom remains equally evident.

When and how did liberalism begin? If we look at the surface rather than the underground history of liberalism, its emergence can be dated to the moment when 'liberal' and its variants began to be widely used as descriptions of a political position. This happened (and the word 'liberalism' was invented) sometime after the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789 – precisely when is a matter of still-evolving scholarly debate.³ From this point of departure, liberal creeds developed as critical reflections on the causes and aims of revolutionary transformation, and on the character and meaning of the modern age. By including a range of texts and thinkers that is deliberately broad, this book aims to convey the variety of liberal understandings and their creative adaptation and critical response to different historical and cultural contexts.

Although liberalism only acquired its name and crystallized as a doctrine in the aftermath of the French Revolution, its historical roots run much deeper. How deep is a subject of controversy, and there are those who would date liberalism's origins to ancient Greece, or even Mesopotamia.⁴ That it only became a recognizable global movement in the modern period is beyond dispute. Yet just as it is open to question when modernity began, so too is there no consensus about liberalism's beginnings, and whether Machiavelli, Hobbes or Locke are to be numbered among its founding thinkers. This itself is testimony to liberalism's continued importance in the twenty-first century. No one cares much about the genealogy of those with no living descendants, but the genealogy of liberalism still matters. This genealogy has European roots, and many non-European branches. We make no attempt to construct a genealogy of proto-liberal thought in this book. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that liberalism was constituted from ideas and language that originated well before 1789.

To signal this philosophical lineage, the book begins with Montesquieu. A towering figure of the French and European Enlightenment, whose profound impact on the development of the liberal tradition could hardly be exaggerated, Montesquieu took a notably global perspective on the study of politics and of

the conditions necessary for individual liberty. His magisterial work *The Spirit of the Laws* shaped liberal thought in numerous ways. It systematized early modern constitutionalism and the relationship between law, power and liberty, and articulated key liberal doctrines such as the separation of powers, the rule of law and the distinction and interdependence between political institutions and social practices. It also conceptualized commercial society and reflected on the interrelation between politics and economics. Perhaps first among the modern European thinkers, Montesquieu sought to understand politics and the human condition in all its actual variety and historical and global multiplicity. Thinking through the Enlightenment's universal aspirations, he theorized the critical role of mores for political life, and argued for the need to tailor political institutions to particular cultures and histories.

If Montesquieu's thought was comprehensive, its impact on ideas and events was no less so. Montesquieu's authority presided over the letter and spirit of the American founding, and guided the French Revolution in its liberal phase. He had, likewise, a formative influence on modern economics and the theorists of capitalist society. Following Montesquieu, the first set of thinkers featured here – Madison, Constant, de Staël, Tocqueville, Bentham – were greatly indebted to his work, as were many later liberals in the West and beyond. Montesquieu, in short, is a pivotal figure in setting the agenda both for modern liberalism and this book.

After Montesquieu, most of the texts and authors discussed in the collection come from the two centuries that stretched between the fall of the Bastille in 1789 and 1989, the year that saw the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, and seemed to mark liberalism's global triumph. But they go beyond them, just as liberalism and its challenges do. Events since 1989 have repeatedly called into question liberal triumphalism – just as they did after 1789. The chapters reflect attempts by liberals around the globe to come to grips with the meaning of both victory and defeat for liberal principles.

In addition to Western classics, the chapters in this book represent thinkers from Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Middle East. With two exceptions, occasioned by the nature of the material, the chapters are organized chronologically according to the death date of the author treated in the chapter. By using death dates rather than birth dates as an organizing principle, we take into account that an author born earlier may have outlived one born later, and thus have had the opportunity to respond to events the younger writer never saw. Chronology is one way of framing the development of liberalism. Another

is suggested by the three headings under which we have organized the chapters: 'Liberal Beginnings,' 'Liberalism Confronts the World' and 'Liberalism Confronts the Twentieth Century'.

Under the heading 'Liberal Beginnings,' a title borrowed from the aforementioned study by Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, we include the first generation of post-revolutionary liberals. Though vastly different in intellectual orientation and sensibilities, they were all influenced by Montesquieu's thought, and sought to re-evaluate and bring it to bear on post-revolutionary conditions. The first group, consisting of Montesquieu (d. 1755), Mme de Staël (d. 1817), Benjamin Constant (d. 1830), Jeremy Bentham (d. 1832), James Madison (d. 1836) and Alexis de Tocqueville (d. 1859), is all arguably European in outlook, although the adherents of a strong view of American exceptionalism will dispute that in Madison's case. All were, in one way or another, essential contributors to the growth of distinctively liberal ways (the plural is important) of discussing the relationship between the individual and society.

The first group of thinkers is the smallest, not in importance but in number, in order to leave room for the many branches of the liberal family tree to unfold in the rest of the book. In the second group, 'Liberalism Confronts the World,' of the eight authors, only four are European or North American. This makes evident how liberalism, once formed, rapidly appealed to thinkers from Buenos Aires to Moscow to Tunis to Istanbul. The second part of the book thus explores the elaboration of the post-revolutionary liberal legacy and its adjustment to new geopolitical and historic circumstances. These include the looming constitutional crisis in the United States and the challenges of democratization in Europe, as well as modernization and nation-building outside the West and the construction of a global system of states. Abraham Lincoln (d. 1865), Alexander Herzen (d. 1870), John Stuart Mill (d. 1873), T. H. Green (d. 1882), Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, (d. 1888), Namik Kemal (d. 1888), Khayr al-Din Basha (d. 1890) and Jacob Burckhardt (d. 1897) show the reach and scope of liberal thought in one of its most dominant periods, from the 1860s to the 1890s. In this section, we depart from chronology to place the Herzen chapter, which is partly based on his response to Mill, after the chapter on Mill.

The spread of liberalism in the nineteenth century was simultaneous with the climax of European imperialism and the reaction to it. Whether liberalism played an important role in encouraging European expansionism is a controversial point. That liberalism played a role in the responses of those who encountered European hegemony is unquestionable, if often overlooked – a gap that this

book helps fill by discussing thinkers from nations outside Europe and exploring their struggle to adapt and respond to European expansionism.

The last set of contributions, 'Liberalism Confronts the Twentieth Century', reflects both the global impact and the variety of liberal responses to that century's greatest trials – totalitarianism, economic crises and world wars – which were also direct challenges to liberalism's core values. Max Weber (d. 1920), John Maynard Keynes (1946), John Dewey (d. 1952), Hu Shih (d. 1962), Hannah Arendt (d. 1975), F. A. Hayek (d. 1992), Masao Maruyama (d. 1996), Isaiah Berlin (d. 1997), John Rawls (d. 2002) and Czesław Miłosz (d. 2004) are a diverse group, both geographically and ideologically. These ten thinkers represent the variety of liberal creeds, liberal left and liberal right, and testify to the diversity of thought within the liberal family. We have chosen to conclude this section – and the book – with the chapter on John Rawls, who has become a lightning rod in the contemporary debate about liberalism. By putting Rawls last, we want to emphasize the open-ended and continuing debate about the issues raised in *Liberal Moments*.

The ambition of this collection is to present in one place, for the first time, the geographic and ideological diversity of liberal thought and practice. Given liberalism's great heterogeneity and long history, the contents of this slim book necessarily had to be selective. The thinkers discussed in particular chapters have been chosen with a view to representing many, though certainly not all, strands of liberalism, and to showing its confrontation with issues as diverse as civil war, imperialism, cultural pluralism, economic depression, totalitarianism and world wars. Neither our choice of thinkers nor the issues discussed in the book are meant to be exhaustive; inevitably, much has been left out. One could construct alternative histories of liberalism and portray its global ramifications differently by including other voices. Nevertheless, this book conveys core liberal concerns and reflects key moments in the modern history of liberalism and its global outreach.

As part of the Textual Moments series, the book features the series' unique format. Each chapter opens with a critical passage from the author under consideration as a starting point for exploring the author's significance for the history of liberalism. The contributors were asked to highlight and explain the particularities of each author's liberalism in relation both to the critical passage they selected and, whenever possible, to other authors featured in the book. By facilitating a direct encounter with influential authors and texts in the liberal tradition, the book serves as an introduction both to the multiple dimensions

of liberalism and to reading texts in political thought. Although not explicitly aimed to highlight specific influences or advance a particular view of the evolution of liberal thought, the textual approach allows readers to create and recreate debates and conversations, perhaps unexpected ones, across the liberal spectrum, and across time and space.

This approach also allows *Liberal Moments* to paint a richer picture of liberalism than the one that dominates contemporary academic discourse. As Kalyvas and Katznelson point out, today's academic political theory operates with a limited and stylized conception of liberalism. This conception rests on 'a series of oppositions that identify it exclusively with the primacy of the right over the good; neutral legal procedures rather than substantive values; interests, not virtues; negative instead of positive liberty; and individual persons as distinct from collectivities and the public good'.⁵ By observing a larger historical vista and taking a global view, this book is intended partly to help correct this misconception. In so doing, it illustrates why liberal thought and practice should not be retrospectively reduced to sterile and abstract oppositions. In addition, it shows how national contexts were essential to the real, as opposed to anachronistically stereotyped, development of liberalism.⁶

Is, then, liberalism simply different things to different peoples? While our aim is to portray the variety of liberalism in all its many-splendored glory, it is also to show the enduring nature of certain core concerns, not to say perennial issues in the liberal tradition. Without undue simplification, the liberal thought and practice explored in this book can be understood as a response to two questions: (1) What is a supportive environment for realizing liberty in the modern world? and (2) How to bring this environment about? – questions all the more challenging as some aspects of modern life (tensions between equality and liberty on the one hand, and external conditions such as economic crises and world wars on the other) may work to undermine the possibility of liberal society.

The relationship between state and society, and the danger posed by unconstrained political authority, is fundamental, perhaps the fundamental liberal concern. What should the role of government be in a liberal state? What is the relationship between freedom and authority? What institutional arrangement best balances security, efficiency and civil freedoms? How can a stable government strong enough to carry out its essential functions be reconciled with individual liberty and a vibrant, independent social sphere? These questions have animated liberal thinkers throughout the centuries and across the liberal spectrum, and they find their most sustained treatment here

in the chapters on Montesquieu, Madison, Tocqueville, Green, Kemal, Khayr al-Din, Weber, Arendt, Hayek and Berlin.

In this connection, one of the most prominent features of liberalism is the recognition and respect for the irreducible diversity of social interests and values, and the quest for institutional mechanisms and practices that would encompass this diversity in a political and constitutional process. Liberalism's distinct notion of stable and legitimate government thus rests on the aspiration, not to resolve contradictions but to mitigate them, by recognizing the permanence of conflict and making it into an engine of liberal government.

Alongside reflections on constitutional principles, delimiting the sphere of political authority and the relation between society and state, liberals in the past two centuries have sought to conceptualize the interrelation between individual and society. This collection highlights the fundamental change that was brought about by the revolutions of the eighteenth century. Nearly all post-revolutionary liberals accepted equality as a foundational principle of modern society and starting point for liberal thought. Yet, alongside the commitment to inalienable rights, to the principle of civil equality and insistence on ensuring the representation and integration of all groups and classes, nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberals also pointed out the tensions between equality and liberty, and the danger modern forms of social organization pose to individual freedom. By eroding the preconditions for free, strong individualities as the wellspring of creative energy and transformative ideas, modern society threatens to undermine liberalism. Hence the focus on individual character and on the interplay of sociopolitical and moral and psychological factors that contribute to its formation, found most notably in the chapters on Tocqueville, Herzen, Mill, Sarmiento, Burckhardt, Weber, Dewey, Maruyama and Miłosz, and more briefly in many of the rest.

Seeking to build a liberal state and a liberal society on these principles, many, if not all, of the thinkers discussed here faced questions of political reform, whether in the wholesale transformation of a political system and constitution-making or through incremental change. The reforms were often both means for attaining liberal goals and ends in themselves. Indeed, one could say that, to a large extent, the identity of ends and means is part of the liberal tradition.

That tradition is unanimous – a rare thing among liberals – about the need to limit the resort to political violence. The thinkers discussed in this book recognized that, to be liberal, social and political reform cannot be imposed or enforced from above but must be encouraged and stimulated from below.

Hence the prominence of the notion of political culture in liberal thought, its concern with developing a liberal vernacular by adapting liberal principles to religious and cultural traditions and its focus, hardly uncritical, on education as the most salient among the means to reform. This concern is present within European liberalism, but it is particularly salient in non-Western liberalisms, as the chapters in this book show. Last but not least, as the chapters in this book can testify, from Montesquieu to Rawls, liberal thinkers emphasized the necessity for a systematic study of politics and society and called on social and political science, both theoretical and empirical, to justify and offer evidence for the validity of key liberal principles and institutions.

The enduring question remains: how to embody liberal principles in concrete institutions, tailored to and grounded in existing practices and cultural traditions – an elaborately academic way of saying: What does it mean to be free? This question seems likely to occupy liberal minds for some time to come.