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Liberal Moments: Reading Liberal Texts

Edited by Ewa Atanassow and Alan S. Kahan

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By Thomas Godfrey

Understanding the historical development of the liberal tradition is essential for any reader of political philosophy. This is due to the historically crucial role that liberal ideas have played in shaping our institutions, mapping out the rights of citizens, and establishing the roles and responsibilities of the state. Today's reader of political philosophy can, however, be forgiven for being deterred from thoroughly examining the development of liberal thought. The discipline is saturated with celebratory, critical, and sceptical responses concerning the value of liberal theory, and this can often overwhelm those seeking a point of entry. That Atanassow and Kahan's *Liberal Moments* provides readers with a relatively comprehensive overview of this vast intellectual and historical tradition is not only to their credit but also to that of the twenty-four contributors who each provide informative introductions to key liberal thinkers.

The book's chief purpose is therefore explanatory. Importantly, and rare to see in a text on liberalism, the contributors neither dismiss any of the ideas or arguments put forward by the liberal thinkers to whom they turn their gaze, nor do they give precedence to their own ideas over their chosen theorist's claims. For the critical philosopher, this may be frustrating, but for the historian of philosophy, students at the beginning of their academic careers, or even experienced academics looking to brush up on their own knowledge, this book deserves praise and attention.

Although *Liberal Moments* does not pursue an overarching line of argumentation, consistent themes are addressed throughout. Firstly, taken together, the chapters seek to convey 'the wide scope, chronological, intellectual and not least geographical, of liberalism as it has developed across the globe since the French Revolution' (1). Secondly, by examining the development of liberalism as a global doctrine, the book aims to explain 'why liberalism found itself in today's leading position' (1). Lastly, Atanassow and Kahan work with a restricted definition of liberalism. While they acknowledge that 'Liberalism is the first truly global political movement', they define the features of liberal thought as consisting of 'an emphasis on individual rights and interests, government [...] legitimized by some form of consent, a distinction between the public and private sphere, suspicion of concentrated authority' and 'constitutional guarantees to protect citizens from potentially harmful interference from authority' (2). This limited definition is deployed to (i) enable readers to formulate their own judgements about the conceptual ideas, language, and political practises at the heart of the liberal tradition, and (ii) provide a normative framework within which readers can judge for themselves the extent to which each considered liberal thinker embodies or departs from these core ideas. Throughout the text, each thinker is also located contextually. By taking context seriously, Atanassow and Kahan are able to capture a recurrent theme in the development of liberal thought: liberal thinkers theorised ideas which responded to their relative contextual situations, such that their thought acted as 'political interventions' and 'took an active part in shaping their own societies while contributing, often self-consciously, to a global discourse of liberty' (2). This gives this introductory text a comparative advantage over others that focus solely on the merits of the

philosophical arguments of liberalism.

The book consists of three sections: Liberal beginnings, Liberalism Confronts the World, and Liberalism Confronts the Twentieth Century. Liberal beginnings explores the ideas and arguments of 'the first generation of post-revolutionary liberals', including Montesquieu, Madame de Staël, Constant, Bentham, Madison, and Tocqueville. These thinkers are grouped together for two main reasons. Firstly, they were all essential contributors to the growth in distinctively liberal ways of discussing the relationship between the individual and society. Secondly, while 'vastly different in intellectual orientation and sensibilities, they were all influenced by Montesquieu's thought' (5). Montesquieu is central to this chapter as he is regarded by Atanassow and Kahan to be the first liberal thinker to take a global perspective towards the study of politics and the conditions necessary for individual liberty. That is, Montesquieu is considered to be central to the development of liberalism as a global tradition. Catherine Larrère's analysis of how his thought differs from the contractarian liberal tradition favoured by other liberals such as Hobbes, how he defines political freedom through its opposite, that is, 'the universal evil of the abuse of power' (20), and how he bases his concept of political freedom on well-developed laws and institutions is expertly developed. That said, the extent to which Montesquieu's ideas imbue later liberal thought could have been developed further in order to justify Montesquieu's work as the most appropriate starting point for the book. Nonetheless, the reader will likely be satisfied with the content expressed and feel confident to use these ideas as a springboard to analyse how liberalism as a global tradition has developed.

Having laid out the post-revolutionary liberal legacy, Liberalism Confronts the World analyses how this legacy adjusted to new 'geopolitical and historic circumstances' in countries such as Russia, Argentina, and Tunisia, as well as throughout Europe, America, and the Ottoman Empire (5). The examination of Lincoln, Mill, Herzen, Green, Sarmiento, Namik Kemal, Khayr al-Din Basha, and Burckhardt provides readers with an in-depth overview of the spread of liberal ideas and how they have been applied to issues as diverse as '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' (5). In this section, the interlinking of liberal ideas with the contextual situations in which they arose is admirably constructed, providing readers with a broad account of how liberalism and liberal ideas were embraced for different purposes and to differing degrees across the globe. Iván Jaksic and Ozan Ozavci, in their contributions on Sarmiento and Namik Kemal, demonstrate that in Argentina, for instance, liberal ideas were deployed against dictatorship and in favour of the modernisation of civil society, whereas Namik Kemal reformulated European Enlightenment Liberalism into an Islamic worldview. Moreover, they illuminate the extent to which the Ottoman Empire embraced liberalism for entirely different reasons to those of the UK or the USA. This section thus illustrates the complex development of liberalism as a global idea. Overall, this chapter successfully examines the global development of liberal ideas, and for this, the contributors to this book deserve credit for their informative analyses.

Liberalism Confronts the Twentieth Century analyses the work of Weber, Keynes, Dewey, Hu Shih, Arendt, Hayek, Maruyama, Berlin, Milosz, and Rawls. This grouping reflects 'both the global impact and 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' (6). Unfortunately, the ways in which liberalism overcame these challenges and assumed the dominant position it enjoys today are scarcely explored. That said, the reader can decipher how these thinkers represent a 'variety of liberal creeds, liberal left and liberal right' (6). The claims of the liberal left vs. the liberal right are best

addressed in the sections on Keynes and Hayek. Both argued for their respective liberal ideas from the perspective of their economic beliefs, with Hayek favouring minimal state interference and Keynes attempting to justify a more central role for the state. The section on Hu Shih explores Hayek's influential role in bringing liberalism to China, again reiterating how liberalism as a global idea has developed. The sections on Weber, Arendt, and Dewey capture the ongoing development and diversity of liberal thought, while the chapter ends with a discussion on Rawls. The discussion on Rawls is written with the intention of emphasising 'the open-ended and continuing debate about liberalism' (6). However, perhaps the authors could have pointed out the disparity between Rawls's political-liberal ideas and the overall tradition of liberalism. Given Rawls's dominance within the academy, this is an issue gripping liberal thought today and its discussion would not have diverged from the main focus of the book. This omission does not, however, detract from the overall strength of the chapter.

Given the rich intellectual and political history of liberalism, there are inevitably going to be question marks regarding what has been included or left out of any introductory text. Importantly, Atanassow and Kahan are acutely aware of this, claiming that 'neither our choice of thinkers nor the issues discussed in the book are meant to be exhaustive' (6). The book instead intends to convey core liberal concerns, reflect key moments in the history of the liberal tradition, and assess liberalism's global reach. While these issues are expertly analysed, the book is perhaps missing a conclusion. Irrespective of one's position on liberalism, the reader is still left wondering what the chief issues facing liberalism are today. With the wave of far-right populism in Europe and the rise in power of digital media, it is often argued that the validity of liberalism is once again under question. These issues do not fall outside the scope of this book, and Atanassow and Kahan thus missed an opportunity to comment on how the thinkers explored within this book could be applied to such issues. That said, the absence of concluding remarks does not detract from the overall merit of the book. Moreover, whatever one feels about liberalism as a political doctrine, it would be difficult to surpass the approach taken in *Liberal Moments* to introduce the main ideas, thinkers and historical development of this venerable political tradition.

Thomas Godfrey is a Ph.D. student at the University of Sussex, where his research in political philosophy is supervised by Dr. Anthony Booth and Dr. Gordon Finlayson. His research interests include the viability of John Rawls's liberal project, the debate between perfectionist and anti-perfectionist liberals, and the applicability and worth of liberal concepts when assessed in light of current problems facing the non-ideal world.