
1. Introduction: the vicissitudes of liberalism

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INTRODUCTION

The crisis – if not the imminent death – of liberalism has been foretold almost since it began (Fawcett 2018, 439–40). This is due, in part, to the way liberal ideas and practices emerged in response to various crises and challenges in the societies in which they were forged. The ceaseless waves of change unleashed by colonialism and imperialism, the American and French revolutions, the revolutions of 1848, large-scale industrial capitalism, the various economic crises of the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries, two world wars, the long cold war, and now COVID, have all shaped the development of liberalism, including, at times, threatening its very survival. Democracy – liberalism’s philosophical and institutional sibling (with all the attendant tensions that come with familial relations) – is prone to similar anxieties, given the rise of illiberal democracies, democratic backsliding, and authoritarian populists. In these cases, the very values and institutions upon which democracy is grounded are turned around and used against it (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Runciman 2018). Finally, there remains, among many critics, a deep-seated scepticism about liberalism’s ability to respond to the great economic and political crises the world faces today. There is concern about its seeming complacency in the face of wide-ranging economic and political inequalities; of its historic collusion with, or at least indifference to, the injustices of colonialism and imperialism; of its inability to address the persistence of structural racism; and finally, that it lacks the philosophical, political, and institutional tools needed to address impending environmental collapse.

This *Handbook* is an attempt to provide a state-of-the-art discussion of liberalism at a time when many anxieties are being expressed about its future (and its past). Some chapters tackle broad, meta-level questions about the coherence and justificatory limits and possibilities of liberalism; others tackle conceptual issues; still others, specific institutional, cultural, historical, and political questions. This introductory chapter is intended to provide a general orientation to these discussions, but also highlight some recurring themes. The hope is that not only will each chapter prove to be a significant contribution to the specific topics they are addressing, but that the book as a whole offers a distinctive take on the viability of twenty-first century liberalism.

LIBERALISM THROUGH TIME

The first thing to say is that, on the evidence presented here, and especially considering a remarkable burst of historical scholarship over the last decade, liberalism defeats any easy summary. As we'll see, it's not mainly about individual freedom, laissez-faire economics, markets, toleration, state neutrality, political equality, democracy, or the primacy of rights. These form part of the complex assemblage of liberal ideas and practices over time, but no single concept, or even cluster of concepts, can be easily said to define the essence of liberalism. However, despite the historical complexity that attends both the emergence and development of liberalism, it clearly needs to refer to *something* distinctive, at least at different points in time. Many of the chapters in this book, as a result, take different stances on what we are talking about when we talk about liberalism.

Is there something we can say about the historical context out of which our understandings of liberalism have emerged? A very rough periodization might look something like this:

1. 1600–1800: 'liberalism' does not yet exist in its modern sense, either conceptually or politically, but a period in which fledgling conceptual, political, and institutional space is opening for claims of religious freedom, anti-authoritarian politics, freedom of the press, natural rights, and equal citizenship – at least for some – in the aftermath of the American and French revolutions and an earlier period of civil and sectarian war. But also, towards the end of the eighteenth century, and especially after the French revolution, a period in which the fear of religious and secular fanaticism and the over-moralization of politics, as well as a fear of untrammelled majorities, permeates and shapes early formulations of these ideas. Alongside these anxieties, a countermovement emerges through the rise of Romanticism and the veneration of 'individuality' and self-expression, and the potential role of the state and society in developing it.
2. 1830s–1880s: the emergence of 'liberalism' as a political movement and set of ideas. Often anti-clerical, anti-authoritarian, and republican in orientation, but also wary of empowering the masses. The revolutions of 1848 and the disruption they generated eventually led to new, centrist coalitions across Europe that hardened previously tentative conceptions of liberalism, conservatism, and socialism, and reshaped the role of the state (especially in promoting economic growth). However, in the immediate aftermath, reactionary forces took hold and inclusive ideals gave way to more virulent forms of nationalism. Deep tensions between liberal and republican ideals are emerging in the United States, along with the entrenchment of White supremacy, despite the defeat of the southern slave-holding states in the Civil War.
3. 1880s–1940: a period of economic growth, technological development and imperial expansion, increasing demands for the democratization of society, along with the promulgation of ethical visions of individual development to be either protected from the state, or supported by it, for example, through social legislation

- and the tempering of capitalism (the ‘new liberalism’). World War I and World War II, along with the economic crises of the 1930s, puts the ideal of liberal democracy under enormous pressure, with competition from socialism, communism, and fascism. The rise of American ‘liberalism’ associated especially with Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal (and in the UK, with the post-war welfare state), as a response to domestic and global economic and political crises.
4. 1945–89: liberalism on the rise and the emergence of ‘cold war liberalism’ as a response to Soviet competition – pluralist, rights-based, and anti-perfectionist in orientation. The rise of the civil rights movement in the US, but also the persistence of deep racial inequalities. The unwinding of older empires and rise of anti-colonial and self-determination movements in Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, but also the formation of a new global economic and political order (Bretton Woods, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, etc.), still intertwined with the older, imperial, and colonial orders. The economic crises of the 1970s sow the seeds for the breakdown of the ‘New Deal order’ and the emergence of neoliberalism, influenced by critiques of post-1945 liberal welfare and social democratic states by von Mises, Hayek, and others. At the same time, somewhat paradoxically, Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971) appears, generating considerable critical engagement in academia (less so in actual politics), and inaugurating a new phase in the development of ‘liberal egalitarianism’. Jürgen Habermas’s *Theory of Communication Action* (1981) offers a distinctive account of the communicative bases of a liberal public sphere, not so much as an alternative to egalitarian liberalism, but initiating a new focus on the deliberative promise of liberal institutions. The increasing importance of the language of rights and the development of major international human rights instruments beyond the UNDHR.
 5. 1990–2023: a brief period of self-confidence after the fall of communism, but also one of rising doubt and anxiety about liberalism’s future and a seeming failure to seize the moment offered by the collapse of cold war liberalism’s *raison d’être*. The economic crisis of 2008 lays the groundwork for the political crises of liberal democracy later in the century, including concerns about deepening inequality, the uneven economic and social impact of globalization and technology, anti-Black racism, the legacies of colonial and imperial orders (domestic and global), cultural and political polarization, the rise of populist movements, and climate change. The beginning of the breakdown of the ‘neoliberal order’ dominant from the 1980s through to 2008, including given the impact of COVID, but without an obvious alternative, though with a revival of interest in Marxist political economy and socialism on the left, and various modes of nationalism on the right. A deepening of demands for new modalities of civic respect and self-determination, as well as a sense of the exhaustion of high normative theory and the emergence (yet again) of ‘realist’ political theory. A return of anxieties about the death of both liberalism and democracy.

This chronology glosses over a high degree of historical complexity. But it provides a sense of the ebb and flow of liberalism over time, not only as a field of ideas, but also as it appears in practices, institutions, and political movements. The chapters traverse this timeline both historically and thematically. They reflect ongoing discussions, debates, and disagreements about the meaning of liberalism and its prospects for the future.

What the book makes clear is not only the abundance of challenges facing liberalism, but also the diversity and shape-shifting nature of liberalism itself – historically, conceptually, and normatively. In the next section, I will provide a taxonomy of different ideal types of liberalism that I think characterize the field today. I also identify three cross-cutting themes that emerge across the chapters: the *complacency* of liberalism, the *self-undermining* of liberalism, and the *insufficiency* of liberalism. For some, these are fatal flaws, for others, a call for renewal.

FIVE KINDS OF LIBERALISM

There are, at least, five kinds of liberalism: natural law liberalism, egalitarian liberalism (including classical and perfectionist variants), democratic liberalism, realist liberalism, and difference liberalism.¹

One of the underlying claims of this book is that a critical but productive discussion about liberalism needs to start from an awareness of the diversity of the tradition. Easy sloganeering about what liberalism is (or isn't) is unhelpful and, at worst, misleading. The different forms of liberalism discussed below are ideal types, and there is slippage and overlap between them. Liberalism is a distinctive tradition of political thought, but it has been pluralized. An important question is thus whether there remains a distinctive assemblage of liberal ideas that can provide a compelling and systematic political theory for today.

Natural Law Liberalism

The early modern natural law tradition, stemming from the work of theorists such as Hugo Grotius, Samuel Pufendorf, John Locke, and others in the seventeenth century, forms an important aspect of the pre-history of liberalism. Locke looms particularly large, especially his argument about how the pre-political natural rights of human beings – grounded in an account of natural law and our duties to God – constrain the power of the state. An appeal to natural rights is also prominent, to different extents, in arguments about the nature of contemporary human rights (Haakonssen 1991;

¹ There are other ways of classifying types of liberalism, of course, as a small sample of recent books will attest: *Bleak Liberalism* (Anderson 2016), 'tempered liberalism' (Cherniss 2021), 'cold war liberalism' (Müller 2019; Moyn 2023); 'aristocratic liberalism' (Kahan 2001); 'political liberalism' (Rawls 1993); the 'liberalism of fear' (Shklar 1989; Kahan 2023); and 'another liberalism' (Rosenblum 1987).

Tasioulas 2012).² For some, this is a defining feature of liberalism. But as scholars have increasingly pointed out, the prominence of Locke as a founder of liberalism is a relatively recent phenomenon, and the positing of pre-political rights as constraints on the authority and legitimacy of the state represents only one strand of liberalism's approach to countering arbitrary power.

Classical natural law theory, as developed in the Christian and especially Catholic tradition, remains a vital source of *critiques* of liberalism – especially by figures such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1988), Adrian Vermeule (2022), and Patrick Deneen (2018; 2023). A common thread here is the liberal tradition's apparent repudiation of the idea that human beings have a natural *telos* or end, grounded in our rational nature. Instead, they argue, the liberal state is focused primarily on securing the conditions required for people to enjoy their negative liberty, shorn of any higher purpose. As Paul Kelly points out in Chapter 16, for 'common good' constitutionalists and communitarians, the order of justification of modern liberalism needs to be reversed: identifying the common good is not the conclusion of a philosophical argument, but rather the starting point – a 'mode of being' – from which citizens ought to begin their moral and political deliberations.

However, perhaps the most systematic defence of modern natural law liberalism (as opposed to *post-* and *anti-*liberalism) is found in the work of John Finnis. For Finnis, insofar as we associate liberalism mainly with limited government, any sound theory of natural law (informed by Aristotle and Aquinas, but not reducible to their views) will explain and justify the authority of the state as limited in at least three ways: by positive law (and especially constitutional law), by the moral principles of justice that apply to all human action (whether public or private) as revealed through substantive reason, and by the pursuit of the common good of political communities (1994, 687–8). This final constraint has to do with the nature of political community, which is that form of association required for the realization of the goods identified through natural law; those 'material and other conditions ... that tend to favour, facilitate, and foster the realization by each individual of his or her personal development' (2011, 147–8). This conception of 'personal development' requires that – in addition to the health, safety, and economic security we all need – the other communities we belong to flourish as well. And it entails a form of citizenship in which duties are primary, as opposed to rights, given the need to sustain the relationships and practices upon which one's flourishing depends (and which ultimately ground any rights one can claim). Government is limited in the sense that its main purpose is to help individuals and groups to coordinate around the objectives and commitments that they have chosen (reasoning correctly), consistent with the common good of the community.

There is a difference, in other words, between compelling people to pursue the good and creating the conditions in which they are more likely to choose and live

² For further discussion of rights in the liberal tradition, see Chapter 3.

by it (693–4, 697–8; 1996).³ It is one thing for the state to ‘identify’, ‘encourage’, ‘facilitate’, and ‘support’ the ‘truly worthwhile’ and discourage the ‘harmful and evil’, and another thing for it to ‘direct’ people to virtue and deter them from vice by either making some private and ‘truly consensual’ acts punishable by criminal law, or using coercive force to ‘cover the whole of a lifetime’ (1996, 7–9). Still, Finnis’s justification of the limits of political authority is very different from other liberals (see his critique of Rawls, Dworkin, and Macedo in 1996). The philosophical grounds of these limits lie in the truth of natural law theory, and thus some things – including, notoriously, homosexual acts and relationships, as well as non-procreational sex – are objectively wrong and can be legally discouraged, if not necessarily criminalized (12–17; see the reply by Macedo in 1996, 22–48).

Natural law liberalism is characterized by a thick theory of the good, grounded in a substantive conception of human nature that suffuses the natural and artificial worlds of human action. Among its more thoughtful adherents, however, this is combined with a justification of public authority limited by the need for citizens to affirm the good based on their own reasoned acceptance of it, as opposed to imposing it through force. But as Kelly demonstrates in his chapter, this (somewhat) self-limiting account of authority has been abandoned by recent post- and anti-liberal versions of ‘common good’ constitutionalism, which unashamedly seek to harness the power of the state to promote and inculcate anti-liberal ends.

Egalitarian Liberalism

In one sense, almost all liberals are egalitarians of a kind. Libertarians and social democrats, for example, endorse the idea that everyone should be treated as free and equal. Almost all liberals think the coercive power of the state requires justification, given the presumption that no one should be subject to arbitrary power. But they begin to fracture around the best way of understanding the meaning of freedom and the extent to which liberty and equality can be traded off against each other.

Classical liberals are generally those who, from at least the eighteenth century onwards, emphasize the importance of individual liberty and individual rights – and especially property rights – as the best way of making sense of freedom. It follows that a society based on the protection of individual rights, and thus the freedom for people to contract with whomever they wish, sell their labour as they see fit, and form enterprises and associations with whomever they like, was the freest (Hayek 2006). That didn’t mean there was no role for the state; it was critical for providing the basic infrastructure of liberty, including the rule of law, defence, education, and other public goods. However, state intervention was always presumptively suspect beyond the minimal provision of these goods. ‘Neoliberal’ ideas, which began to

³ In his most recent book, Deneen (2023) has abandoned this distinction entirely. He argues for the ‘peaceful but vigorous overthrow’ of a corrupt liberal managerial elite and the creation of an illiberal ‘aristopopulism’ grounded in ‘common good conservatism’ (167, 185).

shape politics, especially in North America and Europe, from the 1970s onwards, went a step further and posited that many of the functions of the state itself should be subject to market discipline. Neoliberalism, like classical liberalism, prized free trade and the free movement of capital, goods, and people, and sought to reduce the means for governments to interfere in markets wherever possible (Gerstle 2022, 4–7). The reason for doing so was to unleash the dynamism of markets and human innovation from the dead hand of government and regulation, and in the process, lift human living standards. Liberty upsets patterns, in Nozick’s famous phrase, and any attempt to reset them was bound to violate individual rights, as well as undermine the societal benefits of unfettered market interactions (Nozick 1975). This meant that policies designed to redistribute income and mitigate social and economic inequality were presumptively suspect.

But the liberation of markets from intervention often also required, paradoxically, an intensification of state power, not only through legal and social coercion to ensure people acted freely in the right sense (Foucault 2008; Cooper 2017), but also sometimes through military force, especially when neoliberal ideas were exported globally (Slobodian 2018). As Michel Foucault put it in his lectures on the history of liberalism, it must ‘produce’ and protect freedom, which ‘entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats’ (2008, 64).

What I will call modern liberal egalitarianism, on the other hand, argued that the trade-offs between liberty and equality that classical liberals and neoliberals assumed ought to favour liberty should be rejected. It became a dominant mode of philosophical liberalism between the late 1970s and 2000s, at least in Anglo-American universities, and especially after the publication of Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* in 1971.

There are two distinctive features of egalitarian liberalism that I want to highlight here. The first is the attempt to reconcile the values of liberty and equality, as opposed to thinking of them as fundamentally irreconcilable. Rawls tried to do this through the lexical ordering of his two principles of justice – the first, to do with the protection of the ‘basic liberties’, and the second, to do with equality of opportunity and the application of the ‘difference principle’, which allowed departures from strict equality if it improved the situation of the worst off. The basic liberties, according to Rawls, can’t be sacrificed for greater gains in efficiency or economic growth, but rather are critical to ensuring each citizen is treated with equal respect and can participate in public deliberations about justice. Moreover, citizens need access to a set of ‘primary goods’ which, in addition to the basic liberties, include ‘opportunities and powers’, income and wealth, and the ‘social bases of self-respect’ (Rawls 1999, 92, 440). Taken together, the two principles are meant to ensure that citizens enjoy the ‘fair value’ of liberty (1999).

The second feature of egalitarian liberalism is the importance of taking pluralism seriously, and especially pluralism about the nature of the good – and sometimes, about the right as well. Egalitarian liberalism is a justificatory form of liberalism: acceptance of the principles of justice, as well as the legitimacy of the state, depend on providing reasons that those subject to the exercise of power cannot reasonably

reject. The underlying commitment is thus to a form of equal respect on the part of the state towards its citizens, an important strand in the history of liberalism since at least the nineteenth century.⁴

This egalitarian appeal to reasons that citizens *could* accept is importantly distinct from both the substantive conception of reason that characterizes the classical tradition (from Aristotle through to Aquinas), and the requirement for explicit consent argued for by many classical liberals. As Rawls came to formulate it, justice as fairness is ‘free-standing’ in the sense of not being derived from a ‘comprehensive’ religious or moral view that extends beyond the political, and able to be adopted by those holding radically different worldviews (1993). This didn’t mean that there weren’t distinctive conceptions of the person and of citizenship that underpinned it. But the way these elements of the theory were ultimately justified relied on respecting each person as ‘free and equal’, and the ‘fact of reasonable pluralism’ characteristic of modern democratic societies.

‘Public reason’ liberalism can be developed in different ways, including in both libertarian and social democratic directions (see Chapter 8). However, it is striking that for Rawls, pre-political rights do not constrain the distributive scope of the theory. And even more radically, he thought that the initial distribution of ‘natural talents’ among people (including not only your cognitive and physical capabilities, but even your aptitude for hard work) was morally arbitrary and thus the proper object of a theory of justice: no one deserved their place in society as a result of those talents (1999, 72–5). The ‘original position’, where choosers of the principles of justice remained behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ not yet knowing their social, economic, or political place in society, was meant to model what it meant to take justice as impartiality seriously (17–22). It is a kind of radical egalitarian moment, intended to dramatize the political contours of a community of equals.

Even critics who are sceptical about Rawls’s epistemological restraint regarding the ultimate truth of his theory accept that modern pluralism places limits on the extent to which appeals to substantive conceptions of the good can ground a theory of justice (less so post-liberal critics). Still, there is one important critique worth mentioning here that several chapters engage with (Chapters 9, 6 and 2, respectively).

‘Perfectionist’ liberal egalitarians reject both Rawls’s epistemological restraint, and the claim that a liberal theory of justice must remain neutral between competing conceptions of the good. Again, it is important to distinguish between the perfectionism associated with the classical tradition and that of contemporary liberalism. Aristotelian perfectionism rests, ultimately on a claim that human beings have a natural telos or normative end that explains what a valuable life is. For latter-day Aristotelians (but not all), this means the state must promote the conditions in which people can best realize their true nature. In some cases, this justifies forms of social and political hierarchy; between those best suited to ruling, for example, and those

⁴ But for a discussion of some of the dilemmas this raises for non-citizens, and thus the challenge of cosmopolitan liberalism, see Chapters 5, 11 and 12, respectively.

who aren't. But for *liberal* perfectionists, it's important that well-lived lives are also those that have due regard for the kind of life a person would *choose* to live. Joseph Raz, for example (following Mill), argued that the value of autonomy was sufficiently important for a well-lived life that a liberal state must ensure its citizens have enough *valuable* options to choose from to live genuinely autonomous lives (1986). Autonomy in pursuit of the bad is not worth protecting. But Raz didn't think that people could therefore be forced to be free, in Rousseau's famous phrase. Instead, he argued that the state had an obligation to secure the conditions necessary for its citizens to lead autonomous lives, which in turn limits the use of any coercive power in doing so. However, this did mean that, in addition to ensuring there are enough valuable options for citizens to choose from, given that some conceptions of the good are 'empty' and even 'evil', states can act, in specific instances, to curtail them (1986, 133, 417–24).

Perfectionist liberalism raises a host of thorny issues to do with the appropriate limits of state power and respect for persons. However, as Lefebvre argues in Chapter 2, the more liberalism demurs from even discussing the good – and especially the distinctive value of a liberal way of life – the more it cedes this territory to its fiercest enemies. And as Tormey explores in Chapter 17, populist political movements have indeed filled a void in contemporary politics where liberals have often feared to tread.⁵ The worry is that liberals either effectively have no response to the anxieties expressed by many citizens in the face of massive economic and cultural change, or they pretend they are somehow floating above the political fray when, in fact, they are deep inside it, promoting a particular form of life.

There is another variation on liberal perfectionism worth mentioning here. For some liberals, accepting pluralism about the good does not mean resiling from promoting a distinctive conception of the liberal self, or perhaps more accurately, a liberal ethos. Lefebvre, partly inverting Rawls's argument, defends political liberalism as a valuable comprehensive conception of the good itself, rather than as a free-standing module meant to somehow hover between competing views (2024). Joshua Cherniss, drawing on figures such as Max Weber, Raymond Aron, Albert Camus, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Isaiah Berlin, defends what he calls an ethos of 'tempered' liberalism, aimed at minimizing 'political ruthlessness' in the pursuit of moral ends in politics (2021; see also Ivison 1997). In focusing on the idea of a liberal ethos, and thus the role of character and temperament in applying liberal principles in practice, Cherniss and others are trying to construct an ethical vision of liberalism that takes pluralism seriously but doesn't resile from defending a liberal way of life. Indeed, the stronger claim is that liberal institutions will fail unless they can draw on richer ethical sources to sustain the strong commitments they ultimately depend on.

⁵ Moyn (2023) and Kahan (2023) argue that the dominance of 'cold war liberalism' in the second half of the twentieth century left liberals disarmed and unable to respond effectively to illiberal populist political parties and movements. For Moyn, it is a failure of imagination and politics, for Kahan, a failure to defend a sufficiently robust ethical liberalism.

Democratic Liberalism

Democratic liberalism is closely aligned with liberal egalitarianism, although it emphasizes the role that democratic institutions play in realizing liberal values – and especially the positive liberties associated with democratic self-rule. Historically, liberalism’s general concern with arbitrary power has been conjoined with demands for empowerment and the sharing in democratic authority. But throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, liberals have often had an uneasy relationship with democracy. Early liberals were worried about unchecked popular sovereignty and the risk this posed to political stability and broader culture of society. Others, like Dewey, saw an intimate connection between the expansion of freedom for all and the democratization of all facets of society.

Joseph Schumpeter, in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942), argued that democracy was best conceived as a competitive process to elect representatives to carry out the public’s will – and not much else, given the impossibility of any coherent expression of a general will. (The seeds of contemporary ‘realist’ and minimalist liberals were sown here, among other places.) Friedrich Hayek, in *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), mounted a frontal attack on central planning of any kind, which led inevitably to state control and societal impoverishment, given the inability of central authorities to react effectively to price signals and informational change the way markets could. In essence, Schumpeter, Hayek, and other critics of social democratic liberalism, were arguing that popular sovereignty and liberal capitalism were incompatible. ‘Democratic capitalism’ could survive, but only when economic decision making was insulated from popular sentiment. This didn’t mean that the state should never intervene in markets or society. In fact, Hayek and others were clear that markets were not natural phenomena but human constructions, and thus needed the legal and political infrastructure of the rule of law, national defence, and other institutions to operate effectively. To be free required political and economic order (Iverson 1997). But the state had to be disciplined by markets, rather than the other way around. This cluster of ideas formed the basis of neoliberalism, which has shaped our politics profoundly since the 1980s (Fawcett 2018, 151–6, 325–8; Gerstle 2022, 87–94).

The rise of neoliberalism, as well as ‘cold war liberalism’, is a complex story which I can’t discuss here in any detail (for that, see Forrester 2019; Cherniss 2021; Moyn 2023). However, one important aspect of post-war liberalism was the development of the kind of liberal egalitarianism we explored above, including debates about the appropriate place of democracy. The reconciliation of liberty and equality that was central to the Rawlsian project also involved a reconciliation of two ways of conceiving the relationship between democracy and liberalism.

First, which is Rawls’s position, is that appropriately justified principles of justice ought to constrain the ‘constitutional essentials’ of any liberal regime, including its democratic institutions (1993, 137). The conception of justice that ultimately forms the ground of liberal legitimacy – and the basic rights integral to it – are justified through moral reasoning and only derivatively through democratic will-formation.

The second view is that justice can't be conceived of from 'outside', as it were, of democracy, because the two are mutually constitutive. Habermas (1996) refers to this as the 'co-originality' of public and private autonomy. A liberal political order must protect both the private autonomy of individuals to pursue their own conceptions of the good (requiring the protection of basic liberal rights), but also, and at the same time, promote their public autonomy to participate in the formation and legitimation of those laws to which they are subject (requiring participatory political rights). Thus, you can't fully enjoy your negative freedom without the positive liberties of participation. A still more radical position would be to say that *whatever* emerges from a suitably democratic procedure is what justice requires. However, that simply shifts the question to now describing what we mean by 'suitably democratic'.

One prominent example of the debate between democratic and procedural liberals thus can be found in the exchange between Rawls and Habermas.⁶ Another version is discussed by Ghazavi, in Chapter 6, where he argues for greater democratic empowerment of citizens, informed by a rich conception of 'creative' human agency as a way of overcoming the 'hollowness' of the liberal state.

There remains a lively debate within liberalism about the extent to which democracy and justice are either complementary or in tension; or the extent to which, given deep disagreement about the nature of justice, democratic processes are, in fact, the most just means of resolving those differences. One of the most influential attempts at reconciling democracy and justice is the concept of deliberative democracy, as we've seen. According to this account, at least where there is genuine political equality and robust modes of public reasoning, democratic deliberation helps to identify and legitimate just outcomes (Shapiro 1999; Chambers 2003; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Young 2000). But as the chapters by Hill, Lee-Stronach, Livingstone, and Weir all demonstrate, these conditions are extremely difficult to realize in the deeply unequal circumstances of liberal democracies today – so hard, in fact, as to question the extent to which a strong version of deliberative democracy could ever be realized.

Given the threat to liberal democratic institutions from inequality, and the relatively weak constraints of electoral politics and deliberative assemblies, some have argued for a more radical break from existing liberal institutional arrangements to protect and promote the interests of the 'many'. Deneen, for example, argues for the establishment of an 'aristopopulism' in opposition to the liberal egalitarian elite, grounded in the supposed 'instinctual conservatism' of the *demoi*. But from the left, and in support of more egalitarian ends, John McCormick and others have argued for a revival of pre-eighteenth century republican institutional mechanisms for constraining wealthy citizens and the public magistrates who fall under their sway (McCormick 2011; Vergara 2020). They draw on Machiavelli, and especially his *Discourses on Titus Livy's First Ten Books* (Mansfield and Tarcov 1996), where he offers not only a more realistic picture of entrenched class-based antagonisms in society (and especially the motives and ambitions of the 'grandi'), but also an

⁶ See the excellent discussion in Finlayson (2019).

account of the institutions required to channel these tensions for the public good. This includes the use of offices and assemblies empowered with legislative vetos that exclude the wealthy; magistrate appointment procedures that combine elections and lotteries; and citizen-led prosecutions and trials. Inequality might be ineradicable, but it can be used, somewhat paradoxically, to create the conditions for not only mitigating its damaging effects, but also to help realize more substantive equality for the ‘many’ (McCormick 2011, 12–16).

Realist Liberalism

This leads naturally to a fourth kind of liberalism, which is realist liberalism. I have already mentioned the emergence of cold war liberalism and its anti-perfectionist, anti-totalitarian, anti-historicist, and rights-focused character.⁷ It overlaps, to a certain extent, with both realist liberalism and neoliberalism, although the historiography is complex, and neither are reducible to each other (Müller 2019; Cherniss 2021; Moyn 2023). Many realist liberals are critics of neoliberalism, and cold war liberalism includes thinkers who disagree about as much as they might share philosophically. Neoliberalism also has strong utopian strands (Foucault 2008; Gerstle 2022). But are there some general characteristics of a distinctly *liberal* realism that we can identify?

First, realist liberals seek to avoid over-moralization in both theory and politics. Methodologically, this means political philosophy is not simply applied meta-ethics, but rather has a distinctive set of concepts, questions, and concerns – for example, power, authority, disagreement, as well as a more ‘naturalistic’ account of human psychology and motivation (Williams 2005). Philosophically, this means two things. First, that normativity is internal to politics, not something that precedes it, or operates above it. Normativity emerges from the practices and institutions that human beings construct to deal with the problems that politics attempts to resolve – it is practice-dependent, as opposed to practice transcending.

Second, it is anti-perfectionist, but not necessarily anti-historicist, or narrowly rights based. It’s important to be clear about the rationale for this kind of realist anti-perfectionism. The target is not necessarily the supposed totalitarian tendencies of Rousseau or Marx, for example, but rather the inescapability of disagreement and power and the challenge this presents for comprehensive conceptions of politics. People disagree about the nature of both the good and the right. And this has consequences for how we think about the coercive powers of the state. Judith Shklar, for example, while criticizing post-war liberals in her first book for abandoning the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment, came eventually to define the central ideal for liberal politics rather narrowly as the need to minimize cruelty, given the

⁷ Although, as Moyn shows, there were clearly ideological reasons for this turn against more expansive conceptions of liberalism, there was also, I think, in the aftermath of the war, at least in some philosophical circles, a general suspicion of grand ideas and political moralizing which might generate fanaticism of any kind. See, for example, Rowe’s recent biography of J.L. Austin (2023).

seeming irresistible urge of the powerful to oppress the weak. ‘Without freedom’, she wrote, ‘everyone is intolerably paralysed or demeaned’ (1984, 137; 1989). The ‘liberalism of fear’, as she called it, has become an influential form of liberal realism.⁸

Another aspect of liberal realism is the desire to start from a cold-eyed analysis of society and its institutions and how they *really* work. Liberalism, on this account, is a historically specific set of beliefs and practices that arose as a response to a specific set of problems, as opposed to a transhistorical set of truths. This is sometimes expressed as the need to start with the experience of injustice, rather than a sense of justice, given the former is more immediate and definable than the latter.⁹ Or, to pay heed to experimental and empirical analyses of liberal democratic institutions, in order to gauge the distance between our normative ideals and ‘real democracy’ on the ground (Arlen and Rossi 2021).

But realism about politics and normative aspiration are not mutually exclusive. Stuart Hampshire, for example, a liberal realist par excellence, also believed that there was a normatively powerful, transhistorical idea of justice present in just about every culture that we ought to endorse: ‘agreement by discussion, without conquest or outright surrender, on regular procedures for negotiating with hostile neighbours who have different conceptions of the good’ (Hampshire 1989, 142; 2001). Moreover, this transhistorical core isn’t a kind of political second-best, but rather grounded in the ‘essence of humanity’, which involves an openness to new ways of life, thought, and innovations in language and social arrangements (1989, 30). ‘Justice within the soul’, argued Hampshire, and by analogy in society, ‘may be seen as the intelligent recognition and acceptance of conflicting and ambivalent elements in one’s own imagination and emotions’ (189). Injustice, by contrast, is the desire to dominate when conceptions of the good come into conflict, even though fair and equal negotiation is still possible.

This richer vein of liberal realism runs against the laments of natural law liberals (and post-liberals) about the irredeemable fracturing of the common good. For Hampshire, the central conflicts in politics are between different visions of the good, and not simply competing interests – which, in fact, would be easier to resolve if they were. But our conceptions of the good are also dynamic, shifting, and permeable, rather than hermetically sealed. This means a just society is not only possible but desirable, given the values Hampshire associates with embracing pluralism.

Difference Liberalism

Although liberalism has always been concerned with the place of minorities in relation to majorities, its approach to the normative significance of groups is more vexed. There has been an important strand of the liberal tradition that has valued the role

⁸ Although a realist, Shklar’s account of liberalism is less austere than many critics suggest. I explore this in greater detail in Ivison (forthcoming).

⁹ For further discussion of this claim, see Ivison (forthcoming).

of intermediary associations as a bulwark against arbitrary power, stretching back to Montesquieu and Tocqueville. According to this view, associations, clubs, unions, professional associations, and cultural groups provide valuable space between the individual and the state. For some, they are valuable only if they don't promote illiberal tendencies; for others, they are an intrinsic feature of a free society, even if at times illiberal. Difference liberals occupy varying points between these two ends of the spectrum. What characterizes a difference liberal from others, however, is that groups are taken as both descriptively and normatively significant; although individuals matter, groups do too.¹⁰ More specifically, difference liberals are sensitive to the complex histories, interactions, and interdependencies between persons, identities, and groups – whether cultures, polities, nations, families, or other kinds of communities. Groups aren't necessarily natural kinds, but they are politically and socially salient. As the chapters by Chin, Dodds, Kolers, and Weir discuss, liberalism's political ontology can't be reduced to methodological and normative individualism. However, one of the biggest challenges facing difference liberalism is to ensure that the pluralism and recognition of difference it embraces doesn't transmogrify into archipelagos of domination.

One general issue is the extent to which liberalism can accommodate the idea of irreducibly social goods (Taylor 1995a; 1995b).¹¹ For some, liberalism is inescapably individualist. However, it's not clear that liberalism has ever been, or certainly must be, necessarily *individualistic*, especially if that means 'atomistic'. Atomism entails that all social actions and structures are explainable in terms of the properties of the constituent individuals. Thus, all social goods are concatenations of individual goods. On this reading, a liberal society is best characterized as one in which individuals pursue their conceptions of the good without the need of any societal common goods, other than those required to coordinate their pursuits peacefully (Taylor 1995a, 161–2, 194–5; Bird 1999).

Charles Taylor, however, has spent a lifetime defending the importance of language, understood as the background against which any given linguistic term acquires meaning, as a prime example of an irreducibly social good (Taylor 1985; 1995b, 132–5; 2016). Indeed, for him, culture is best grasped through the analogy with language: rather than providing a determinate set of desires and beliefs, it enables us to grasp and express our commitments in a distinctive way, but also to argue over them, criticize them, and revise them. We simply can't make sense of

¹⁰ It is interesting to note the increasingly sympathetic treatment of the role of groups in analytic moral and political philosophy in recent years. See, for example, List and Pettit (2011), Gilbert (2023), and Pettit (2023). That groups can have agency (moral and otherwise) is now widely defended. However, what is more controversial is whether they therefore have the necessary characteristics – dignity, sentience, equal worth, etc. – required for the attribution of basic rights at the group level. For an interesting defence that they might, at least in some cases, see Collins (2023). On rights more generally, see Chapter 3.

¹¹ Taylor also refers to these as 'mediated' or 'immediately' common goods, as opposed to 'convergent goods', which he associates with the 'Hobbes-Locke' tradition and atomism (1995b, 190–1).

important aspects of our lives, including our actions, feelings, valued ways of life, as well as various moral and political commitments – in short, our sense of agency – without grasping these background social goods. And they aren't merely public goods; that is, goods that benefit individuals but must be provided to all, like national defence or public safety measures, but genuine social goods. The culture within which language is developed, for example, is not merely an instrumental good. It's not just that speaking French helps me navigate the Montréal metro more effectively, but rather that the form of life within which a common language lives and breathes (including the various concepts and practices it makes available to us, mediated through the state, schools, religion, and our families) helps us identify what is good or valuable in the first place, in dialogue with others.

For Taylor (1985), human beings are 'language animals' and have the capacity for what he calls 'strong evaluation', which involves second order reflection on our beliefs and desires, guided by a language of evaluative distinctions that stems from the traditions and communities we are enmeshed in. These evaluations, or 'articulations', can be more or less perspicuous; we are always in the process of refining and reflecting on them. And if that's true, then it follows that some cultures – at least, those which play the role that Taylor outlines above – are at least potentially worth protecting.¹² However, at the same time, to reiterate, cultures and traditions are characterized by arguments and disagreements, as much as by shared beliefs and practices. Moreover, there might be parts of the culture we don't value anymore, or at least not in the same way, which makes the delineation of cultures (or aspects of cultures) deserving of protection, and those which are not, a difficult issue.¹³ A serious risk for difference liberalism remains the reification of culture and, in the process, the potential for denying the agency of members of the group, especially more vulnerable ones.

Taylor's main point, though, is that unless we at least try to understand what is bound up in people's attachment to their beliefs and cultural practices – even when

¹² There are different ways of doing so. Some (like Taylor) think the state has a crucial role to play in protecting language and cultural identity at least in certain circumstances – as in Québec. Others (like Kukathas) think the state should butt out, and allow individuals to form whatever associations they please, subject only to a general right to exit for all members. Appiah, on the other hand, thinks that assuming culture is a social good *simpliciter* is too vague in terms of explaining what, exactly, should be promoted or preserved, or what makes it good in the first place (2005, 127–41).

¹³ Taylor is highly sensitive to this, despite what critics suggest. Cultures, embedded as they are forms of life, provide valuable modes of reflection and self-inquiry, but these are only starting points from which we then go on to make discriminations between what is more and less valuable within and between different traditions. Thus, for Taylor, they deserve a certain kind of provisional respect, but this is defeasible, as we engage more deeply with them (both our own and others). Taylor is an anti-subjectivist (and thus can hardly be accused of relativism), but at the same time, he emphasizes that our self-understanding is always incomplete, given we are always situated within existing languages and practices, and thus are always in the process of seeking more perspicuous articulations of the different goods and practices that shape us (Taylor 1989).

we profoundly disagree with them – we miss important aspects of modern social and political life. In his influential essay on the ‘politics of recognition’, Taylor went on to argue that the lack of recognition (or misrecognition) experienced by a cultural group was at least a *potential* harm that liberals need to pay attention to (Taylor 1994; see also Hampshire 1989, 154–6). The harm lies not simply (or even mainly) in the denigration of one’s culture by others (a harm to one’s self-esteem or self-respect), but in missing the substantive role that cultures play in relation to human flourishing that our theories of justice need to address. Mere affirmation of one’s culture isn’t what’s at stake in the politics of recognition. Talk is cheap. The value of affirmation is derivative of a deeper claim about the role that cultures and traditions play in relation to our capacity for ‘strong evaluation’ and thus, ultimately, to human agency.

Perhaps the original and most important form of difference liberalism has been liberal nationalism. Again, Taylor provides an interesting genealogy of its emergence, along with his teacher, Isaiah Berlin (Berlin 1972 [2013]). The roots go back to the emergence of philosophical Romanticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as to ideas of popular sovereignty and self-determination in the political sphere. The Romantic movement, epitomized in the work of Herder and others, emphasized that each of us had a unique way of being human which required both self-affirmation (now, in secular time), as well as locating ourselves in a distinctive culture and tradition through which we attempted to make sense of our identity. Modern forms of identity are thus fragile but also powerful mobilizers of collective action, and ‘the nation’ emerged as one of the first major group identities of modern politics. It was both a product of state mobilization, but also a means of unifying otherwise disparate communities. Liberals have tried, ever since, to identify an ethical version of nationalism that helps bind citizens together and creates the conditions for liberal institutions to flourish, but all the while engenders respect for individual rights and pluralism (see Miller 1995; 2000; Tamir 2020).

However, this isn’t easy. Nationalism is the sharpest of double-edged swords, as the politics of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have demonstrated. The challenge is to somehow contain its tendency to be turned against vulnerable minorities, while simultaneously making it sufficiently rich enough to provide a genuine sense of community (Iverson 2015).

Difference liberals take these issues seriously. Will Kymlicka (1995), for example (discussed closely by Chin in Chapter 9), has argued that individuals require equal access to a secure ‘societal culture’ to make sense of their autonomy, and thus in multicultural and multinational states there are liberal grounds for offering not only linguistic, religious, and cultural ‘minority rights’, but also, in some cases, collective rights of self-determination.¹⁴ Iris Marion Young (2000) has criticized liberal views

¹⁴ For an excellent collection of essays discussing these issues in more detail, see Laden and Owen (2007); see also Iverson (2010). Anne Phillips (2007) has criticized the reification of groups in liberal multiculturalism and thus one strand of what I am calling difference liberalism. She argues that although we can’t wish away culture, and people value their cultural attachments in a myriad of ways, the only rights that should be defended are individual rights,

of impartiality and difference-blindness, but at the same time, argued for a more inclusive conception of democracy that provides for differentiated forms of citizenship and belonging. A striking analysis is also provided by Paul Gilroy, for whom the plea for recognition is articulated ‘not as culturally specific but as vitally and corporeally human ... [and] explicitly against the forbidding specifications and structural effects of racial hierarchies’ (2019, 7–8). Groups matter for Gilroy, especially given the history of empire and the persistence of structural racism, but not as modes of ethnic absolutism or imagined unanimity, but rather as sites of relationality and humanistic mutual understanding in pluralistic societies – or what he calls ‘agonistic belonging’.

Another strand of difference liberalism is more pragmatic. Here, there is recognition of the ineradicable tension between liberal ideas of toleration, on the one hand, and more comprehensive conceptions of liberalism as a valuable way of life, on the other (Kukathas 2003). Liberals are often anxious to protect associational freedoms as bulwarks against state power, but also to guard against arbitrary power *within* groups as well. The coerced inclusion or exclusion of groups worries difference liberals, but so too the power exercised within groups, including cultural and national ones. This is especially true in the case of the vulnerable, such as women and girls, as well as minorities within minorities (Eisenberg and Spinner-Halev 2005). However, intervention also has its costs, and thus libertarian difference liberals worry as well about states intervening on the grounds of either constraining the internal power of elites within groups, or on the basis of human rights concerns (especially across national borders). The state is often no less a threat than local elites (Kukathas 1998; 2003; Levy 2015).

Thus, there are tensions at almost every level between individuals, groups, and the state, as well as between states. Liberty generates pluralism, but it also generates irregular patterns of social power that egalitarian, democratic, difference, and realist liberals must remain attentive to.

THREE CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Although this book is intended to highlight the diversity of the liberal tradition and the challenges it faces, and each chapter can be profitably read on its own, there are

which include, of course, the rights to association and to live according to one’s beliefs. But rights are always subject to limiting conditions, including broader social and legal rules and norms. Phillips acknowledges, however, that cultural differences tend to overlap with social disadvantage and discrimination, and that majority cultures are often blind to the ways they shape the public sphere. Thus, diversity needs to be accepted and accommodated, but not by distributing power to groups. Appiah makes a similar argument, worrying, as important as identities are, that collective rights grounded in cultural preservation and survival can’t always be squared with ethical individualism and the ‘liberal respect for humanity’ (2005, 135, 140–1).

also some cross-cutting themes that draw different clusters of chapters together in conversation.

The Complacency of Liberalism

Despite its normative aspirations to not only treat citizens as free and equal, but also provide them with the means to live decent lives, deep and degrading forms of inequality and domination persist in liberal democratic societies today. As a result, whether from a left-liberal or libertarian perspective, too many among us can't live in the way liberalism envisions. Anne Phillips, for example, argues that we should abandon claims about 'basic equality' altogether given these discrepancies (Phillips 2022). The problem, according to her, lies in the way equality is often grounded in claims about human nature (recall our discussion of natural law liberalism above). Doing so inevitably generates conditions and qualifications, usually to do with supposed facts about our nature – like our character, intelligence, rationality, or gender. This results in what Weir, in Chapter 10, calls 'constitutive exclusions', which are not merely a side-effect of liberal conceptual schemes, but central to them (see also Phillips 2022, 18–20). They shape what freedom or equality means and who is eligible to be considered free and equal in the first place. Melvin Rogers (2020), for example, has argued that nineteenth century American republican thought was suffused with deep racial hierarchies that denied slaves not just their political status, but their basic moral standing in the community. African American writers and activists, in response, sought to retool republican conceptions of civic virtue and non-domination to de-naturalize these racialized forms of arbitrary power built into not just the legal and political system, but the wider culture as well. Contemporary republican political thought – and by extension, contemporary liberalism – still struggles with this legacy. The Black Lives Matter movement has made this clear.

Liberalism, for these critics, remains continually on the surface of things: worse, it provides cover for deeper, structural injustices that it can't even conceptualize, let alone address (see Chapter 13). This has been one of the most powerful legacies of the feminist critique of liberalism, as the chapters by Dodds, Spottorno, and Weir make clear. Too often, lapses in equal treatment are put down to the faulty reasoning and prejudices of our predecessors. Or that there is a difference between ideal and non-ideal theory, and contemporary liberal political theory is focused primarily on the former, rather than the latter. All of this can come across as so much bad faith – as a form of moral and political complacency.

However, it's unfair to say that existing liberal democracies are in any way representative of a Rawlsian – or even Shklarian – vision of a just society: mutual reciprocity and the avoidance of cruelty aren't exactly characteristic features of North American and European societies today. Thus, many liberals argue we shouldn't blame the victim. Liberalism is under attack and we should focus on the forces subverting it, rather than sabotaging it ourselves (Scheffler 2019). We should be working harder to build better and more effective liberal institutions. We haven't yet been able to realize the kind of equality envisioned by our best liberal theories, but that's

no reason to abandon the project. Still, the obvious question is why not? Is it just a failure of implementation, or a failure of imagination? It's this constant deferral of a liberalism to come – of a kind of 'normativism' – that has generated a loss of faith in liberalism's emancipatory potential.

The Self-undermining of Liberalism

Another cross-cutting theme is the extent to which liberalism is self-undermining. As I argued above, liberalism may well undermine itself if it can no longer provide an adequate response to the great social and political problems facing our societies today. If the gap between liberal aspirations and social and political realities grows too large, for too long, people might well see liberalism as increasingly irrelevant and turn to other sources for critique and moral and political inspiration.

There are two other senses in which liberalism might undermine itself. The first is an argument found on both the left and the right. According to this view, insofar as egalitarian and democratic liberalism has been championed by a class of professional and 'managerial elites', it has betrayed the working class by embracing social and economic policies that have devastated their communities. Those living outside major metropolitan areas, with less education and less economic and cultural capital, have been left behind. Relentless economic liberalization and globalization has undermined communal structures (such as trade unions, churches, and other community associations) within which people find support and common cause, leaving a significant proportion of societies in the West socially and culturally disoriented. Technological innovations in the 1980s and 1990s, along with trade policies, resulted in large amounts of manufacturing shifting from the advanced economies to emerging markets. This hollowed out well-paying, middle-class jobs. Countries became richer overall, but also more unequal (Stiglitz 2003; Collier 2018; Rodrik and Stantcheva 2021). In these circumstances, the professional elite can lead autonomous, flourishing lives of the kind imagined by liberal political philosophers, but the less well educated and skilled can't – and many are literally dying from despair as a result (Case and Deaton 2020). Regulatory and political 'capture' of mainstream political parties and institutions by plutocratic forces only serve to lock these advantages in (Hacker and Pierson 2020; Vergara 2020).¹⁵ Finally, and especially in the UK, Europe, and the US, large-scale migration has generated economic and cultural unease and resentment in large segments of the population that populist parties have seized on. So, economic and trade policy, cultural liberalization, mass migration, conjoined with rising nationalism, have created fertile ground for reactive political forces to thrive.¹⁶

¹⁵ This is exactly Rawls's critique of the outcomes of American meritocracy – something his critics often miss. See below and n.19 in particular.

¹⁶ See Chapters 11 and 12 on the myriad challenges migration and national borders pose for liberalism.

It is thus no surprise, as Tormey and Kelly discuss, that we see populist political movements emerging from the mid-2000s in response to these economic and cultural changes. Populism is not necessarily anti-democratic, but it is almost always anti-pluralist since it presents a profoundly dyadic vision of society as a contest between the people ('us') and elites ('them'). The people are good, and the elite are bad, but also powerful, and therefore the people need a strong leader to help them overcome their fear.

However, the conclusions that critics of liberalism like Deneen draw from this – that the 'instinctual conservatism' of the 'many' has been crushed by a liberal 'few' – are, needless to say, highly questionable (Deneen 2023, x, 60). Pippa Norris, Ronald Inglehart, and Francis Fukuyama, for example, have charted the 'great disruption' in shared values occurring across American and European societies in detail, demonstrating that the rise of 'postmaterialist' values (for example, to do with environmentalism, gender equality, and human rights) has been underway for some time and cuts across class lines (Fukuyama 1999; Norris and Inglehart 2019). There is no basis for assuming the working class are 'instinctually' conservative or crave authoritarian rule. As Jan-Werner Müller points out, the attack on liberal democratic institutions in countries like Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and India, for example, emerged mainly *after* democratic elections in which populists co-opted mainstream centre-right parties either directly or indirectly (2021, 19–22). The problem isn't that the people crave authoritarian leadership, but that once elected, populists often turn around and subvert the very processes that brought them to power. They manipulate the courts, undermine the freedom of the press, and restrict civil associations in various ways in order to delegitimize the opposition, attack vulnerable minorities, and entrench extreme majoritarianism.¹⁷ This serves to further erode liberal democratic norms in general, making it more difficult for centre-right and centre-left parties to claw back support (Galston 2018, xiv–xv, 44–5; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Still, the economic crisis of 2008 intensified these economic and cultural cleavages, including anxieties about immigration, as well as generating a sense that the economic elites who caused the crisis managed to escape any responsibility for doing so. The rise of what Guy Standing calls 'rentier capitalism', whereby quasi-monopolies are allowed to generate massive profits which are not linked to generating good jobs, as well as enabling owners to buy political influence to secure these 'rents', has contributed to the entrenchment of inequality globally (Standing 2016; Rodrik and Stantcheva 2021; Wolf 2023). Critics on both the left and the right blame egalitarian and classical liberals for failing to address the structural distortions caused by financial capitalism. As a result, they helped set in motion forces that

¹⁷ It's important not to over-generalize here, as there are important differences between what has happened in Poland, Hungary, India, Venezuela, Austria, and Italy in recent years. But the phenomena are sufficiently widespread to note with concern. See the nuanced discussion in Sadurski (2022), especially chapter 2.

undermined the possibilities for realizing the kind of decent liberal order envisioned by egalitarian liberalisms.¹⁸

But perhaps the most powerful critique of the self-undermining of liberalism is its inability to respond adequately to the climate emergency. As Celermajor, Chang, Schlosberg, and Winter argue in Chapter 18, and Kolers in his, it's not clear that democratic liberalism has either the conceptual or political resources to respond effectively to the compounding environmental crises we face. Even if liberalism does not entail a defence of unlimited property rights and capitalist accumulation, it still relies on a deeply anthropomorphic political ontology, along with a limited critique of capitalist social relations, both of which constrain its ability for rethinking our relationship with nature. Moreover, as Robyn Eckersley and others have argued, egalitarian liberalism continues to rely on assumptions about economic growth and a distributive surplus that are unsustainable if we are to halt the worst effects of human-induced climate change (Caney 2018; Eckersley 2023).

Climate justice also requires climate ethics, which is connected to what we ultimately value, including our ideas about human well-being and our relationship with nature – questions which liberals tend to associate with thicker and more 'comprehensive' conceptions of the good. This puts pressure on liberal conceptions of state neutrality. Some critics go so far as to question whether even democracy is compatible with addressing climate change, given its inherent short-termism and tendency to be captured by powerful economic interests.

However, liberal egalitarians are certainly engaging with these questions (see Caney 2021). Perhaps the most important development has been the explicit recognition that liberal justice has ecological preconditions, which in turn has consequences for not only what we owe to each other, but also to future generations, to nature, and to non-human animals. But is there still time?

The Insufficiency of Liberalism

The final theme is a related concern about the insufficiency of liberalism. This is a familiar critique. It was Marx, after all, who in 'On the Jewish Question' argued that bourgeois liberal rights, although a kind of progress on what went before, still only delivered 'political emancipation' within the existing capitalist social order, instead of fully 'human emancipation' which 'will only become complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen: when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a species being' (1978, 46).

Despite the attempt by egalitarian liberals to answer this charge, the Marxian critique remains potent. The claim is that liberalism, even in its most left-egalitarian

¹⁸ For a trenchant and prescient version of this argument, see Gray (2009). But see the more balanced assessment of the threats to liberal democracy since the global financial crisis in Galston (2018).

variants, still lacks a sufficiently critical account of the social relations that characterize liberal democratic capitalist societies. Of course, Marxists will claim this is because liberals lack a critique of capital. But there is a general sense that liberalism struggles to address some of the deeper, structural injustices that mobilize many social movements today. Let me mention two examples.

The first is a concern with the focus on distribution as the main site of justice, as opposed to production and the social organization of labour. Although the Rawlsian tradition has developed increasingly sophisticated analyses of the normative grounds for addressing inequality, some argue that it still leaves the deeper workings of capitalism untouched. Many theorists, inspired by both Rawls and Marx, have responded by focusing on the extent to which a theory of justice must address arbitrary power wherever it occurs – in both distribution and production (Edmundson 2017; O’Neill 2020). These arguments have highlighted, for example, Rawls’s defence of the ‘fair value’ of political liberties in his first principle, and the fair equality of opportunity in his second, both of which go far beyond merely formal accounts of the equal liberties and have potentially radical political and economic consequences. Greater attention has also been paid to Rawls’s account of what he calls a ‘property owning democracy’, rather than welfare state capitalism, as the best economic and political system within which to realize his two principles. In fact, he developed this idea in direct response to the kind of Marxist critique outlined above. A property-owning democracy, governed by the two principles, would be one in which concentrations of wealth have been mitigated so that society is ‘not so divided that one fairly small sector controls the preponderance of productive resources’; where there is a wide dispersion of income and wealth; and where the fair value of the positive political liberties are protected, thus minimizing distortions of democratic politics characteristic of contemporary capitalist societies (Rawls 2001, 177–8).¹⁹

However, insofar as the Rawlsian critique remains wedded to reforming liberal institutions, rather than radically transforming them, for some critics, they remain insufficient (Fraser and Jaeggi 2018; Forrester 2022). The financialization of social life, accelerated through the neoliberal hegemony of the 1970s until the 2000s, has

¹⁹ Rawls was deeply concerned about the emergence of a ‘politics of resentment’ from the workings of American meritocracy. His entire theory is premised on the rejection of meritocracy as an appropriate distributive ideal, given the distribution of natural talents, skills, and abilities was arbitrary from a moral point of view (1999, 63). But his analysis of the kind of social relations meritocracy generated is striking: ‘There exists a marked disparity between the upper and lower classes in both the means of life and the rights and privileges of organizational authority. The culture of the poor strata is impoverished while that of the governing technocratic elite is securely based on the service of the national ends of power and wealth’ (1999, 91). Left unaddressed, ‘political power rapidly accumulates and becomes unequal; and making use of the coercive power of the state and its law, those who gain the advantage can often assure themselves of a favoured position’. As a result, poorer and marginalized citizens ‘(h)aving been effectively prevented by their lack of means from exercising their fair degree of influence ... withdraw into apathy and resentment’ (1999, 199, 198; see also 469). For further discussion see Weithman (2016) and Wenar (2023).

profoundly reshaped the social facts on the ground. Moreover, Rawlsian liberalism, lacks a robust account of social and political change, given its focus on legal and institutional processes, and thus underplays the role that social movements play, not only as agents of social change, but also as sites for the production of political theory – ‘lived intelligences’ as John Dewey put it (Pineda 2021; Woodly 2022; Honig 2023). In Chapter 15, Alex Livingston develops a version of this critique of liberal conceptions of civil disobedience (including Rawls’s), which, he argues, ends up rationalizing and thus entrenching forms of structural racial disadvantage, rather than providing a means of overcoming it.

This leads to another variation on liberalism’s insufficiency. If it fails to adequately grasp the nature of capitalist social relations, then it also lacks a sufficiently nuanced account of the broader relations of power to which we are increasingly subject. Liberalism has been focused, for the most part, on what Michel Foucault called ‘juridical power’ – the power exercised through law and the administrative state (Foucault 2008). But more and more of our lives are shaped by what he called ‘the conduct of conduct’, or ‘government’, in the broadest sense of the term (Iverson 1997; Foucault 2000). This is a productive and constitutive form of power. It doesn’t only constrain our behaviour by blocking (or enabling) certain of our actions, but also shapes what we come to believe and desire in the first place.²⁰ The influence of Foucault, as well as Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner’s republican conception of ‘freedom as non-domination’ (Pettit 2014), is an indication of a general sense of the insufficiency of liberal conceptions of social power.

But there are others too. Take, for example, the power of online platforms and digital intermediaries, discussed in Chapters 19 and 20. In our interactions with Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Chat GPT, and other platforms, their algorithms are designed not only to provide a means for us to express ourselves and communicate with others, but also to actively shape our desires and beliefs. In the process, they are also reshaping social relations: encouraging, frustrating, promoting, and enabling certain kinds of interactions and communication over others. In Chapter 19, Lee-Stronach argues that we need a new taxonomy of the forms of injustice found in our increasingly automated world to help us make sense of these phenomena. Does liberalism have a sufficiently nuanced account of power to account for these developments? Do appeals to the ‘free market of ideas’, to the expressive value of free speech, or to the ‘fair value’ of liberty, provide sufficient normative purchase in a world of generative artificial intelligence and the concentrated power of the large tech companies?

²⁰ To be fair, Rawls, at least, was certainly concerned with the effects of distribution and the role the ‘basic structure’ played in shaping peoples’ lives: ‘a theory of justice must take into account how the aims and aspirations of people are formed ... the institutional forms of society affects its members and determines in large part the kind of persons they want to be as well as the kind of persons they are’ (1993, 269). See Chapter 2 for further discussion of this ‘soul making’ aspect of liberalism. On the changing forms of political and social power and how they have shaped liberal theorizing over time, see Chapter 4.

CONCLUSION

Liberalism's ability to adapt and respond to changing historical conditions and the emergence of new forms of arbitrary power has been a critical feature of its historical development. Critics and defenders have debated the extent to which it has and can continue to do so successfully. The rapid pace of technological change, deepening inequality, and the looming prospect of ecological collapse present three of the most urgent challenges facing liberalism today.

The chapters in this book reflect the complexity and shape-shifting nature of liberalism. This is perhaps its most important claim: that in grappling with both the limits and possibilities of liberalism, we need to avoid reductionism. The tensions between the individual and society, between ethical conceptions of the good and pluralism, between constitutive and juridical forms of power, between scepticism and affirmation, and between universalism and historical contingency, are not peculiar to liberalism, but to just about any political theory trying to make sense of our times. Liberalism hasn't failed, but nor has it fully succeeded; it remains fragile and yet, resilient.

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