

Introduction

It's About More Than Liberty

As mine is a bold attempt to pull together a complicated story, a few more words are needed about what is being undertaken and why. That said, I at once urge readers who are keen to start to skip this explanatory introduction and go straight to the story. There they will meet the German scholar and diplomat Wilhelm von Humboldt, the first of a rich cast of exemplary liberal thinkers and politicians whose lives and thoughts illustrate this biographically led, nonspecialist chronicle of liberalism as a practice of politics. The explanatory introduction is for readers who want to see more of the map before they start the tour.

The introduction is in two parts, thematic and chronological. The first part picks out themes and arguments that run through liberalism's life. It suggests that a good place to start that life is not with liberty, as books on liberalism often do, but with a historical predicament, the onset of industrial capitalism. It notes pitfalls facing any account of liberalism and stipulates what I shall take "liberal" and "liberalism" to mean. The introduction's second part outlines my book's telling of that life in three liberal periods, 1830–80, 1880–1945, and 1945–89, followed by a brief Coda about liberalism's present mood. Each part starts with a sketch of the historical setting and then recounts the lives and thoughts of exemplary liberals, grouped roughly into thinkers or into politicians. Readers lost in the story can come back to the map later should they care to.

Liberals, it is said, believe in liberty. Indeed, they do. But so do most nonliberals. Standing up for liberty does not distinguish liberals or what

2 » INTRODUCTION

they believe in. Just about every modern rival to liberalism has claimed to stand somehow on the side of liberty. *Le Conservateur*, a French journal founded in 1818 to promote tradition and reaction, announced its aims as a defense of “religion, king and liberty.” In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels looked forward to a classless society in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” In 1861, the American Confederacy’s vice president, Alexander Stephens, defended the newly formed government of the slaveholding South as securing “all our ancient rights, franchises and liberties.” The encyclical *Libertas humana*, which Pope Leo XIII addressed to Roman Catholics in 1888, held that shaping human law so that everyone might better conform to “the eternal law of God” constituted the “true liberty of human society.” Benito Mussolini described Italian fascists as “libertarians” who believed in liberty, even for their enemies. The charter program of the Nazi Party in 1920 announced its goal as “Germany’s rebirth in the German spirit of German liberty.”

Maybe so, but those nonliberals were surely thinking of different things from what liberals think of when they invoke liberty. That reply, telling perhaps on its own, would give more pause if liberals themselves agreed on what political liberty was and why it mattered. But they don’t. Recent liberal thinkers have disagreed as to whether liberals should adopt a “negative,” “positive,” or “republican” conception of liberty, indeed on how deeply those conceptions differ, if they do. Nor do they agree as to whether political liberty, however thought about, really is the one commitment that makes liberalism stand out. Some take equality, not liberty, for liberalism’s leading idea. Others think liberalism has had no one idea that somehow dominates the others.

Liberty has commanded the stage in the monodramas of liberal history. In its Hegelian or Whig variant, the tale is essentially the same. History as Hegel imagined it was a kind of superagent for the ever fuller realization of human liberty—for whatever counted in practice, that is, toward the extension of people’s powers and capacities, both mental and material, in successive stages of society. Hegel was not the power-drunk authoritarian of hostile caricature but a liberal believer in human progress of somewhat cautious temper. As the common focus of people’s drive for freedom, history on Hegel’s account moved stage

by stage toward its end or goal in an enlightened and law-governed constitutional monarchy. Only such a state, to his mind, could provide the ordered liberty that citizens needed to best achieve their proper ends. A brave twentieth-century Italian liberal, Guido de Ruggiero, told a Hegelian story of liberty's advance in his classic *History of European Liberalism* (1924), though with a different goal in view. Ruggiero went into internal exile during the fascist years, joined the anti-Mussolini resistance in 1942 before it was safe and founded Italy's postwar liberal Action Party. For Ruggiero, the spread of liberty was visibly tending to the only condition of society in which each citizen could realize his or her aims and develop his or her capacities to the full: a democratic commonwealth, that is, where the rights of all were equally respected. In stories of liberty's grand march people often disagree about where they are going.

Whig history also presented human progress as a march of liberty, though its goal-directed character was more disguised. In the Whig epic of emancipation liberty's agents were flesh-and-blood particulars—early Christians, medieval townspeople, Catholic conciliarists, Reformation Protestants, seventeenth-century Parliamentarians, anti-Stuart 1688-ers, antitax American colonists, French 1789-ers—knocking away one barrier or another to their advancement, motivated willy-nilly by private conscience, urge for gain, or an expansive sense of self. Liberty on such accounts was a common human possession, ever at risk of hostile capture and in standing need of protection or release. The Protestant Macaulay's *History of England* (1848–61) acclaimed the anti-Stuart Revolution of 1688 in England as a restoration of ancient liberties lost to absolutism and intolerance. The Catholic Acton's posthumous *History of Freedom* (1907) tracked from antiquity to modern times a long campaign by personal faith to fend off suffocating authority. In the medieval contest for supremacy between church and crown that neither was in position win, Acton spied in particular a modern recovery of liberty and the creation of a lasting space for civic freedom.

Liberty-driven history survives in the recent fashion for books that recount modernity's unstoppable success as a happy ménage à trois of free enquiry, unobstructed new technology, and liberal politics. In biological mode, such tales make liberty an all-purpose reproductive

4 » INTRODUCTION

advantage in the evolution of social forms. They credit just about every aspect of human betterment and social progress since Galileo spotted Jupiter's moons through a handmade telescope to liberty's selfless sharing of her bounty. The tale has dazzling appeal. But are the boons of universal schooling, democratic suffrage, and penicillin all forms or consequences of *liberty*?

There are less grandiose, more strictly political versions of the liberty narrative. They follow a memorable rule of three: political liberty's first victory early in the nineteenth century was constitutional freedom, its second victory was then economic freedom, and its final victory was democratic freedom in the twentieth century. Though neat, that sequence presumes the question at issue: what single political value, if any, do representative institutions, free markets and democratic participation all embody? History is wilier than such attempts to catch it in one trap allow. To put it quaintly, history concerns itself solely with liberty no more than liberals do. Obviously, you cannot leave liberty out of the liberal story. Like the king in chess, liberty comes into its own, but nearer the end of the game. For all its crowning appeal, liberty is the wrong place to begin.

On my telling, liberalism began with a predicament. The first liberals were looking for a new order after the productive turmoil of early industrial capitalism and three late eighteenth-century political revolutions—American, Dutch, and French—had turned society and politics upside down. Their principal challenge was that order would from now on be dynamic, not static. When thrown off balance, society and economy would, so it was hoped, come to rest again, but never save by remotest luck in their former place. Continuity of life imagined as a comforting return home was gone for good. Liberals, as I see them, were thrilled and horrified by that idea, and it is not possible to understand their political temperament unless the hold on them of thrill and horror together is kept in mind. In searching for an acceptable political order in a destabilized world of ceaseless change, liberals had accordingly a dream, a nightmare, and a daytime picture of human society that combined both in an unsteady, creative tension.

The liberal dream was a myth of order in a masterless world: a peaceful, prosperous place without father figures or brotherhood, chieftains

or comrades, final authorities or natural-born friends. It was an appealing myth shaped by distrust of powers, monopolies, and authorities, by faith that the human ills of warfare, poverty, and ignorance were corrigible in this world, and by unbreachable respect for the enterprises, interests, and opinions of people, whoever they were. Those convictions served as liberalism's guides in a world of ever-shifting novelty where interests clashed and argument never ended. Liberals were not sleepwalkers. They worked hard to convince themselves that those guiding ideas would interlock and reinforce each other.

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

The liberal nightmare pictured a world in disorder. The nightmare drew on the direct experience of revolution and warfare from 1789 to 1815 and on collective memory of the fratricidal conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It mingled fears of a return to historic intolerance and religious strife with revulsion at the terror and counterterror, popular unrest, vengeful repression, *levée en masse*, and unlimited warfare that had recently swept over the European and Atlantic world. Liberals shuddered at riotous mobs in burgeoning cities. They feared mounting poverty in the countryside as growing populations threatened to outstrip agricultural capacities. They feared that whereas the benefits of progress were diffuse and seen only with time, the costs of progress were local, heavy, and abruptly felt. Liberalism, as I see it, resolved dream and nightmare into a desirable picture of society as an unfraternal place without natural harmony from which clashing interests and discordant beliefs could never be removed but where, with luck and wise laws, unceasing conflict might nevertheless be turned to welcome ends in innovation, argument, and exchange. That picture of conflict channeled into peaceful competition made a mystifying, fluid,

6 » INTRODUCTION

and constantly surprising society intelligible to liberals, and thence in some sense justifiable or acceptable.

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

Liberalism made a high bid. One running theme is accordingly wide swings of liberal mood: politically from overconfidence to undue disappointment and intellectually from horizonless universalism to worldly-wise damage limitation. A connected theme is that liberals nowadays know, or ought to know, better what they are after than did earlier liberals. The story of liberalism is in its way a coming-of-age tale as liberals learn, or fail to learn, from experience.

Before going on, two difficulties have to be faced, briefly dwelt on and put aside with a stipulative disclaimer. Who *were* these liberals I am talking of so freely? What *is* liberalism? The word "liberal" is notoriously slippery. There is no stable, uncontested understanding of the concept *liberalism*.

To take the verbal difficulty first, it would be neat if all and only liberal politicians, thinkers, parties, and voters called themselves "liberal." The word itself would then mark who was a liberal and who not. The snag is that most liberals have called themselves something else. It is possible, in addition, to be more or less liberal, to be *liberalish*. You could insist on treating "Liberal" as a brand name like "Apple" or "Nike,"

but it would not get you far historically. You would leave out most of the players. With the exception of Germany's nineteenth-century National Liberals and Britain's long-lived Liberal Party (1859–1988), most small-l liberal parties in the countries under focus here never took the capital-L name “Liberal” at all.

The first to adopt the term “liberal” openly in politics were the Spanish *liberales*, members of the Cortes, or parliament, demanding a return to constitutional rule. In 1814 Spain's vacillating Bourbon king suspended the two-year-old constitution under the combined pressures of Catholic resistance, European reaction, and colonial revolt against Spanish rule in Latin America. The *liberales* hoped that reviving the constitution would restore customary liberties and persuade self-governing colonies to remain Spanish in a new commonwealth. Immediately it came to nothing, for the Latin American colonies soon won full independence and in Spain the European reaction was too strong for the constitutionalists. As a label for an emerging outlook, the term “liberal” itself survived and quickly spread from Spain to France and from there across Europe.

To begin with “liberal” characterized constitutional opposition to autocracy. On Napoleon's return from exile in March 1815, Benjamin Constant wrote in his journal that however “liberal” the ex-emperor's intentions, the results would more likely be “despotic.” After Napoleon's final defeat, the term “liberal” was a pejorative to conservatives restored to power. In 1819 Austria's chancellor, Prince Metternich, told his political secretary, Friedrich von Gentz, that “ultraliberalism” was to be extirpated without pity. Soon after, Britain's Tory foreign secretary, Viscount Castlereagh, called Whigs who were advocating immediate electoral reform, Catholic emancipation, and the abolition of slavery “our English *libéraux*,” as if the Frenchness of the word was itself enough to damn the parliamentary opposition as disloyal and unsound.

In 1822 the awkward squad of literary England in exile—Byron, Shelley, and Leigh Hunt—founded *The Liberal*, a magazine they wrote from Pisa. Although it cloaked its attacks on arbitrary power in verse and lasted only four issues, it won notoriety in the Tory press as a dangerous tear sheet and prompted the conviction of the publisher, Hunt's brother, for libeling the crown.

8 » INTRODUCTION

The term acquired a past. In 1827 the British Whig historian Henry Hallam wrote of the anti-Stuart Revolution of 1688 as the “triumph of those principles which in the language of the present day are denominated liberal or constitutional.” Hallam’s careful distinction between how people talked in the seventeenth century and how they talked in Hallam’s time was before long forgotten. By 1830, there were not only liberal views, but also people who embraced such views: liberals. In France *un libéral* meant loosely anyone, monarchist or republican, who favored constitutional government and opposed a return to the ancien régime. In *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), the French novelist Stendhal wrote mockingly of his fictional Italian tyrant, Ernest IV, alone at night and afraid, who had only to hear the parquet squeak to “leap for his pistols, fearing a liberal under the bed.”

Germany’s liberals took many names. The first liberals called themselves Progressives. They split into right-wing National Liberals and left-wing Freisinnigen or Independents, who split in turn into an Independent Union and an Independent People’s Party before in 1910 becoming Progressives again. In the Weimar Republic after 1918, the National Liberals renamed themselves the German People’s Party. Left liberals became the German Democratic Party. After 1949, the liberals became Free Democrats.

The mainstream of French politics in the Third Republic (1870–1940), Fourth Republic (1944–58), and Fifth Republic (from 1958) was liberal in character, though never in name. Many have fallen for the bluff assertion of Emile Faguet, a French literary critic, who wrote in 1903 that there were no liberals in France and never would be. Elie Halévy, a French historian of English thought, who understood more about politics than Faguet did, grasped that you could be liberal without calling yourself liberal. Halévy described himself as being in 1900 “anti-clerical, democratic, republican, not socialist, against intolerance—a ‘liberal,’ in other words.” With the rediscovery of French liberalism in the 1970s and 1980s, such verbal puzzles came to seem less taxing. A French historian of ideas, Cécile Laborde, judged in 2003 that “the dominant language of politics in France is republicanism, not liberalism,” but added the decisive rider that republicanism had “historically occupied the ideological space of liberalism.”

With the two exceptions of the short-lived Liberal Republicans, led to defeat in the presidential election of 1872 by the redoubtable newspaper editor Horace Greeley, and the local sport of the mid-twentieth-century Liberal Party of New York, the main parties in American politics have avoided the name. Since the 1850s, two loose coalitions, the Republicans and Democrats, each with liberal and less liberal wings, have monopolized the nomenclature of party competition. After 1945, “liberal” in the United States took on an internal and external use. When used of politics in the United States, “liberal” typed a supporter of the New Deal and civil rights. Internationally, “liberal” contrasted an American-led West with a communist East. The term was interchangeable with “free,” “open,” and “democratic.” By the 1990s, the conservative right in American politics was using “liberal” as a term of abuse for almost anyone it disagreed with and the ending of Cold War had, it seemed, robbed “liberal” of use as a term of geopolitical contrast. In the United States at any rate, it may be that a balanced sense of “liberal” without asterisks and qualifications is for now beyond reach. Prompted by pollsters with lists of “liberal” policy positions, fewer than 20 percent of American voters call themselves liberals. On the other hand, after India, the United States is the world’s biggest liberal democracy. On any due understanding of liberalism, how can that be?

Unfortunately, there is no due understanding of liberalism, not one everyone readily agrees upon. Behind those taxing verbal questions lies the awkward absence of a settled, intuitive grasp of the concepts *liberalism* and *liberal*. Listing liberalism’s characteristic preoccupations as commonly spoken of is not difficult. Uncontroversially they include people’s rights, toleration, constitutional government, the rule of law, and liberty. There is, alas, no settled, intuitive grasp of those ideas either, nor of which trumps which and how they all hang together, if they do, to make a characteristically *liberal* list.

Who was or wasn’t liberal is open to dispute. Tocqueville yes, Marx no, although some have thought he was. Being or not being liberal comes in degrees. François Guizot and John Stuart Mill were both unmistakably liberals, but Mill, who admired him as a thinker and historian but not as a politician, was probably more liberal than Guizot. Herbert Hoover was a liberal of a kind but Franklin Roosevelt was more

10 » INTRODUCTION

liberal. Among thinkers and philosophers, John Stuart Mill, Isaiah Berlin, and John Rawls were exemplary liberals. Jean-Paul Sartre or Michael Oakeshott were neither of them straightforwardly liberal, but it would be curious not to see something liberal in Sartre's hostility to power and authority or in Oakeshott's suspicion of systems and planning.

So that the story may start, I cut through those verbal and conceptual knots to make a stipulative disclaimer. On this telling of its life, I take liberalism for a practice guided by four loose ideas. I flag them in shorthand *conflict*, *resistance to power*, *progress*, and *respect*. Together they compose what I take for the liberal outlook. More will be said of each in a moment. I offer them not as the essence of liberalism, an analysis of "liberalism" or an attempt to complete "*x* is a liberal if and only if . . .," but rather as an informal device to organize a fluid, capacious story. I take "liberals" to pick out practitioners, thinkers, and followers of liberalism, and "liberalism" to name a historical practice of politics guided by those four ideas. How liberal someone was, on that understanding, depended on how strongly he or she held to those four ideas, particularly on how strongly he or she insisted on holding to them all. I do not claim that my understanding of liberalism in such terms is correct. I trust simply that it will seem apt as the story goes. I trust that liberalism so described shows by the end a recognizable degree of unity and continuity.

After that long clearing of the throat, I return to talking about liberals and liberalism in the direct mode, without any longer flagging either term with scare quotes or warning signs such as "on this telling" and "as I understand."

Liberalism's first guiding idea—conflict—was less an ideal or principle than a way to picture society and what to expect from society. Lasting conflict of interests and beliefs was, to the liberal mind, inescapable. Social harmony was not achievable, and to pursue it was foolish. That picture was less stark than it looked, for harmony was not even desirable. Harmony stifled creativity and blocked initiative. Conflict, if tamed and turned to competition in a stable political order, could bear fruit as argument, experiment, and exchange.

Human power, second, was for liberals implacable. It could never be counted on to behave well. Superior power of some people over others,

whether political, economic, or social, tended inevitably to arbitrariness and domination unless resisted and checked. Liberalism's call to resist power was often put negatively. Resistance required the refusal of submission and the prevention of domination by any single interest, faith, or class.

Human character and human society as liberals saw them were, third, not static but dynamic. They were open to change. Liberal hope stiffened by liberal history suggested that both character and society might change for the better. The fourth liberal idea was that moral limits existed to how superior power could treat people. Might alone was not right. Power was obliged to respect people for themselves. Liberal respect could also be put negatively. It set out what superior power should not do: obstruct or intrude on people in pursuit of their chosen enterprises or beliefs. Once embraced democratically, respect for people as such forbade power from excluding anyone from the circle of liberal protection.

The four guiding ideas may be seen as liberal answers to questions facing any political outlook. Is a conflict of interests and faiths in society inescapable? Is power implacable, and, if so, is it nevertheless controllable? Are human society and human character static or dynamic? Are there moral limits on how those with more power may treat those with less? Those are by no means the only large questions to ask in politics. Without answers to them, though, political outlooks lack grip on the world they propose to work in.

The liberal outlook had a shape. Cross-connections among its guiding ideas helped hold it together. Inner tensions created running lines of dispute among liberals, practical and theoretical. I take such disputes as family quarrels, not as wars among rival sects for the liberal crown. Liberalism, so taken, is capacious, but not indiscriminate. Taken one by one, liberalism's guiding ideas have distinguished it from nonliberals and antiliberals. Liberals have stood out by insisting on holding to their guiding ideas together without in practice abandoning any of them or in theory subordinating some to others.

In the boldness and diversity of its aims, liberalism's critics have seen practical overreach and theoretical incoherence. Its friends have seen a source of political hardiness and intellectual vitality. Liberalism's

12 » INTRODUCTION

guiding ideas rested visibly on different grounds. Conflict was a conviction based on observation and historical memory. Resistance to power grew from long human experience. Faith in progress was a mixture of observation and hope. Respect for people had roots in legal custom, shared moral tradition, and the successful precedent of religious toleration. Liberal practice has outlasted political rivals that tried to do without one or other of worldly prudence, common morality, and attention to historical experience or the social facts, especially facts about what modern people would put up with. In its covering power, liberal thought has drawn strength from holding back pressure to isolate one liberal principle that somehow dominated the others. Liberal thought has won broadest understanding and support when insisting on the primacy of politics—endless public argument and compromise—not when elevating liberalism into moral philosophy or reducing it to economics.

Liberalism's ideas were distinctive. They stood out in relief against the competing outlooks of conservatism and socialism, liberalism's chief nineteenth-century rivals. Both arose in reaction to liberalism, which they pictured as source and celebrant of blind, restless change. In the name of stability, conservatism appealed to the fixity of the past, socialism to the fixity of the future. Conservatives, to schematize, believed in the unchallengeable authority of rulers and custom. They thought of human character as largely set and of society's scope for wholesale improvement as small or nonexistent. They took liberal respect for people's chosen enterprises and opinions, especially if they took unfamiliar or disruptive form, as harmful to orthodoxy and social order. Civic respect, to the conservative mind, overindulged human willfulness and private choice. It shortchanged duty, deference, and obedience. Conservatives took society for a harmonious, orderly whole before critical modernity promoted self-seeking disaffection and liberal capitalism sowed discord between classes.

Socialists believed like liberals that society was divided by conflict. Unlike liberals they thought that conflict would end once its sources in material inequity were overcome. Socialism here stands for the many families of the left that grew out of Jacobinism and popular radicalism to include Utopian collectivists, Fourierists, Marxists, and early labor unionists. The socialist left, second, put its trust in the power of the

people, as intuited by popular tribunes, elected, or self-appointed. Like liberalism, socialism had faith in human progress, but unlike liberalism, progress by radical transformation of society rather than in progress by gradual reform within society as it largely was. Some socialists would reach their goal gradually by the ballot, others in a revolutionary leap. All hoped for a postcapitalist society of common ownership and material equality. In socialist eyes, last, civic respect for people singly threatened comradeship, class loyalty, and solidarity. As liberals respected in particular people's property, liberalism stood in the way of true progress.

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

The comprehensive disgrace of fascism (1945) and a closing of the book on communism (1989) left liberalism, as it seemed, without a global rival against which to compete historically or define itself conceptually. That sense of an ending was short-lived, as the book's Coda after 1989 notes. In the expanded field of the twenty-first century, it was soon clear that liberalism had several competing "isms": one-party authoritarianism, state capitalism, democratic nationalism, and

14 » INTRODUCTION

theocratic Islamism. Each denied or shortchanged one or more of the elements that marked out liberalism, most obviously resistance to power and civic respect. Each had adepts that looked like vigorous alternatives to liberalism, though not unchallenged alternatives, as people demanding something better in Beijing, Moscow, Caracas, Istanbul, and Teheran bravely attested.

Cross-supports and inner tensions connected liberalism's four guiding ideas. Some pulled toward each other, some pulled apart. Liberals counted throughout on a play of forces to hold their project together and avoid collapse.

In their descriptive picture of society, liberals imagined a field of inescapable conflict. American and British liberals tended to think of conflict "individually" in the manner of economists as a clash between two single contestants that could without distortion be magnified to social scale. French and German liberalism tended to treat conflict more "socially" as competition among shared mentalities and self-standing groups. Each approach, the economic and the social, had its delights and difficulties. The point to keep in mind is that, however they theorized about the precise character of the contestants, liberals all took social conflict for a fact of life that could be turned to fruitful ends.

As conflict could not be denied or overcome, it had to be contained and channeled. Otherwise, no order, liberal or illiberal, was achievable. Liberal order ruled out absolute power. Politics, accordingly, had two main tasks. The first was to create institutions that prevented domination by any one power, section, or interest. The second was to embed habits of bargaining, persuasion, and compromise. Both were ambitious. To encourage themselves to think that the tasks were doable, liberals staked a lot on material and moral progress. To do without absolute power and to count on a spirit of bargaining, everyone had to be willing to trade and everyone had to have something to trade. Neither condition was ever secure. Liberalism throughout has had to reckon with people who would rather fight than trade. Liberalism throughout has had to find something to say to people without anything of significance to trade, little or nothing of the kind, that is, that liberal capitalism characteristically valued. Faced by those twin difficulties, liberals have often tried to fool themselves that people were not after all in in-

escapable conflict with each other. Liberals have often been tempted, with a large measure of bad faith, to fall back on a comforting but perilous belief: not only did modern people agree on some minimal live-and-let-live rules of the game, but their material interests and deepest convictions were also converging.

As to the limits that liberalism put on the kind of political order it might accept, resistance to power and respect for people were counterparts of a kind. They pulled together. Power may stop people doing what they choose or make them do what they would rather not do. The kind of power that matters first in politics is public power, of state over citizen, wealth over poverty, majorities over minorities. Public power takes a variety of forms. Power may come as hard, lawful coercion by the state. It may come more softly as overbearing economic pressure in the market or socially as constricting orthodoxy. Each form carries a characteristic “or else,” by which power exacts compliance: violent restraint, the infliction of penury, and social ostracism.

Civic respect promised people reliable protection from oppressive power. It was a public, not personal, requirement. Hence the “civic.” It did not call on people to like, admire, or even take an interest in each other. It called impersonally for restraint from the powers of those “cold monsters”: state, wealth, and society. Respect was unconditional and anonymous. It could not be withheld by the state at any rate, save by legal sanction for due cause. Liberal respect was in theory required for everyone, whoever they were—a democratic promise that, as Part II will amply show, liberals were in the main slow and reluctant to honor.

As power oppresses people in various ways, respect called for a variety of protections from power. Power might intrude on people’s private world. Power might obstruct their aims and enterprises. Power might exclude people from the protections that respect insists on. Respect promised accordingly a family of protections: against intrusion, against obstruction, and against exclusion. Intrusive power might interfere with property or with opinions. Obstructive power might block mechanical innovation or imaginative invention. Exclusive power might deny civic protection to the poor, the unlettered, the unorthodox—indeed to anyone typed for inferior citizenship by markers of social “difference.”

16 » INTRODUCTION

Respect's triple structure made it irresistible to simplify. Faced by the interferences and exactions of rulers, landowners, and priests, reliable protection from arbitrary, undue power was what people, immemorally, had spoken of in banner terms as liberty. Such protection for everyone was what, immemorally, they had spoken of as equality. When thrown into modern politics with its novel constellations of distant, impersonal power, liberalism inherited those banner terms, "liberty" and "equality." The terms rallied people to respect. They also blurred distinct elements of what respect demanded from power. Soon another banner term entered the argument: "the individual." Though civic respect did not need to be thought about or defended in "individualist" terms, liberalism became widely talked of as a kind of political individualism. The three-part shape of civic respect, the encouraging precedent of religious toleration, and the confusions of "individualism" have a chapter to themselves (I, 4i).

Respect and progress pulled apart from each other. They were hard for liberals to pursue together. Respect promised to let people alone. Progress undertook to raise them up. The tension involved the progress of character and the progress of society. Civic respect appeared to get in the way of both. As to the progress of character, liberals on the one hand insisted that people must be left to grow and flourish in their own ways. People, liberals believed, had to choose for themselves what dreams to chase, what gods to worship, and what lives to lead. At the same time, liberals were teachers, preachers, and leading men in their communities, used to telling people what to do and how to behave. Liberals could not help but interfere. Of all tag terms for liberals, "laissez-faire" may well be the least apt. With characteristic pith, Lord Acton nailed the difficulty in a letter to a friend in 1887, "My liberalism admits to everyone the right to his own opinion and imposes on me the duty of teaching him what is best."

That was all very well. But what if unruly pupils did not want to hear the liberal lesson? What if they did not accept the unreflective assumption of early liberals that they spoke for humankind as its natural tutors, not from ancient custom or God-given right, but as reasonable, educated men of means who understood the common interest and knew what was best? With the spread of ethical democracy, such questions

became pressing. Faced by an angry reversion to xenophobia and intolerance in France during the 1890s, the French social thinker Célestin Bouglé asked in “The Crisis of Liberalism” (1902) how liberals should respond when people, left to decide for themselves, chose to be bigoted, illiberal, and exclusionary.

A related difficulty lay with liberal Utilitarianism: How far might social progress be pressed at cost to civic respect? How far might the good of a few be sacrificed for the good of the many? In its first 150 years, liberalism commonly fudged the issue with the thought that the net benefits of progress could be counted on in time to benefit everyone overall. Liberal experience of twentieth-century modernity dampened hopes of morally frictionless advance. After 1945 liberalism faced up more squarely to the unacceptable harm that the collective powers of state, market, and society could do to people in the name of progress.

Liberal progress posed challenges of its own. Once embarked on social reform, subsequent change quickly became reform of reform. With the growth of liberal government and liberal capitalism after 1880, that nettlesome dialectic of progress runs through Parts II and III. Taxes and social spending were its most obvious expression. To liberalism’s conservative critics, such frustrations were general. Liberal progress to conservative minds was a delusion. Why not simply call progress by its true name, hope, the French antiliberal Charles Maurras scoffed? Among liberals themselves, disputes about the managerial state ever correcting previous corrections, often at the behest of the modern market, were less extreme but never ending.

A parallel question was whether the progress of society was open-ended or might have limits of sorts. “The more society is perfected, the more it will aspire to new perfections,” Guizot predicted. Mill mused in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1848) that a prosperous society might reach a steady state when the worst ills had been ended, needs were broadly met and people were on any reasonable standard materially satisfied, although he did not suggest when. The fiscal and planetary costs of liberal democracy’s open promises run through Part III and recur in the Coda. Growing doubt about horizonless progress took fiscal expression in the neoliberal reaction to the welfare state in the

18 » INTRODUCTION

1970s and environmental expression in the Green movement's rejection of progress as "ever more."

To resist power, liberals needed to use power. One unending back-and-forth of such kind among liberals was economic. At times the liberal state tamed the market. At others the liberal market tamed the liberal state. In liberal practice, the modern state and the modern market grew up together in the nineteenth century as two counterpart powers. In some respects they were rivals. In other respects they needed each other. Liberals have understood and accepted both truths. Granting the state supremacy is not liberal. Granting the market supremacy is not liberal either. The economic claims of the modern market and of the modern state occupy much of the story from 1880 to 1945. After 1945, liberal democracies appeared to get the balance right. Now market power grows unchecked across the world. The state grows in weight but weakens in capacity. Liberals, with reason, wonder which power, if either, may any longer check the other.

If liberal capitalism in the twentieth century was parent to the welfare state, liberal militarism was parent to the warfare state. By a happy countermovement, the rise of liberal warfare provoked resistance in a liberal tradition of dissent. Early liberalism took shape and sustenance from radical opposition to repression in wartime and its aftermath in the 1790s to 1830s. The twentieth-century defense of civil liberties grew similarly out of wartime dissent in 1914–18. Dissent won protections in law and charters of rights, especially after 1945, when civil liberties became part of everyday politics. Liberal dissent even so has rarely proved equal in strength to the liberal warfare state, a power all the harder to resist as it routinely goes to war in the defense of liberalism.

Given how hard it proved to keep to all of them, pressure to drop one or another of liberalism's guiding ideas was always strong. Dropping one or more of the liberal elements produced a characteristic deviation. Anarchism in the nineteenth century and its late twentieth-century cousin libertarianism both promoted respect for people on their own into a superprinciple to the neglect of liberalism's other guiding ideas. Neither idea was ever practical. Libertarian thought has all the same stamped present-day sensibilities in politics, encouraged underestima-

tion of the need for countervailing powers, and fed a mood of distrust with politics.

An opposite pull was toward progressive authoritarianism. It fostered the liberal goal of social progress at cost to civic respect, especially respect for minorities, dissenters, and outsiders. Throughout the story, social progress pursued in illiberal ways has tempted liberals as a temporary second best. Liberal economists in particular have tended to relax with the thought that economic progress, however achieved, will in time meet other liberal goals. Liberals in office have often shown a rightward pull toward the conservative defense of order, established wealth, and orthodoxy. Shrewd observers spotted this conservative tendency among liberals from the beginning. After the German liberals' rout in their failed revolution of 1848 against absolute rule and princely privilege, Helmut von Moltke, the future Prussian field marshal and creator of Germany's general staff, wrote about liberal prospects in a letter to his sister-in-law. For all their stormy talk of change, Moltke told her, liberals would quickly see that their true interests lay in the conservative defense of wealth and property. Before long, he predicted, "the most radical deputy will be carrying on like a monocled toff."

Speeches, talk, and fiction have mattered for liberalism as well as treatises. To follow liberalism's story, you need a scalpel for its ideas, but also an ear for the sentiments that gave those ideas force. In *Anna Karenina* (1873–77), Tolstoy described "the true liberalism" of Anna's amiable, shambolic brother, Stiva Oblonsky, as being "in his blood." Oblonsky's was not the doctrinal liberalism he read about at the club in his liberal newspaper, but a deep-rooted set of moral sentiments. That temperamental liberalism, Tolstoy told us, rested on "a leniency founded on a consciousness of his own defects" and on a profound sense of human equality which "made him treat all men alike whatever their rank or official position." The American poet T. S. Eliot noticed a less flattering aspect of the liberal temperament. "He is a liberal," Eliot said of his friend and fellow poet, Stephen Spender, "and therefore tends to intolerance and to judging others; and he tends to take an unctuously superior tone on the basis of very imperfect understanding." There are many feelings in the liberal breast.

20 » INTRODUCTION

Characteristic social sentiments and moral emotions lent liberalism's guiding ideas strength: hatred of domination (resistance), pride or shame in your society (progress), outrage at maltreatment and exemplary wrongs (respect), zest for competitive challenges (conflict). None were liberal property. When bringing such feelings into politics, liberalism gave them characteristic voice. Those liberal feelings had darker counterparts. The power over others that came with superior strength, wealth, excellence, or moral splendor provoked liberal envy and resentment. Liberal zeal for progress could mask self-punishing scrupulosity toward blameless collective ills. Insistence on unbending civic respect for people was ever open to the distortions of selective indignation. Unquestioning acceptance of conflict could tip to its opposite, exaggerated fear of disorder, and anxious longing for calm. So liberalism's sharper critics, to left and right complained. Joseph de Maistre, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Maurras, and Carl Schmitt, for example, all made hay with that shadow side of liberal sentiment. Liberalism's great orators—Guizot, Lincoln, and Gladstone—liberalism's great talkers—Clemenceau and Lloyd George—and liberalism's great writers—Orwell, Camus, and Sartre—understood liberal sentiments, the bright and dark ones alike. In telling the liberal story, I have tried to keep in mind not just liberalism's guiding ideas, but its temperament and shifting moods.

Part I (1830–80) recounts liberalism's early life. After a sketch of the historical background, its first seven chapters describe the lives and thoughts of the founders of liberalism, often in contrasting pairs. The broad content of liberalism's promises was clear by the end of the nineteenth century. Parts II (1880–1945) and III (1945–89) describe the trials and achievements of extending those promises democratically.

Democracy and liberalism are distinct, as liberals from Guizot to Hayek have stressed. Liberalism is about how authority is to be restrained and talked back to. It is about how people, their beliefs, and their property are to be shielded from the intrusive powers of state, market, and society. It is about how the civic respect owed to people and their chosen enterprises can be given practical cash value in custom and law. It is about how the general conditions of moral and material life are to be improved. Democracy by contrast is about who belongs in

that happy circle of voice, protection, and progress. The “how?” and the “who?” are not the same question. Liberalism is about content, democracy about scope. Liberalism lays out the feast, democracy draws up the guest list. The two are connected. Liberalism promised civic respect to people, whoever they were. That nonexclusive, democratic promise proved liberalism’s single highest bid. Living up to it was, and is, liberalism’s biggest single challenge.

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

Until well into the twentieth century, liberals dragged their feet over political democracy. In the decades after 1880s, under pressure of class conflict, governments enacted sweeping social reforms and gave the state new tasks, welcomed by most liberals as an application of liberal principle to new circumstance, though resisted by an unconvinced minority as an abandonment of liberal principle. Education and cultural progress did not eradicate prejudice and intolerance or make reasonable, dispassionate citizens as reliably as liberals had hoped. Aggressive nationalism, jingo imperialism, anti-Catholicism, white racism, anti-Semitism, and other exclusionary hatreds proved winning vote getters, to which liberal elites often responded opportunistically when not offering active encouragement.

Trade and economic interdependence, second, did not bring peace and amity. They brought rivalry of liberal imperialisms, illustrated by the parallel careers of Joseph Chamberlain and Ernst Bassermann. In

22 » INTRODUCTION

1914 came an unexpected and inexplicable world war that many took to mark the end of liberal civilization itself. That war introduced a political type, the liberal hawk defending liberal values, that came to prominence in the twentieth century. Nor, last, during the decade-long slump of the 1930s could liberals convincingly persist in the *laissez-faire* doctrine that when markets capsized, they righted themselves. Economists in the slump and political responses to liberal democracy in danger occupy the latter chapters of Part II. Different as they might look, all concerned were aiming for the same thing: to save liberal capitalism.

Liberal democracy survived economic collapse, world war, and moral ruin to enjoy a second chance after 1945, the topic of Part III. The liberal world took that chance, and succeeded beyond expectation. The story opens with human rights, liberal democracy restored in full to Germany, and the expansion of the liberal welfare state. Representative liberal thinkers of the 1950s to 1980s occupy the next five chapters, followed by the turn of liberal economists against the state. Three politicians each from the liberal left and the liberal right close the years 1945–89.

Were 1989 the end, the narrative arc would be simple: liberalism is up, it's down, it's up. The liberals of 1830–80 drew the blueprint. The liberals of 1880–1945 built the house and then almost burned it down. Liberals took their second chance in 1945, and by 1989 liberalism was the pride of the neighborhood. That was then. Liberal confidence in the relevance and achievability of their hopes is once again shaken, for many reasons: global challenges, the appeal of competitive authoritarianism, the mobilizing powers of sectional and religious violence, Western fiscal overstretch, Western self-doubt, the sheer train of events. The shaky present-day mood among liberals is the topic of a brief but undespairing final part.

Three preliminaries remain. It may, first, seem odd to begin the liberal story in nineteenth century, not earlier. That the term “liberal” was not generally in political use before the 1810s is hardly conclusive on its own. It is a steep climb to persuade most of us that there were no atoms before “atom.” Were there liberals before “liberal”? Unlike physics, politics is recognizably drenched in shifting human attitudes and vague words to express them. The late arrival of the term “liberal” into

politics ought accordingly to say something about liberalism's starting point, if only as a symptom. The more decisive consideration is historical. As noted at the beginning, people early in the nineteenth century were living in a new world in which prevailing rules of political order had been thrown in the air.

The first liberals had immediate and acknowledged intellectual predecessors in the Enlightenment. Voltaire replayed sixteenth- and seventeenth-century arguments for religious toleration. Montesquieu recommended an arrangement of institutions that set power against power. Hume encouraged disbelief in intellectual and ethical authorities. Smith saw in the division of labor and growth of commercial society an auspicious prospect of human advance out of poverty and dependence. Kant put an ideally rational citizen willing to give and take reasons at the heart of his picture of a worthy republic where propertied men—no women or laborers—enjoyed moral freedom and civic equality as subjects to collectively recognized law. Each of those elements may be found somewhere in the liberal story. None of those Enlightenment thinkers saw, let alone felt, the full effect of the upheavals of the 1780s to 1830s. Their social world was run by unelected leading men—lairds, lords, barons, and justices with their clients, factors, and bailiffs—and so they expected it to continue. They might disagree as to why people should behave as they must. None of them seriously disagreed as to how people should behave. Few foresaw the ceaselessly changing world of capitalist modernity in which old ethical maps gave little direct guidance to good conduct or wise laws in wholly unfamiliar circumstances. Still less clairvoyant were the disparate thinkers who commonly show up on lists of liberal precursors: Spinoza, Locke, Hobbes, Montaigne, Machiavelli, Luther, the Church doctors of the pre-Reformation, even Cicero and Socrates. Shake the great tree of pre-nineteenth-century political thought. You get a rich basket of fruit, some of it ripe, some overripe. You do not get liberalism.

A second point to stress is that this book is a chronicle of liberalism, not a philosophy of liberalism. As liberalism is rich in ideas, the story cannot avoid what philosophers have made of liberal ideas. That is especially so after 1945 when “liberal philosophy” strictly speaking began. It may help here to get levels clear. As a practice of politics,

24 » INTRODUCTION

liberalism has an outlook shaped by guiding ideas. Liberalism itself is not an outlook, let alone a philosophy. Political ideas are raw material for political philosophers. They scrutinize and articulate political beliefs, offer them ethical justifications of varying kinds, and perhaps propose a metaphysics of society and personhood on which such justifications might be held to rest. So seen, the philosophy of liberalism sits proud of liberal practice with its characteristic outlook.

There is no obvious match between ethical camps in philosophy—Utilitarian, Kantian, and neo-Aristotelian, say—and political disputes among liberals and nonliberals. And that is before even considering metaethical camps in philosophy—say cognitivists and noncognitivists. One of the greatest liberal thinkers, Mill, was a Utilitarian. His fiercest contemporary critic, the archconservative James Fitzjames Stephens, invoked Utilitarianism to draw thoroughly antiliberal conclusions. In *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* (1987), the French historian of ideas Pierre Manent concluded that liberal philosophy ended with Rousseau, after which history took its place as a legitimizing narrative. Mill and Utilitarianism, the workaday philosophy of British nineteenth-century liberalism, did not appear in Manent's story. T. H. Green, who taught many of Britain's social-minded "new" liberals, adopted in philosophy an anti-Utilitarian idealist outlook. So did Green's contemporary F. H. Bradley, a greater philosopher who in politics was a fierce, proud reactionary. Much of the productive anti-Utilitarian, rights-based enterprise now loosely called "liberal philosophy" dates from no earlier than the 1950s. To nonspecialists, such fluidities are bound to seem baffling.

Once you have a decent picture of liberalism's history and the ideas that gave it shape, it makes sense to look into the *philosophy* of liberalism. Without such a picture, I find it hard to see how you can know you are doing the philosophy of *liberalism*. Put another way, there is no uncontested and purely philosophical test I can think of for the descriptive adequacy of an account of liberalism, and looking for one strikes me as a level confusion. Rich as liberalism is in ideas, liberals in history were not pursuing a philosophical theory. They were not doing applied philosophy. The philosophy of liberalism is an exhilarating, fruitful endeavor, but it is beyond the scope and aim of this book, which is to tell an undertold political story.

Looked at from the point of view of citizens, liberalism is a practice of politics for people who will not be bossed about or pushed around by superior power, whether the power of the state, the power of wealth or the power of society. Looked at from the point of view of government, liberalism is a practical response by state and law to the predicament of capitalist modernity. From either point of view, my story takes liberalism naturalistically as a norm-governed adaptation to historical circumstances, not as speculative anthropology, politico-moral philosophy, or social biology.

One product warning is left. Enough has been said to stir the “liberalism or liberalisms?” anxiety. Stipulate as I like, have I got one political creature in mind? Politics has no handbook of anatomy. People carve “isms” in various ways. Liberalism has been split into nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberalism, classic and “new” liberalism, market liberalism and government liberalism, European and American liberalism, laissez-faire and social liberalism, libertarian and egalitarian liberalism. The list goes on. There are no decisive facts here. The plausibility of the divisions depends a lot on the skill of the anatomist.

A first problem with such tidy-looking dualisms is that they are not obviously congruent. It remains open which dualism, if any, carries more conviction than others. The contrasts tend also to be made with partisan intent, one member of the pair being favored as pure or true liberalism. Far from solving a problem, dualisms kick it down a level: “American liberalism or American liberalisms?”; “laissez-faire liberalism or laissez-faire liberalisms?” It is worth noting in addition that reducing the liberal project to the pursuit of one goal—liberty, say, or equality—does not solve the many-liberalisms problem for those to whom it is a problem. For there are many conceptions of liberty and equality. Far from simplifying or clarifying matters, depicting liberalism as a pursuit of liberty alone or equality alone narrows the focus of complexity without visibly making the resulting picture of liberalism historically more faithful.

In the context of liberalism, besides, such doctrinal speciation *feels* wrong. Not only does it reflect preoccupation with brands, innocent enough, in a commercialized culture. More troublingly, it smacks of the hunt for nonbelievers, for the Jewish *mumar*, the Christian apostate, or

26 » INTRODUCTION

the Islamic *kafir*. Liberal politics aspires to openness and toleration, to settling matters by argument and compromise, to building coalitions rather than creating sects, and to recognizing the inevitable existence of factions and interests without turning them into irreconcilable foes. Not everyone sees politics in that liberal way. One of liberalism's sharpest critics, Carl Schmitt, a German constitutional thinker who fell in with the Nazis, recognized and deplored the inclusive, broad-church aspect of liberalism. He took it for liberalism's main weakness not to see that the mark of politics lay, as he believed, in the identification of friend and enemy. That is not to suggest that liberals have no enemies. They have indeed. It is simply to stress what a wasted effort it is and how illiberal to hunt for enemies inside the liberal tent. You can acknowledge liberalism's inner divisions without hailing one camp or other as true liberalism. I invoke them myself, though, as already stressed, to pick out family quarrels, not as wars for supremacy among rival sects.

Perhaps the biggest single difficulty with "many liberalisms" is that there has to be some usable label for the common practice of politics that four quite different Western countries serving here as an exemplary core—France, Britain, Germany, and the United States—all uncontroversially converged on after 1945. Liberal democracy strikes me, and I suspect most people, as an appropriate label. Overthinking liberalism and partitioning it into distinct "liberalisms" risks turning an indispensable label into an unnecessary puzzle. Faced by the rich variety of liberal thought and diversity of liberal politics in the story that follows, readers with stricter, more confining notions of liberalism than the one on offer here may well wonder, "Can all of these really be liberals?" My answer—another running theme of the book—is "Yes, they can."