**Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 368 pp. £27 (hardback).**

Max Skjönsberg, University of St Andrews

Raymond Geuss has written of liberalism: ‘(a) it has no definition, (b) it tends to rewrite its own past, sometimes anachronistically, (c) it is open to very significant modification in the future.’ (2001: 69). Even friendlier critics than Geuss have to admit that liberalism is an uncertain and contested concept. For one thing, it generally means left-of-centre in the US and right-of-centre in Europe. To some extent this is a question of the relative position of the ‘centre’, because European liberals tend to support the Democratic party in the US. But there are still important differences. On the question of ‘safe space’, for instance, American liberals are more eager to protect vulnerable groups from offensive remarks, whereas European liberals are usually more concerned with freedom of speech. As Helena Rosenblatt shows in the final chapter of *The Lost History of Liberalism*, the meaning of the word ‘liberal’, and especially whether it means state intervention or laissez-faire, became disputed on both sides of the Atlantic especially in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, William Beveridge, and Friedrich Hayek all called themselves liberal. Eventually, Hoover conceded the word (263), and Hayek sought instead to revive the term ‘Whig’ (Hayek 2006: 343-55).

Any attempt to clarify the history of ‘liberalism’ will also be an attempt to enrich its potential meaning. What commentators often do is to stipulate a personal definition. By contrast, in her new book Rosenblatt considers ‘how liberals defined themselves and what they meant when they spoke about liberalism’ (2). In other words, she has written a history of a word and how different people have used this word in various ways and settings. From this perspective, the subtitle of the book is somewhat misleading, since liberalism only became an -ism in the nineteenth century. The greatest part of the book is indeed about the nineteenth century. However, if we are to understand why so many parties and movements calling themselves ‘liberal’ suddenly emerged across the Western world and South America in the beginning of the nineteenth century (61-5), we may want to look at the popularity of the word itself over a longer period of time.

The first chapter of the book – which is the only pre-French Revolution chapter – is about the original and altenrative meaning of the word ‘liberal’ as ‘generous’. The Latin term had a broad political meaning for thinkers such as Cicero and Seneca, Rosenblatt argues, since they viewed it as the ‘bond of human society’ as well as part of the aristocratic ethos of the political class (10-11). In this story, John Locke contributed literally to the liberal tradition and Thomas Hobbes did not, because of the former’s commitment to Christian duty and the latter’s ‘egoistic’ philosophy of human nature (19-23). Crucially, Locke associated liberality with religious toleration (28), which Rosenblatt tends to treat as a basic tenet of liberalism (almost as if she is working with a loose personal definition after all).

*The Lost History of Liberalism* recovers the history of a liberalism centred on civic participation, devotion to the common good and morality rather than individual rights and self-interest. One of the key arguments of the book is that many early ‘liberals’ spoke of rights *and* duties, with the latter having largely disappeared in contemporary debate. The principle threats of the modern age according to John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville were materialism, selfishness and the propensity of people to withdraw to a narrow, private life (148, 156-7). The idea that liberalism is a doctrine of individual rights and self-interest is a recent Anglo-American tradition (271-4), whereas Rosenblatt’s story is largely Franco-Swiss and German. Since many view liberalism as an American tradition, Rosenblatt calls her book a ‘lost history’. The English-speaking world plays an important role in the first chapter of the book, however. From Cicero via Shaftesbury in England to Frances Hutcheon, Adam Ferguson and Adam Smith in Scotland, political thinkers stressed that liberal sentiments involved civic engagement. We are also told that the first person to call him- or herself ‘A Liberal’ was an anonymous American writer in *Pennsylvania Packet* in 1780 (38).

The pivot of the book is the chapter on the French Revolution. ‘Liberal principles’ for the generation of Germaine de Staël and Benjamin Constant meant defending the (costly) gains of the French Revolution (50). Importantly, it did not (yet) imply democracy. There is still something teleological about Rosenblatt’s story. Although they never used the term as an ‘ism’, De Staël and Constant ‘began the thinking that would lead to the invention of liberalism’, while Napoleon ‘betrayed liberal politics’ (51, 59). In other words, it seems as if Rosenblatt at this point in the narrative does have a quite specific definition of liberalism in mind. For example, she writes that Constant ‘pronounce[d] what was to become a founding principle of liberalism: the separation of church and state.’ (67). Liberals in the UK, where no such formal separation exists, are rarely as obsessed with this principle as their counterparts in the US and France.

Despite its *longue durée*, the story Rosenblatt tells is rapid, straightforward and lucid. The book is deliberately more of a whistle-stop tour in contrast with the meticulous scholarship which characterized Rosenblatt’s pathbreaking *Rousseau and Geneva* (Cambridge, 1997). *The Lost History of Liberalism* is certainly a brave, exciting and highly readable book. To her credit, Rosenblatt is not afraid to look at some of the more unpalatable aspects of the history of liberalism, for instance the interest in and enthusiasm for eugenics (235-8), and the prevalence of blatant racism (253-5). However, not enough space is devoted to the ‘nationalist’ aspect of liberal anti-imperialist movements across Europe in the nineteenth century, such as the one of Giuseppe Mazzini in Italy (see Bayly and Eugenio Biagini 2008). Mazzini is of course mentioned several times in the book, but his nationalism, which later inspired the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, is not really treated. For many liberals in the nineteenth century the principle of nationality was perhaps *the* foundational liberal principle. It was seen as crucial because it enabled national sovereignty and self-government as opposed to the sovereignty of monarchs and empire (although empire over ‘barbarians’ was often justified by liberals; see 247-52). The nation was seen by J. S. Mill – who was also inspired by Mazzini and extremely interested in the study of ‘national character’ – as the largest unit which could guarantee a sense of duty and cohesion (Varouxakis 2002). Nationalism and cosmopolitanism were not viewed as mutually exclusive; attachment to a nation was a precondition for any fellow-feeling, it was argued. Referring to Mill, Rosenblatt rightly emphasises that ‘[a]t mid-century it was perfectly possible for a liberal to be socialist.’ (110) We also need to remember that it was equally possible for liberals to be nationalist. Nationalism certainly deserves a chapter-length treatment in this genealogy. This is a rather minor, however, because *The Lost History Liberalism* is yet another impressive performance from one of the leading intellectual historians and deserving of a broad readership.

**References:**

Chris Bayly and Eugenio Biagini (eds). 2008. *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of*

*Democratic Nationalism 1830–1920*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Friedrich Hayek. 2006. *The Constitution of Liberty* [1960]. Abingdon: Routledge.

Raymond Geuss. 2001. *History and Illusion in Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Georgios Varouxakis. 2002. *Mill on Nationality.* London: Routledge.