STEEL IN THE VELVET GLOVE*

TO CLAIM that it is matter of regret that this book had to be written is not to suggest that it possesses any serious defects. To the contrary, this is the best short book on liberalism that has been written for a very long while. It is wonderfully concise, packing in insight and good sense into almost every page; it hardly misses a trick in assessing the variegated nature and impact of the traditions operating under the umbrella term liberalism; it combines a strong historical purview with an acute sense of the fine points of liberal theory; the author does not talk down to his readers; and it is punchily and elegantly written. All told, it is plumb in the tradition of L. T. Hobhouse's *Liberalism*, published almost a century ago, and written with the dual purpose of spreading out liberal wares in all their richness and of providing a tract for the times – in this case for an American, rather than a British, public.

No, the reason for regret is that despite its extraordinary achievements since the middle of the 19th century, and in its proto-forms since the 17th, the liberal story keeps being forgotten, misappropriated, or distorted. As Paul Starr observes, "nothing has to be reinvented, yet everything has to be reimagined" (p. 234). *Freedom's Power* is thus a compelling reminder of what the attributes of liberalism are, what the variants of liberal ideology have accomplished, and what they both can and cannot be used for. Starr's leitmotif is the power of liberalism. Power is, after all, an existential feature of politics. Yet – contra some political scientists – power is never neutral. It is put either to "good" or "bad" uses, and only a paralytic or self-delusionary liberalism could ignore that. The avowed historical liberal mission of curbing "bad" arbitrary or oppressive power has displayed its own forcefulness, while "good" liberal power requires the arduous overcoming of obstacles in the path of personal growth conceived as both normal and desirable. Against those who regard liberalism as weak, wishy-washy, and unable to defend itself – a refrain already heard loudly once previously in the USA, when liberalism's receptiveness to other voices was blamed for the rise of Nazism – Starr demonstrates that liberalism has always opted for strong government, but has reserved that strength primarily in order to protect its own values and principles. Time and again, its perceived flexibility has been exploited as a weakness and it has failed to garner the kind of support that more portentious rhetoric attracts. But for those who care to probe there is steel in its velvet glove.

The areas of those liberal values are threefold: first, from Locke onwards, the liberal state has been unbending in its support for stability and the delimitation of excess through designing juridical social arrangements and

* About Paul STARR, *Freedom's Power: The True Force of Liberalism* (New York, Basic Books, 2007).

Michael FREEDEN, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford [michael.freeden@mansfield.ox.ac.uk].
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establishing human rights. Second, from the end of the 19th century those have been joined by the active promotion of human well-being, development and progress as the unassailable cores of civilized cultures. Here, liberalism's crowning domestic triumph was the type of advanced thinking that culminated in the welfare state – in the European, not the American, meaning of the term "welfare''. It entailed human flourishing in a context of social responsibility, blending state and private co-operation, and not the "undeserved handouts'' to the poor the term now denotes in the US. Third, and running alongside the other two, liberalism has served as the chief conduit in the political sphere of the experimentalism and semi-detached, reflective criticism ushered in by the enlightenment.

Liberalism is a European product but, of course, its American incarnation has had its own moments of glory. The American constitution is, on the whole, an exemplary liberal document, remarkable for its resilience and prescience as one of the oldest working constitutions in the world. Under the name of progressivism, American liberals attempted to match the British new liberalism, though with a more pronounced patriotic edge. Roosevelt's New Deal was a further instance of what a regulatory liberalism could do, even if its interventionism pushed liberal sensibilities to their limits. In the 1960s and 1970s US liberals showed impressive flair and courage in their pursuit of civil rights and women's equality, securing international acclaim – a momentum currently, though one would hope temporarily, halted in its tracks. But, as Starr demonstrates, American liberalism has always been at its weakest in social policy, operating within an individualist and ethnocentric political culture highly suspicious of an egalitarian and redistributionary ethos, and of the frequent dalliances of liberalism with a mild collectivism. Instead of the helping hands offered by social democrats to liberals in the British and Scandinavian cases, a reactionary conservatism – of the likes long relegated to Europe's sidelines – blunted the drive of American social liberalism. When the fingers of blame and fury are now pointed from outside the Western world at the US as the (satanic) representative of Western civilization, Europeans are prone to mutter to themselves that civilized Western thinking and conduct is mainly to be found east of the Atlantic. That gulf identifies the real American exceptionalism. Although Starr is bent on retrieving significant liberal practices in the US as a service to an uninformed citizenry, he tellingly does not mention the durability of the death penalty in the US – a practice that alone sets that country apart from all other current Western societies, and constitutes an acid test of the liberal texture of a country's moral mettle. Though punctured by a short hiatus in the 1960s and 1970s, judicial murder is once again neither cruel nor unusual, and no liberal President has dared to voice public opposition to it.

Liberals, on the whole, have known what they want, and what they want is far removed from the emasculated notion of the neutral state. That idea of neutrality is itself a misreading of sections of the US constitution as

supra-political, a misreading that has spilled over into much contemporary political philosophy. Liberalism, however – like any ideology – has its red lines and non-negotiable positions, its passions, its holistic visions, and its powers of persuasion – all of which are the potent tools at the disposal of political thinkers and their preferred institutional mechanisms. As Starr recognizes, liberalism has always been an "ideologically active force" (p. 11). As such it has to make choices among values and offer its own interpretation of ideas ostensibly shared with other groupings. Its respect for constitutionalism revolves around guarantees against excessive power and civil rights rather than, say, around the rigorous protection of property now associated with conservatism. And its support for markets does not extend to permitting businesses and corporations, or even individuals, the unlimited freedom now associated with libertarianism.

Markedly, – as Starr knows – liberals do not proffer pat answers to social problems. They are afflicted with a methodological awareness of the existence of multiple perspectives on, and many solutions to, a given issue. Notably, liberalism's navigation both of universal values and the merits of human difference have sent it in diverse directions. That conceptual indeterminacy is a source of unavoidable internal tensions deftly eschewed by utopians and authoritarians. Liberalism's complexity has not always gone down well when it comes to policy recommendations, with the result that liberalism does not pull in as many votes as it does good arguments. Yet its conceptual flexibility and tolerance for variance have positioned it as the most adaptable, fluid and non-dogmatic of ideologies, structurally suited to absorb the ideational and historical pressures that accompany rapid social and technological change.

In a bravura survey of the history of English and American liberalism, Starr argues that the mixing of power (England) or the ring-fencing of certain rights (US) both gave rise to vigorous states. He is also insistent, and rightly so, that an account of liberalism cannot rest content with an isolated investigation of its ideas and theories but must incorporate liberal practices. On the whole, that task is very well discharged. Starr relates the redistributionary push of liberalism to economic growth policies, to earnings support, to encouraging the free flow of information through bourgeoning technologies, to the regulation of pollution, and to international multilateralism.

But in emphasizing those features, a lack of clarity creeps into two areas. The one concerns a running boundary problem between the traditions and thought-patterns of liberals and the conduct and policy of states that are very roughly, and often questionably, assigned to the liberal domain. Take Europe as an example. In countries such as France, Germany and Italy, the liberal tradition has become almost invisible to their inhabitants and even to their intelligentsia. Liberalism is either considered to be limited to a right-of-centre market variety or hidden – in the French case – amidst strong republican or solidarist traditions that have promoted liberal ideas *sans le*

nom. Those latter enclaves, past and present, notwithstanding, the continental political spectrum is packed too tightly for a party-political liberalism, even for its intellectual agenda, to find sufficient breathing space. Starr, however, verges on the other extreme. For him the entire European Union project is a liberal one. But is for instance the British state, led by New Labour, a liberal state? Its ostensible liberal credentials have been dented no less by its unitary moralism in the name of a national community than by its campaign against terrorists. At best it offers a hybrid between liberal and social authoritarian practices. Are states led by Christian democrats, or Gaullists, liberal states? Is Japan, forsooth, a liberal state (p. 131)? Larger magnification might have allowed for more intricate configurations to emerge.

This leads to the second, related, problem area: Starr's predilection for identifying as liberal any belief system that has some liberal components, without considering whether it has accumulated sufficient critical mass to be entitled to membership of the liberal family. Constitutionalism may have been liberalism's gift to the world, but to embrace it no longer singles out a liberal from a conservative or a social democrat, even from some forms of populism. And when Starr writes perceptively that dissenting voices in Eastern Europe revitalized a pan-European awareness of human rights, civil society and democracy, he then over-eggs the argument by claiming that "the intellectuals and movements that [...] ultimately overthrew communist rule contributed to a renewal of liberalism all over Europe'' (p. 186). Rather than aver that socialists, populists, conservatives, greens – and the Churchill of World War Two! – are all liberals now, it would be more nuanced to suggest that liberal ideas have seeped into non-liberal viewpoints and groupings while performing very different work in each of them, and while being contained by a variable range of non-liberal notions that put a different gloss on ideas of liberty and democracy. Thus for many European conservatives the "social market'' is a method of ensuring not only justice but order; for many European greens the free individual choice component of democracy needs to be constrained by scientific expertise about the environment; and for many European populists liberty is harnessed to the unfettered expression of national values. Earlier Starr astutely noted the changing rankings liberals accorded to various liberties (p. 86), a comment that could have been extended to the latter chapters of his book. In sum, liberal ideology, liberal states, and liberal features shared with other ideologies are three analytically distinct categories.

Freedom's Power is pleasurably full of throwaway lines that ought to be studied very carefully. At one point Starr writes that "some kinds of privatization do not weaken the state; the privatization of rancorous religious differences promotes peaceful cooperation'' (p. 56). Wise counsel, although quite a few religions, or sub-religions, would contest their removal from the public arena and their disputations certainly cannot be screened from the sphere of public political language. In another case he warns: "promoting

democracy is certainly not an all-purpose remedy to the world's problems, especially if democracy is interpreted as consisting merely of elections'' (p. 217), something that both Bush in his Iraq misadventure and the leaders of Hamas might wish to ponder over in their respective scrambles for legitimacy. Bring on the paperback.

MICHAEL FREEDEN