

Liberal

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IN his Carlyle Lectures, delivered at the University of Oxford in 2022, the political theorist Samuel Moyn narrates the history of liberalism as one of narrowing and decline. He attributes a central role in this narrative to such Cold War thinkers as Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, Lionel Trilling, and Gertrude Himmelfarb: “Cold War liberalism,” Moyn contends, “was a catastrophe—for liberalism.”¹ In Moyn’s account, Cold War liberalism enshrined a vision of social atomism while also lending support to the political desire “for collective and personal order, limiting the state while disciplining the self” (9). “Cold War liberal assumptions have had devastating consequences,” Moyn concludes: following the ossification of liberal politics into techniques for the management of populations, it is unclear whether liberalism can still be rendered “eligible for or worthy of rescue” (10).

Moyn’s lectures shed important light on the longer history of liberalism from the Victorian period to today. First, they usefully position Cold War liberalism as a vanishing mediator between the rich traditions of nineteenth-century liberalism and their brutal reduction (under the auspices of “neoliberalism”) to a calculus of economic utility: “under neoliberalism,” as Bonnie Honig explains, “efficiency is no longer one value among others. It has become rationality itself, and it is the standard by which everything is assessed.”² Second, Moyn’s analysis suggests that the reflexive dismissal of Victorian-era liberalism—for its manifest complicity with the ideologies of empire and its projection of an illusory political consensus at home—has been detrimental to our historical and political sense: liberalism’s bad reputation is in fact partly the result of the attrition of the liberal tradition during those early decades of the Cold War. This second observation is particularly valuable to scholars of the long nineteenth century because it suggests that certain alternative traditions of liberalism—interrupted by the Cold War’s reductive

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Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 447–450.

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doi:10.1017/S1060150323000293

ideological misrepresentations—still await historical reconstruction and political remobilization.

Moyn does not specify what liberal traditions were eclipsed during the Cold War, yet in a tantalizing aside, he suggests that “liberalism’s central features before the Cold War came—above all its perfectionism and its progressivism—are worth a second look” (2). These two features of Victorian-era liberalism have drawn much criticism from literary and cultural critics, and they are underplayed even in sympathetic recent accounts by scholars such as Amanda Anderson and Elaine Hadley.³ This situation has rendered key formations of Victorian liberalism well-nigh illegible—and none more so than the socially progressive (and unabashedly perfectionist) liberalism of the decades around 1900. The foundational tenets of this late Victorian and Edwardian version of liberalism were influentially formulated in the work of the Oxford-based idealist philosopher T. H. Green. Green’s writings called for new kinds of active citizenship and for a shared orientation toward the common good. In an 1881 lecture, Green outlined the contours of this “active citizenship”:

We do not mean merely freedom from restraint or compulsion. We do not mean merely freedom to do as we like irrespectively of what it is that we like. We do not mean a freedom that can be enjoyed by one man or one set of men at the cost of a loss of freedom to others. When we speak of freedom as something to be so highly prized, we mean a positive power or capacity. . . something that we do or enjoy in common with others. We mean by it a power which each man exercises through the help or security given him by his fellow-men, and which he in turn helps to secure for them.⁴

As Green’s language suggests, his writings endow liberalism with a collective (rather than merely individualist) dimension. Indeed, recent work in political theory and intellectual history has credited Green with laying the conceptual groundwork for the emergence of the welfare state.⁵ Green’s practice-oriented philosophy inspired many others—including Arnold Toynbee, Sidney Ball, and Bernard Bosanquet—to engage in reformist schemes, ranging from the settlement movement (Toynbee; Ball) to the Charity Organization Society (Bosanquet). The aspirational idiom of these self-styled “New Liberals” appealed to reformers across a broad political spectrum. For example, Green’s advocacy of active citizenship—what he called “freedom in the positive sense”⁶—was rooted in a deep-seated abhorrence of the social fragmentation caused by capitalist property relations. This aspect of Green’s progressive liberalism made

it appealing to reformers leaning toward socialism. As one of these thinkers, Green's former student David George Ritchie, concluded, Green had "begun to free political theory and practice from the narrowness and false abstractions of the individualist philosophers."⁷

As I have argued at greater length elsewhere, it fell to literary works to imagine the forms of life that would lend substance to Green's philosophical abstractions. The language of progressive liberalism allowed a politically diverse set of writers—from Mary Ward and H. G. Wells to Edward Carpenter, E. M. Forster, and Virginia Woolf—to inhabit a shared imaginary centered on the slow politics of reform rather than the disruptive temporality of the revolutionary event. Their texts pursue the aspirational vision of a state that nourishes the exercise of freedom and the formulation of new social demands—a state that encourages individual and collective flourishing rather than one that merely “manages” obedient populations. This collective orientation was later opposed by Cold War liberals who suspected turn-of-the-century liberalism of putting society on a slippery slope toward totalitarianism. Isaiah Berlin, for example, associated Green's ambitiously progressive liberalism all too neatly with the first term of the oppositional pair of “positive” and “negative” freedoms—a frozen antinomy recognizably rooted in the ideological antagonisms of the Cold War.⁸ Berlin's now-classical account of the “two freedoms” misses Green's insistence on freedom as a quality that is both individual *and* shared, as well as his keen awareness of the state's ability to support the welfare of its citizens. In today's conjuncture, we desperately need alternatives to the reigning neoliberal regime that threatens to dismantle the welfare state at every turn. The progressive liberalism of the late nineteenth century creates an imaginative wedge that makes it possible to glimpse some of these neglected alternatives.

NOTES

I am grateful to the German Research Foundation for funding my research.

1. Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Political Thought and the Making of Our Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming), 1 [typescript]. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text. I am grateful to Sam Moyn for sharing this material with me.

2. Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 14.
3. Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). For trenchant critiques of Victorian liberalism's perfectionism, see Daniel Malachuk's *Perfection, the State, and Victorian Liberalism* (London: Palgrave, 2005).
4. Thomas Hill Green, "Lecture on Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract," in *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and Other Writings*, edited by Paul Harris and John Morrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 199.
5. See Roger Backhouse and Tamotsu Nishizawa, eds., *No Wealth but Life: Welfare Economics and the Welfare State in Britain, 1880–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and W. J. Mander, *British Idealism: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
6. Green, "Lecture," 200.
7. David George Ritchie, *The Principles of State Interference* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891), 156.
8. Berlin's 1958 lecture "Two Concepts of Liberty" gave the terms "negative" and "positive" freedom their current polemical edge. Quentin Skinner notes that Berlin's text takes aim specifically at Green. See Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 117 (2002): 237–68.

