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Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt, eds., *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xi + 318 pp. Notes, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-107-01743-6.

Review by R. S. Alexander, University of Victoria.

The remarkably high level of interest in French liberalism apparent over the past two decades can once again be seen in *French Liberalism from Montesquieu to the Present Day*, edited by Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt. Many of the sixteen chapters in this fine collection are drawn, at least in part, from one or more previously published books, making the work something of a sampler of current perspectives and trends. More striking still is the vast array of recently published sources cited in the chapter notes. Rightly, the editors make no claim that the book is a comprehensive study, and one can note that subjects such as the relation of French liberalism to feminism or nationalism is not given much, if any, consideration. Nevertheless the issues under discussion are of a fundamental nature, and the topical sweep of the book is broad.

In his contribution to the collection, Jean-Fabien Spitz attributes current interest partly to perception that French liberalism has been and remains exceptional (pp. 252-254). The claim of national “exceptionalism” is of course a familiar one, and it is vulnerable to questions concerning the breadth of comparison. In this case, it is difficult to assess whether French liberalism was exceptional in relation to other continental European liberalisms, given the absence of discussion of, say, German or Belgian variants. But, in truth, what Spitz and many of the contributors have in mind is the extent to which the French differed from liberal theorists in Britain and the United States. The latter concern is not immediately apparent in each of the chapters, but it does arise frequently and gives the work a thematic consistency. Moreover, the editors make the point explicitly at the end of their introduction, noting how American writers have represented and misrepresented French liberalism for polemical purposes in recent publications (pp. 11-12).

To assess the extent to which the French offer an alternative path to liberty requires a working definition of classical liberalism, which, as Larry Siedentrop asserts, has largely been the product of British and American thinkers (p. 16). According to Céline Spector, the essentials of classical liberalism consist of “belief in limited government, the protection of individual rights and the positive effects of interest in the absence of virtue” (p. 59). According to Spitz, contemporary neoliberalism differs mostly by degree, with its heightened sense that the state and law represent the greatest, perhaps only serious, threat to individual autonomy and private association, especially where private enterprise is concerned (p. 253).

In seeking in the introduction to identify characteristics that have made French liberalism distinctive, the editors provide a means by which the reader can trace common themes that help to link the chapters into a coherent whole. While noting that there are ambiguities within the French liberal tradition, Geenens and Rosenblatt point to reluctance to base theory on an abstract or natural conception of individual rights, and a penchant for situating individual freedom within social and political institutions and contexts generally. In investigating the relation between collective and individual rights, French

liberals pay close attention to historical development and frequently employ comparison. Provision of this set of markers is especially helpful, because a second feature of the work is the diversity of thought within French liberalism. Given the number of individuals and groups discussed, diversity is to be expected, but without the guidance of such markers, encountering the richness of French liberalism could prove bewildering.

French Liberalism is divided into six parts, with each containing two or three chapters. In the first part, contributions by Siedentop and Lucien Jaume provide a platform for the rest of the book. Siedentop emphasizes that French liberals rejected static *a priori* modes of argument and sought from the 1820s onwards to relate (and adapt) political theory to historical context, particularly changing economic and social structure. Jaume then introduces diversity. Most notably, while one stream of theorists (which includes Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville) was preoccupied with limiting state subjugation of individual liberty, a second stream (including Francois Guizot and the *doctrinaires*) was less concerned with limiting state power than with assuring that the “right” sort of people controlled it as a means to direct and educate the masses. The latter stream reflected French respect for the state as the representative of the national interest and as the defender of individual liberties from subjugation by particular (non-state) interests. Read in combination, these two chapters point to much of what will follow in the book, but they also indicate that while one stream of French liberalism differs markedly from British and American variants, the other stream has fundamental affinities.

Thereafter follow three chapters that feature discussion of the relation of French liberalism to republicanism and reveal further complication. In questioning whether Montesquieu can be categorized accurately as a classical liberal, Spector points to the centrality of context in liberal theory; Montesquieu views concepts such as liberty in terms of how they relate to particular societies. By demonstrating the extent to which Constant and Tocqueville saw (mass) political participation as a bulwark against state erosion of civil rights and private freedom, Andrew Jainchill then identifies the influence on French liberalism of republicanism’s emphasis on citizen engagement in public affairs. Jainchill suggests that this influence is another reason for a contemporary perception of French liberalism as an alternative to classical liberalism (p. 73), but his point seems to rest uneasily with the stream of French liberals who see the state as a defender of individual liberties. In the subsequent chapter, Stephen Holmes provides a detailed analysis of Constant’s withering critique of the First Republic’s deployment of state terror. While the author has analogies with post-9/11 America in mind, what Holmes describes as a classical republican tradition of setting aside the rule of law in times of crisis was hardly something that influenced liberals in a positive sense. So the republican legacy was mixed.

How liberals dealt with certain key issues in the nineteenth century is the theme of the third part of the book. As Rosenblatt shows, the relation between secularism and liberalism can be overstated. A surprising number of liberals hoped that separation of church and state would lead to a Protestant Reformation that would align resurgent French spirituality with liberal ideals. Perhaps not surprisingly, Guizot, although a leading Protestant, did not share in such aspirations. Guizot’s taste for centralized authority made him sympathetic to the Catholic Church. Thereafter Cheryl Welch explains why utilitarianism has held so little appeal for French liberals. Once again, historical context is crucial: conflation of rights with public utility during the Revolutionary-Napoleonic era had alienated the French from the sorts of arguments Bentham was thought to deploy. Moreover, Benthamism was thought to be “indigestibly English,” rather than universally applicable (p. 144). More than a faint whiff of nationalism can also be detected in Alan Kahan’s discussion of Tocqueville’s advocacy of French imperialism. Although Tocqueville was not a racist, he was inconsistent in applying his liberal principles. Freedom was the highest priority for France, but not for Algeria, because it conflicted with French power and prestige.

Economic liberalism is the principal subject of part four. Richard Whatmore’s analysis of competing French and British liberal discourses from 1780 to 1816 again draws out the importance of

circumstance. Faced by French territorial expansion, Britons such as Edward Gibbon and Edmund Burke sought to position Britain as the defender of the independence of smaller European states. Meanwhile French writers, ranging from the Girondin leader Jacques-Pierre Brissot to the economist Jean-Baptiste Say, depicted Britain as a rapacious commercial empire bent on destroying the independence of other states by economic domination. Truly cosmopolitan, France championed free trade as the means to assure general prosperity. While the element of comparison is less at the fore, Philippe Steiner's following chapter carries discussion well into the nineteenth century, highlighting French emphasis on the practical application of theory. In their efforts to educate the public and combat rivals such as the Saint-Simonians and positivists, economic liberals stressed that policy should be based upon the principles of enlightened self-interest and competition, and that state intervention should be kept to a minimum.

Not much by way of conflict with British liberalism appears evident here, and such arguments were continued late into the nineteenth century. However, according to Serge Audier, classical economic liberalism was already in decline by the outbreak of the Great War, and the interwar period then brought numerous proposals to revise liberalism by using the state to rectify flaws in the free market either through legal regulation or wealth redistribution. Ironically, it was in this sense of revision through increased state intervention that the term neoliberalism first arose. It was not until the 1970s that neoliberalism took on its contemporary emphasis on deregulation and privatization, and even then it was largely the product of foreign theorists. Most French economists, including the Nobel Prize winner Maurice Allais, continued to seek revision more along the lines of the earlier conception of neoliberalism.

As the fifth part of the book reveals, attempts to revise classical economic liberalism were part of a broader effort to reconcile liberalism to mass democracy. In his discussion of a "sociological turn" in liberal thought, William Logue identifies an important transition and thereby provides a helpful link between earlier and later stages of liberal thought. In the second half of the nineteenth century, under challenge from the collectivism espoused by socialists and right-wing elements, liberal theorists moved away from formulating philosophical bases for liberalism. Instead they turned to sociology in an attempt to justify individual rights in relation to collective rights. In so doing they hoped to harness the growing authority of science, but the key was that figures such as Emile Durkheim wanted to promote social integration by linking individual rights to social obligations. Logue's observations are then nicely complemented by Spitz, who shifts focus to writing on the state. Spitz draws attention to theorists such as Louis Blanc and Charles Dupont White, who emphasized the role of the state in preventing the subjugation of individual autonomy by private interests. For Blanc, the role of law is not just to prevent oppression through physical violence, but also to assure that all individuals have as much opportunity as possible for development. Inclusion of the socialist Blanc in a book on liberalism may seem odd, but, as Spitz shows, Durkheim also recognized a positive role for the state in securing individual liberty. Such a perspective perhaps springs naturally from a political culture born in 1789. Unlike its English and American predecessors, the French Revolution soon passed from a revolt against political oppression to employment of the state for an onslaught against social privilege.

The final part of *French Liberalism* brings us to contemporary times. Aurelian Craiutu's chapter on Raymond Aron makes the instructive observation that moderation has been a crucial component of French liberalism from Montesquieu onwards. Aron's approach combined detailed analysis of political, social, economic, and cultural structures with recognition of the importance of historical circumstance. Although politics occurs within the constraints of long-term structures, matters are not predetermined and choice matters. He thus recognizes complexity and eschews dogmatic utopianism, realizing that "the best is often the enemy of the better" (p. 283). A search for a middle ground between individual and collective rights can also be seen in Samuel Moyné's analysis of the response of Claude Le Fort and Marcel Gauchet to the "human rights talk" that burst upon the scene in the late 1970s. Neither theorist was willing to view individual rights as existing prior to society; they were the product of human

development. For Gauchet, the chief vector of individualism had been the state due to the latter's gradual erosion of the social ties that had enmeshed the individual in former ages, but neither he nor Lefort accepted that human rights could be divorced from social bonds.

So how does French liberalism differ from British and American classical liberalism? Judging by this volume, the answer lies in an ongoing attempt to find a working balance between individual and collective rights, with the state playing a fundamental, though not unlimited, role in the process. That the effort is ongoing does not make it fruitless; balance must be found within a context that is constantly changing. Moderation, in the sense of avoiding extreme positions, facilitates adaptation to altering circumstance. If Logue is correct that neoliberalism constitutes the greatest current threat to liberalism, then it is just as well that neither of Jaume's two main liberal streams has ever achieved complete ascendancy.

In sum, *French Liberalism* is a highly instructive and thought-provoking collection that draws upon the expertise of a wide sweep of leading North American and European scholars. The quality of the individual chapters is uniformly high, and thematic continuity is sufficient to assure that the sum of the whole greatly exceeds that of the parts.

As the cover blurb asserts, specialists in the history of political thought will find the book "essential reading," but it also is of significant interest for historians of modern France generally.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Raf Geenens and Helena Rosenblatt, "French liberalism, an overlooked tradition?"

Part I: In Search of a Lost Liberalism

Larry Siedentop, "Two liberal traditions"

Lucien Jaume, "The unity, diversity, and paradoxes of French liberalism"

Part II: The French Liberal Conception of Liberty: Loyal to Its Republican Roots?

Céline Spector, "Was Montesquieu liberal? *The Spirit of the Laws* in the history of liberalism"

Andrew Jainchill, "The importance of republican liberty in French liberalism"

Stephen Holmes, "Rethinking liberalism and terror"

Part III: The Formative Era: Liberal Dealings with Key Issues in Nineteenth-Century France

Helena Rosenblatt, "On the need for a Protestant Reformation: Constant, Guizot, Sismondi and Laboulaye"

Cheryl B. Welch, "'Anti-Benthamism': utilitarianism and the French liberal tradition"

Alan S. Kahan, "Tocqueville: liberalism and imperialism"

Part IV: Economic Liberalism *à la Française*

Richard Whatmore, "War, trade and empire: the dilemmas of French liberal political economy, 1780-1816"

Philippe Steiner, "Competition and knowledge: French political economy as a science of government"

Serge Audier, "Is there a French neoliberalism?"

Part V: At the Dawn of Mass Democracy: Reassessing the Role of Collective Institutions

William Logue, "The 'sociological turn' in French liberal thought"

Jean-Fabien Spitz, "The 'illiberalism' of French liberalism: the individual and the state in the thought of Blanc, Dupont White and Durkheim"

Part VI: The Twentieth Century and Beyond

Aurelian Craiutu, "Raymond Aron and the tradition of political moderation in France"

Samuel Moyné, "The politics of individual rights: Marcel Gauchet and Claude Lefort"

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