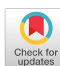


*Modern Intellectual History* (2024), 1–9
doi:10.1017/S1479244324000519

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

REVIEW ESSAY

# Liberalism in Search of Itself

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Gianna Englert, *Democracy Tamed: French Liberalism and the Politics of Suffrage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024)

Francis Fukuyama, *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022)

Alexander Lefebvre, *Liberalism as a Way of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024)

We are told that liberal democracies are in crisis. The way of life that we once took for granted is under attack from both the far right and the progressive left; facing threats from all sides, the rights and freedoms that are ostensibly guaranteed and protected by the liberal democracy seem to be slipping away at an astonishing pace. The suggestion of these proclamations is that this crisis is a contemporary emergency, somehow instigated or enflamed by our own current, novel way of being in the world. It is *today's* liberal democracy that is somehow undoing a past good. As Francis Fukuyama writes in *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, "liberalism is under severe threat around the world today; while it was once taken for granted, its virtues need to be clearly articulated" (vii). For Fukuyama, this is a recent development: "populists on the right and progressives on the left are … unhappy with the way that liberalism has evolved over the last couple of generations" (ix). Fukuyama is joined by the two other authors I will be addressing in this review. In *Liberalism as a Way of Life*, Alexander Lefebvre wants to defend us against the "current crisis of liberalism" through a kind of self-promotion: "the global conversation about the current crisis of liberalism tends to fixate on opponents of liberalism, and how horrible populists, nativists, and authoritarians are. Only rarely are the strengths and virtues of liberalism talked up" (63). Gianna Englert also situates her work in *Democracy Tamed: French Liberalism and the Politics of Suffrage* within the presentism of our current liberal-democratic crisis: opinion pieces "warn of the rise of 'illiberal democracies' and 'populist autocracies,' terms meant to reflect the harsh reality that liberal democracies everywhere seem to be coming apart at the seams" (1).

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It is undeniable that we are in an era of concern about the historicity of liberal democracies. The crisis of the present is situated in relation to a past—whether real or romanticized—from which we are meant to take our bearings. As Englert does in the first page of her book, this mode of analysis rejects Fukuyama's earlier proclamation that liberal democracy is "'the final form of human government,' and 'the end of history'" (1). Liberal democracies are entirely subject to the same historical conditions as other regimes and forms of rule, perhaps even facing a collapse akin to the empires that have preceded it. This historicizing of the liberal democracy has resulted in a proliferation of work from both liberals and non-liberals, and accompanying warnings about its potential impending demise. Samuel Moyn argues, for example, in *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* that "Cold War liberalism was a catastrophe—for liberalism," and "broke with the liberalism it inherited";[1] and Patrick Deneen claims in *Why Liberalism Failed* that liberalism "has generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims yet realizations of liberal ideology."[2]

For Englert, Fukuyama, and Lefebvre, the crisis that liberal democracies face now is both historical and definitional. Ours is a crisis of democracy *against* liberalism. It is not only the liberal democratic regime in practice that is at threat in our contemporary circumstance, but the veracity of the claim that we live—or have ever properly lived—in a liberal democracy itself. While we now employ the term "liberal democracy" liberally, it is not in fact the case that these two have been friendly bedfellows. Englert wants to set the record straight in the history of liberalism, which all too often "treats liberals' documented distaste for the democratic as a mere footnote" (2). Instead, Englert shows that there was a battle fought for the place and meaning of democracy as liberalism emerged in the nineteenth century, in which "a universal franchise posed an obvious threat to free governments, an open war on liberal ideals and constitutions" (3). "Liberalism and democracy did not begin to uncouple just recently" (2), but this was central to the emergence of liberalism itself. In this project of disrupting our conventional notions of the accordance of liberalism and democratic government, Englert makes a major contribution to the recent historical turn in liberalism scholarship, joining William Selinger's *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber*, Gregory Conti's *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain*, and Helena Rosenblatt's *Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*—in which Rosenblatt writes definitively that in the history of liberalism, "being liberal was not the same thing as being a democrat."[3]

Fukuyama and Lefebvre see the liberal landscape in the same terms. While Fukuyama writes that he does not "intend [his] book to be a history of liberal thought" (xi), he agrees that liberalism is not, and has not been, the same as democracy: "liberalism is often subsumed under the term 'democracy,' through strictly speaking liberalism

[1]Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (New Haven, 2023), 1, 2.

[2]Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, 2018), 3.

[3]Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, 2018), 52; William Selinger, *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber* (Cambridge, 2019); Gregory Conti, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2019).

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and democracy are based on distinct principles and institutions" (3). For Fukuyama, our "present-day crisis of liberal democracy revolves in the first instance less around democracy strictly understood than around liberal institutions" (4). Both the left and the right are pushing liberalism to extremes, according to Fukuyama, grounded in the liberal commitment to autonomy, which, when it is understood to be unlimited (in either identity politics or economics), causes both left- and right-wing populist backlashes that "threaten liberalism today" (17).

Lefebvre takes both the present crisis and the historical thesis about the decoupling of liberalism as a kind of first premise for his own argument. He grants the ground of the post-liberal critique, which is that liberalism's "ideals and sensibilities are indeed omnipresent in the public and background culture of Western democratic societies" (13); it is a dominating "worldview and value system" (12). Lefebvre agrees that liberalism and democracy were historically at odds. "*Early* liberalism was suspicious of democracy" (42, original emphasis), and so too is Lefebvre's token modern liberal—Leslie Knope of the television show *Parks and Recreation*—suspicious of the *demos*. "The antidemocratism of early liberalism," Lefebvre writes, "is thus not something we should want to periodize as the prejudices of a benighted age. Neither is it something to sanitize by saying that liberalism has today made peace with democracy and the two are now happily reconciled" (46). In fact, to ignore the quarrel of liberalism and democracy would be, for Lefebvre, to "deny ourselves the resources that the liberal tradition invented to inhabit the democratic world" (47). According to Lefebvre, the real crisis of liberalism for the present is that we are compromised liberals—we are both deeply embedded in liberal democracies and *not liberal enough* to weather the storms brewing around us.

For these three authors, then, it is liberalism alone that is in contemporary crisis—and so too is liberalism the source of a solution. For clarity and potential resources, Englert looks to early French liberals for their distinctive defense of *capacité politique*, often leveraged against universal suffrage. Fukuyama argues that liberalism must be moderated, and we must "rebuild faith in classical liberalism" (xi). Lefebvre wants to reunite us with the root of our own liberal values—"the gifts and felicities that our own way of life affords" (104)—through a reinvigoration of John Rawls via Pierre Hadot's spiritual exercises. Liberalism must become, for Lefebvre, an "existential attitude" (33) that can persist despite liberal democracy's own imperfections.

Englert argues in *Democracy Tamed* that liberals in the nineteenth century had a fraught relationship with democracy, and sought to define their liberalisms in relation to their concerns about the extension of suffrage and voting procedures. In careful and revealing readings of Benjamin Constant, François Guizot, Alexis de Tocqueville, Édouard Laboulaye, and Ernest Duvergier, Englert unfolds a story of what she calls "democracy's 'eternal antinomy' between the rights of the many and the wisdom of the few, between the universality of political rights and the limits that nature has presumably placed upon the capacity to bear them" (143). While remaining attuned to the nuances of each figure's position, Englert highlights their coalescence around the idea of *capacité politique*: the belief that "an individual should exhibit the signs of *capacité* to exercise the right to vote—a right that had to be earned or proven rather than taken as given or 'natural'" (4). This desire for the standard of *capacité* arose in response to rising calls for universal suffrage, and the nineteenth-century liberal movement was

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generally defined, Englert shows, by an alignment not with democratic impulses, but against them. At times, she writes, "liberals went so far as [to] depict *capacité* as the sole safeguard for freedom" (6). Focusing on a few liberal giants (Constant and Tocqueville), while also steering us away from those whom we would consider the most canonical liberals, Englert's attention to these figures in the history of liberalism constructs a kind of materialist history of what liberals *actually* thought and directs helpful study to the policies and procedures they supported. This enlarges and enlivens our historical perspective, but also—to Englert's purposes—shows how the "fault lines between liberal values and democratic orders that the earliest European liberals could not help but feel under their feet have opened up to our view once again" (145). The crisis of liberalism is not new, but very familiar; and, as in the nineteenth century, it emerges in response to the challenges of democratic agency and populism. So, then, Englert tentatively suggests in her conclusion, we might also do well to recall what those "long-ago liberals" first thought about democratic universalism—that "the most effective assurances for the longevity of liberal democracy were never democratic at all" (147).

Fukuyama's *Liberalism and Its Discontents* is less historically and more ideologically focused than Englert's account, and is thus simultaneously more polemical. Those whom he casts in wide terms as on the right and the left have "discontents with the way that liberalism has evolved in recent decades [that] have led to demands … that the doctrine be replaced root and branch with a different kind of system" (x). Instead, Fukuyama claims that we ought to reinvigorate what he calls classical liberalism, and he specifies "some general principles that should guide the formulation of more specific policies, principles that flow from the underlying theory" (141). These principles include the need to "acknowledge the need for government" (146), "take federalism seriously" (148), "protect freedom of speech" (149), maintain the "primacy of individual rights over the rights of cultural groups" (150), and recognize that "autonomy is not unlimited" (152). It is this last principle with which Fukuyama is most concerned, seeing the expansion of autonomy as the core of the contemporary liberal crisis. "The realm of autonomy," he writes, "has steadily expanded over time, broadening the freedom to obey rules within an existing moral framework, to making up those rules for oneself" (152). This form of autonomy founds populist movements, according to Fukuyama, which push people to extremes and cause us to abandon "liberalism's positive impact as an ideology" (16). Fukuyama concedes that "liberalism's travails are not new" (12)—it has always had to deal with competing ideologies such as nationalism and communism—but he is particularly concerned with the effect that this extremism is having on the way in which individuals see and conduct themselves. The final principle he names in the book, the pillar of his reenvisioning of classical liberalism, is the need for the virtue of moderation: "recovering a sense of moderation, both individual and communal, is therefore key to the revival—indeed, to the survival—of liberalism itself" (154). With a liberalism in crisis, Fukuyama, too, seems to believe that it can find resources from within itself to resolve its own predicament.

Lefebvre's *Liberalism as a Way of Life* is the boldest statement of precisely this belief (or, put more aptly, faith) that liberalism has its own internal resources for salvation from crisis. For Lefebvre this resource is not in the past—though he agrees, as we have seen, that liberalism as such has always been in an uncomfortable relationship with democratic rule—but in a more present history: in the work of John Rawls. Lefebvre

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begins with the Rawlsian belief that liberal values "are embedded in the public culture of mature democracies" (83) such that we liberals no longer even take note of its omnipresence. He opens his book with a vignette used by David Foster Wallace: "There are two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'" (11). Lefebvre's point is that we are in the waters of liberalism, whether we like it or not. Critics (such as the post-liberals) know this all too well; liberals, however, take it so significantly for granted that they no longer feel that it is, in fact, a foundational worldview. Lefebvre's argument, he claims, "is descriptive and normative. It is descriptive in that I claim that a great many people living in Western democracies are already liberals in this robust sense … We are all liberals all the way down, and consciously or not, hold liberalism as our conception of the good life" (18), and "my argument is also normative in that I propose that liberalism is a *good* way of life" (18, original emphasis); that is, that it is worth defending and invigorating. For this, Lefebvre draws on the work of Pierre Hadot to specify some "spiritual exercises" that liberals can perform on themselves, to see their own vision of their good more clearly.

Once liberals begin to self-reflect, it will also be clear, according to Lefebvre, that we are living in what he calls *liberaldom*: a compromised state of liberalism that has become corrupted and diluted. Liberaldom is "a mixture of liberalism and other ideologies" (capitalism, democracy, internationalism, meritocracy, "as well as openly illiberal forces") "dug into our institutions and attitudes" (117). It is "the craven capitulation to unliberal values that threaten to destroy your and my spirit" (117). The crisis of liberalism here is not only in the *demos* and in the forces of *illiberalism*, but in the impurity of our own liberal vision. The solution for Lefebvre cannot, however, be institutional, but must be in the soul. Lefebvre envisions John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* as "a work of self-help for liberals" (129), which will remind us how truly extraordinary liberalism is in its "legitimate expectation to be treated reasonably and fairly by the basic institutions of our society" (154). Lefebvre wants us to be reminded of liberalism's capacity for the "moral depth and spiritual range *to redeem everyday life*" (236), which can only come in the form of an internal reclaiming of that good and meaning for oneself.

From a shared crisis of liberalism emerge three visions of how liberalism might return to some redeeming self-conception: one that Englert, Fukuyama, and Lefebvre seem to believe can be found within its own tradition, and without a necessary foundation in democratic impulses or democratic regimes and institutions. In the work of Englert and Fukuyama, however, there are reasons to suspect that these internal resources are not, in fact, so readily available from within liberalism itself. Englert's effort to rescue the nineteenth-century vision of wise liberal capacitarians, standing against the *demos*, must rest on even older—non-liberal—accounts of virtue and the *aristoi*. She writes,

> of course, these nineteenth-century liberals were not the first thinkers to recommend that human societies follow the guidance of a wise or all-knowing ruling class. Writing in the fourth century BCE, Aristotle concluded that politics was a vocation best left to the leisured and ideally the philosophic few, since the

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> intellectual demands of life in the Athenian assembly would prove too exacting for day laborers, common craftsmen, and slaves. Centuries later, Edmund Burke watched in horror as the French Revolutionaries proposed to empower the lower orders. (5)

She concludes the book invoking the same ancient standard of virtue:

> since our attempts to reform the *demos*—the choosers, to use Fouillée's language—have failed from the beginning, perhaps the time has come to revisit "the top," to support institutions that encourage human beings to become "worthy of being chosen," a moral *aristoi*. There is a virtue, the liberals in this book taught us, in nurturing an aristocracy in and for democracy, an aristocracy whose boundaries are porous and whose membership is ever-changing, a new and true aristocracy from which the people—the whole people—may choose for themselves. (147)

Francis Fukuyama's final appeal in *Liberalism and Its Discontents* is also to the ancient virtues, and to ancient Greece:

> A final general principle for a liberal society would borrow a page from the playbook of the ancient Greeks. They had a saying, *μηδεν αγαν* (*mēden agan*), which meant "nothing in excess," and they regarded *σοφροσυνη* (*sophrosunē*), or "moderation," as one of their four cardinal virtues. This emphasis on moderation has been largely discarded in modern times: university graduates are routinely told to "follow their passions," and people who live to excess are criticized only when it harms their physical health. Moderation implies and requires self-restraint, the deliberate effort not to seek the greatest emotion or the fullest accomplishment. Moderation is seen as an artificial constraint on the inner self, whose full expression is said to be the source of human happiness and achievement. But the Greeks may have been on to something, both with regard to individual life, and in politics. Moderation is not a bad political principle in general, and especially for a liberal order that was meant to calm political passions from the start … Recovering a sense of moderation, both individual and communal, is therefore the key to the revival—indeed, to the survival—of liberalism itself. (154)

As it turns out, for Fukuyama, as for Englert, the resources needed for liberalism are not internal to it, but external. For liberals—in all of their freedom and autonomy—to occupy an independent space, against the consuming forces of populism or democratic suffrage, they must rely on conceptions of virtue and ways of life that are deeply and historically non-liberal. For liberalism to be redeemed it must stand in a profound way *outside itself*, lacking the claims from within to bolster or defend its own moral and political vision.

The impulse of Lefebvre's book is to work against this need to turn anywhere except into oneself in order to be saved. We must examine ourselves as liberals and only with liberal values and virtues. In his critique of other philosophies of "how to live well," Lefebvre says precisely this:

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> on this model, the solution to the unhappiness and malaise of contemporary Western societies is to venture elsewhere in search of alternatives. Only this time, instead of leaving New York City for Italy, India, and Indonesia [what Lefebvre calls the *Eat, Pray, Love* variation], remedies are sought in the distant past (the ancient Greeks or Scottish Enlightenment, for example), non-Western places (China and Africa, for instance), philosophies that resist the inauthentic or repressive spirit of modern life (say, existentialism or psychoanalysis), or artefacts and activities seen as reprieves from it (like fine art or travel). *Liberalism as a Way of Life* is not like that, which brings us back to the idea of liberalism as the water we swim in, along with my suggestion to dive deeper into it. (14)

Lefebvre wants to take liberals head-on, forcing them to find *within themselves* the capacities for, and sources of, their own good. This is the only way, for him, that liberalism will survive: "this is what the present moment requires: for liberals to not just promote their values but live up to them too" (242). This means that we need to take a significant look into the waters in which we swim and see that they reflect things that we do, even deeper down in ourselves, believe to be true and good.

The search for an internal source of the good for the liberal is an admirable one, but my fear is that its very virtue—that liberalism is the source of our souls—may yet be its most significant flaw. We may all be swimming in the waters of liberalism, but the relevant question here (if we are going to push the metaphor) concerns the place or object in which that water is contained. Are we, as liberal fish, in a vast and natural ocean? No, we are in a fishbowl. The liberal waters can be either clear or murky, and liberals themselves can suffer the same clarity or impurity in their internal constitutions, but there is—there has always been—*something outside*. As the recent historical turn in scholarship has shown us, liberal democracy is itself subject to change over time. It is, simply, *subject to time*. Liberalism came into being through human invention and artifice, and it may one day leave the historical stage. While Lefebvre acknowledges that one possible future for us is the overcoming of liberalism by illiberalism, the success of the internal self-reconstitution that is called for in *Liberalism as a Way of Life* will rely on our resistance, as liberals, to the belief that anything good exists outside our own souls. To make the justification for liberalism entirely internal, one must by default deny the externalities—the historical circumstances, conditions, and realities—that brought it into being and that persist and live on as the *somethings outside* our contemporary, liberal fishbowl.

In these three impressive and important books there is in fact a consistent account of liberalism: that there is always something that it constitutively lacks. In attempts at self-definition, liberals require outside resources, or they need to be willfully ignorant of the historical and contextual world beyond, looking only to their self-care. In the recent historicity of liberalism we also see that liberalism as an idea or a movement was always conceived relationally: in its aversion to democratic revolutions and to universal suffrage, and, as those like Duncan Bell have shown, in its twentieth-century antithesis to totalitarianism.[4] There is no liberal we have known without his others, no liberalism

[4]Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?", *Political Theory* 42/6 (2014), 682–715.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000519 Published online by Cambridge University Press

without its crisis. Far from being the calming and stable regime it has promised to be—opposed to the tumults of the populace and the Terrors of revolution—liberalism is wracked with anxiety and insecurity at its core, knowing that it is deep-down a kind of responsiveness to something outside itself that it cannot control. Turning in toward our souls for salvation in such a condition might be a refuge, or a place to find the good, but one could not advocate a more ancient—illiberal—prescription than this for an individual in relation to her historical or political circumstance. Left only with our own souls and ancient virtues, perhaps there is nothing at all we can say about liberalism that can be entirely self-redeeming. Perhaps too, then, there is nothing at all we can do as liberals to wrest ourselves from its crisis. It seems that far from signaling its salvation or reinvigoration, the resolution of discontents is what would, in fact, put an end to liberalism. The crisis of liberalism is and has always been essential to liberalism itself; what liberalism lacks supplies its fullness and definition. As these books show, this is revealed to us both by our present way of life and by our history, in and not in spite of our perpetual anxieties about its place in the world.

To return to the contemporary crisis not only of liberalism, but of liberal democracy, we might ask what we are left with when liberalism is incapable of finding itself. Democracy, too, is an ancient idea—one that might have more contemporary permutations in affirmations of sovereignty or legitimacy, but whose roots are also found, ultimately, outside modernity. No answers remain about what makes our current political life and its crises distinct in the present, even though we all seem to feel as though it is or must be.

My own answer would always come back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose diagnosis of the modern condition was one that saw the irrevocability of relational understanding or perception. Grounded in his account of the corrupting influence of the human being's emergent inability to see oneself outside the view of others, Rousseau marked us—even before Hegel—as dialectical creatures. What human beings lack, according to Rousseau, is a sense of wholeness, a connection to some sense of oneself and the world that would not be contingent on one's historical circumstance, or on other people. The nonrelative and undialectical is, for him, thus rooted in nature—a nature, as any reader of his *Second Discourse* knows, that is effectively lost and irretrievable.

When we search, therefore, for this kind of unified meaning in something like liberalism, or liberal democracy, we are searching in vain. These are concepts, ideas, or ideologies that are unknowable to us without a dialectical or relational understanding. It is also possible that in straining to make them internally coherent we are doing more harm than good. If, as the post-liberals claim, the problem with modern life is that human beings lack this unified and comprehensive sense of meaning, the temptation will be to find it. The stronger temptation on the part of politicians will be to supply it for us. Growing concerns about the crisis of liberalism are coupled with concerns about the reemergence of totalitarianism and the rise of the far right—movements that promise precisely the kind of wholeness in the world that liberal democracies fail to deliver.

The response of liberals is thus to try to turn liberalism into an equally holistic worldview, or to find its cohesive origin or purposiveness. But what if the answer to

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the contemporary condition is instead to resist turning liberalism into a comprehensive doctrine, and to accept—even embrace—the fact that its only chance of survival is foundationally reliant on its inability to rest in any one place, or to be any one thing. The preservation of liberalism, and of liberal democracy, might just be contingent on the persistence of its crisis, and the crisis of not knowing who and how we are in the world, except insofar as we make it in and through each other. While this is not natural on Rousseau's terms, it is, as he argues in *The Social Contract*, precisely the kind of denaturing that the political artifice requires if it is to respect the freedom and equality of human beings in the modern world.

**Cite this article:** Emma Planinc, "Liberalism in Search of Itself," *Modern Intellectual History* (2024), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000519

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