

## Michael Freeden's Liberalism

Ben Jackson and Marc Stears (eds.), *Liberalism as Ideology: Essays in Honour of Michael Freeden* (OUP, 2012)

Reviewed by Tudor Jones

**T**HIS COLLECTION OF essays by an international group of political theorists, political philosophers, historians and political scientists seeks to assess the impact of Michael Freeden's wide-ranging analyses of liberal ideology, history and theory that have been developed over the course of more than thirty years. He has been engaged in that project as a Professor of Politics at the University of Oxford, editor of the *Journal of Political Ideologies* since 1996, and as the founder, too, in 2002, of the related Centre for Political Ideologies at Oxford.

The book's editors, Ben Jackson and Marc Stears, state that it provides 'a broad and critical examination of the key themes in Freeden's work', covering the two general debates most associated with him, concerning, first, the historical development of British liberalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, notably in his two important historical studies, *The New Liberalism* (1978) and *Liberalism Divided* (1986), and, second, the methods to be deployed in the study of both political theory and ideology, the latter being viewed as a central aspect of that academic discipline. These two areas of scholarly debate are explored in Part I of *Liberalism as Ideology*, on 'Liberal Languages', and in its Part II, on 'Ideologies and Political Theory'.

In the first of those areas, some of the book's contributors observe that Freeden has sought to underline the internal diversity of liberalism as an ideology, and hence the need to avoid confining it to one doctrinal strand – for example, to an economic liberal one that emphasises the asocial individual, property rights, economic freedom and the limited state to the exclusion of a social liberal strand that emphasises social welfare, communal responsibility, positive freedom and state intervention.

Freeden's second main area of academic concern, at least since the late 1990s, has lain, other essayists point out, in stressing the

significance of ideology and ideological debate for 'concrete', action-related political thinking developed in the face of public debate by some politicians and political activists and by social reformers, rather than just by professional political theorists or political philosophers.

Among the essayists' own contributions to the scholarly examination of the development of liberalism, David Leopold provides some interesting reflections on the place of utopian theorising, that is, of detailed descriptions of an ideal society, within Western liberalism in the early and late twentieth century – specifically, in the work of J. A. Hobson, the British new liberal thinker, and in that of John Rawls, the American political philosopher. In another essay by Ben Jackson, more overtly historical in its approach, and which, among the book's thirteen essays, may be the one of greatest interest to readers of this journal, another key theme in Michael Freeden's early academic work is explored – namely, the relationship between the new liberalism and socialism in early twentieth-century Britain. Jackson here emphasises the mutual influence and intellectual interdependence of those two ideological traditions. But he argues, too, that 'the intellectual influence of socialism on the new liberalism has been understated' by both historians and political theorists. Freeden's early historical works had meticulously documented, he recognises, the extent to which British socialists had been influenced by the ideas of new liberal theorists such as J. A. Hobson and L. T. Hobhouse. Jackson maintains, however, that new liberal theorists also drew on arguments and ideas that were 'socialist in their intellectual provenance', whereas Freeden had contended that: 'Liberal influences among many socialist leaders and intellectuals seem to have been stronger than the reverse'.

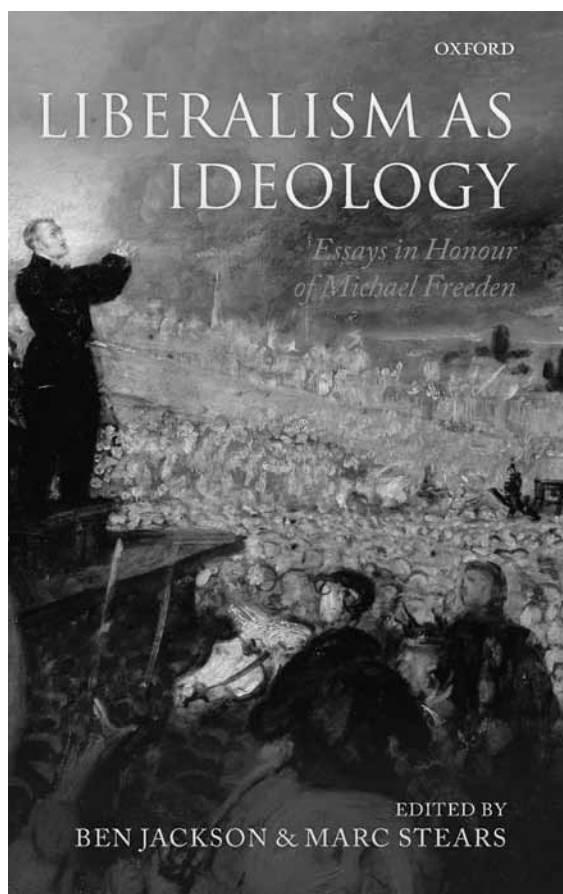
In offering his revised account of the British progressive tradition, Jackson traces the influence of

socialist ideas, as promoted within the trade unions and cooperative movement, and as formulated by Fabian socialists, syndicalists and guild socialists, upon the new liberalism by examining in particular the attitudes of new liberal thinkers towards the central socialist policy idea of the public ownership and control of industry. He points out that in the first half of the twentieth century the British new/social liberal programme was not just focused on fiscal policy, social policy and labour market reform. It also included advocacy of a limited but significant measure of public ownership of productive resources. This was evident in works of political theory produced by Hobson and Hobhouse before 1914, in the debate surrounding the future of the coal industry after 1918, and in Sir William Beveridge's views on socialist planning during the 1930s and 1940s. Jackson makes these points effectively, but not in such a way as to undermine Freeden's earlier contention in 1979, in *The New Liberalism*, that 'intellectually and ideologically, liberalism itself was fully responsible for, and capable of, transforming its political doctrines'.

Other essays in the first section of *Liberalism as Ideology* provide studies of American, Indian and European liberalism. The book's second section is much more theoretical and methodological in its approach and focus, dealing throughout mainly with Michael Freeden's more recent concern with the study of ideology and the role of ideological analysis within political theory.

In an essay that draws a clear distinction between, on the one hand, a historically informed study of political ideologies and, on the other, the philosophical investigation provided by analytical, normative political philosophy, as practised by John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Ronald Dworkin and others, Andrew Vincent, while recognising that each is of scholarly value, argues for a 'positive segregation' between the two modes of intellectual enquiry. Vincent notes, too, that, as Freeden has also argued, the 'over-emphasis, in much recent political philosophy, on synchronic abstracted reasoning can lead to a virtually semi-private professional academic language, which bears

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little or no relation to the realities of politics, as perceived by the mass of ordinary citizens.' Analytical political philosophy (which Freeden usually refers to as 'philosophical liberalism' or 'Anglo-American political philosophy') is thus portrayed, in my view with a significant degree of justification, as, in spite of its various intellectual insights, largely out of touch not only with both the constrained realities and the fray of political practice but also with academic disciplines other than philosophy.

Other essayists in the book make similar critical observations about analytical political philosophy, although Gerald Gaus does offer a defence. It has to be said, however, that some of these criticisms are pitched at a level of abstraction reminiscent of their target. Nonetheless, in one of the volume's more accessible contributions to this debate, Mathew Humphrey, in an essay entitled, 'Getting "Real" About Political Ideas', presents it within the broader context of the 'realist' critique, as developed by Raymond Geuss and others, and as prefigured in Freeden's later work in political theory, of the 'ideal' mode of Anglo-American political philosophy.

As set out clearly by Humphrey, that critique has focused on three major alleged shortcomings of analytical political philosophy: first, its severe and unjustified abstraction; second, its lack of historical awareness and hence its lack of attention to the temporal and spatial contexts of political action and thought; and third, its application of normative models, stressing standards of logical consistency and argumentative coherence, and derived from moral philosophy, to the distinctive political realm. With regard to the second shortcoming, according to this 'realist' critique, 'ideal' political philosophers tend to 'freeze' historical time so that the principles they formulate (for example, Rawls on justice) appear timeless and universally valid.

With regard to the third shortcoming, their application of the normative models of moral philosophy to the political realm thereby misses, so 'realist' political theorists also maintain, questions fundamental to political activity such as political disagreement and conflict (a central point that the philosopher Bernard Williams had earlier recognised). Humphrey notes, too, other questions that tend to be sidelined in this way, questions that pervade the history of modern political thought such as the exercise of political power, the development of institutions with sovereign authority, the need for collective decision-making, and a Hobbesian concern with the establishment of political and social order.

The subject-matter of political theory, which Michael Freeden views, in Andrew Vincent's words, as 'a capacious category containing both political philosophy and ideology as subcategories', should therefore be 'concrete political thinking', the product of, in the broad sense of the term, ideologists, in all its varied manifestations – for instance, as embodied in influential political treatises, in pamphlets, manifestos, periodicals, speeches, etc., rather than merely in the work of professional political philosophers.

The task of political theory should consequently, in Freeden's view, be to decode, understand and interpret these forms of 'concrete' political thought, these political ideas flowing through the social order. To that end, in his attempt to recapture the importance of

ideological analysis for political theory, notably in his *Ideologies and Political Theory* (1996), and in his subsequent work, Freeden has developed a morphological theory of ideology which examines the complex structures in which the core and adjacent concepts of particular ideologies are configured.

In the final essay of the volume, entitled 'The Professional Responsibilities of a Political Theorist', Freeden himself engages with most of its themes, and, in addressing one of the most prominent of these, restates his belief that 'the colonization of political theory... by analytical and ethical philosophers over the past forty years' has been 'a rearguard intellectual diversion from what we should be investigating in our role as students of society and of the thought that societies host'.

*Liberalism as Ideology* is a volume that contains many such perceptive observations and interesting reflections. On the debit side, while this tribute to Freeden's innovative and stimulating work in political theory is well merited, the pervasive mutually congratulatory tone of the volume tends at times to be wearing. In addition, some of its contributions, as has been noted, are presented in a highly abstract manner that engages with an internal debate of greatest interest to the academic practitioners of political theory and political philosophy rather than the general reader interested in the 'stuff' of politics, namely, political ideas.

Finally, this reviewer remains unconvinced that the methods of political theory offer a more fruitful approach, rather than a complementary one, compared with that of intellectual history, and specifically the history of political thought, for charting the development of British, and Western, liberalism, an undertaking to which Michael Freeden has made such a distinguished contribution.

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