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Rediscovering Liberalism by Peter Berkowitz

A review of *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* by Pierre Manent, translated by Rebecca Balinski. Princeton University. 128 pp.

American scholars owe a debt of gratitude to Thomas Pavel and Mark Lilla, editors of the series, "New French Thought," for making available in English a variety of recent writings that "represent the new liberal, humanistic bent of French intellectual life." These translations will enable English-speaking readers to keep abreast of a fascinating shift in orientation that has transpired over the last decade in French intellectual life. More important, the series promises to improve our understanding of liberalism's prospects and possibilities. Especially if Pierre Manent's *An Intellectual History of Liberalism* is an indication of the intensity and quality of reflection on liberalism that is now taking place in the land that, in the not too distant past, has produced some of the most intense and extreme criticism of liberal thought and practice.

Manent seeks to clarify the key stresses and strains that have constituted liberalism from its inception and continue to determine its vulnerabilities and opportunities. He does so by exploring the "motivating force" or spirit of liberalism. Yet Manent does not mean to slight liberalism as actually practiced and lived. Indeed, Manent's striking claim is that to make sense of liberalism as a form of life one must see it in the light of the spirit that animates it, and that that animating spirit comes into sharpest focus in the writings of the great European political theorists.

According to Manent, liberalism is born in a political struggle, in the effort at the dawn of modernity to escape from the political authority exercised by the Church. To win this emancipation for the secular world, it was necessary, Manent explains, to neutralize the Church's tendency to intervene in political life. Early modern political theorists played their part by calling into question or denying that human beings had higher aims or a good independent of politics. With this new conception of human nature, early modern thinkers, above all Machiavelli and Hobbes, sought to reduce to the vanishing point the realm of human life over which Christianity claimed to rule. The "theologico-political problem" is the name that Manent gives to the question of the political role of revealed religion. And he argues forcefully that this problem, a problem that forces one to take sides on questions about the good life for a human being, lies at the heart of liberalism.

Once the political authority of Christianity had been undermined a new authority had to be constituted. The challenge faced by early modern thinkers was to develop a form of politics that corresponded to the new human being of early modern thought, one who was no longer seen in the light of natural or supernatural ends, and who was inclined to demand that he be understood in terms of his freedom from a fixed moral hierarchy. Liberalism develops, according to Manent, in the effort to meet this challenge.

Manent offers a refreshing perspective on Hobbes, to whom he assigns a position of honor in the history of liberalism. Although it was Machiavelli, among the early moderns, who led the way in discrediting the idea of a good above politics, it was Hobbes, Manent argues, who was the first to develop a form of government that kept Christianity at bay and institutionalized the new understanding of human freedom. Indeed, Hobbes's Leviathan, despite its obvious authoritarian character, is based on elements that bear a certain family resemblance to basic liberal doctrines. On Manent's account, Hobbes, in spite of his absolutism, should be viewed as a founder of liberalism. After all, Hobbes derived sovereignty from the idea of fundamentally equal individuals endowed with natural and inalienable rights; he identified limits to political obligation stemming from the natural right to self-preservation; he established representative government based on the consent of the governed as the only legitimate form of political rule; and, he elaborated the idea of a state based on a law whose sole purpose is to guarantee peace and order.

In interpreting Hobbes as a kind of proto-liberal, Manent opposes both critics and champions of liberalism. Critics of liberalism have been eager to sully liberalism's good name by portraying Hobbes --- the "beast of Malmesbury," the purveyor of a reductivist and mechanistic psychology, the champion of absolute political authority --- as the founding and paradigmatic liberal. Liberals, only too ready to accept this unflattering and one-dimensional portrait of Hobbes, have wished to deny that Hobbes is a any sort of liberal at all. Manent slices through the name calling on both sides to show liberals that while they do descend from Hobbes, this origin is a worthy part of a noble lineage. Through his examination of Hobbes, Manent reminds that liberalism arose from the understandable need to reduce the political power of religion, and sought to satisfy this need by introducing a new view of human nature.

Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, of course, advance conceptions of government that differ considerably from one another and from that of Hobbes. What links each to the other and all three to Hobbes, Manent argues, is a common understanding of the theologico-political problem. Accordingly, Manent traces Locke's theory of labor and his account of constitutional government, Montesquieu's doctrine of the separation of powers, and indeed Rousseau's critique of emerging liberalism on behalf of a more elevated notion of freedom to a common source --- related and controversial assumptions about moral psychology, human nature, and the claims of religion to guide political life.

The French Revolution, Manent argues, stands between the two great periods in the intellectual history of liberalism. Having broken free from religious authority, pre-revolutionary liberalism sought to develop political institutions that could secure peace and freedom. Post-revolutionary liberalism arose in reaction to a dangerous and unexpected new threat to freedom, the threat to freedom posed by the free institutions elaborated by prerevolutionary liberalism. So, for example, Constant opposed the liberal principle of the sovereignty of the people because, in the wake of the experience of the French Revolution, he found that such a principle could imperil liberty. It was in the name of liberty that Constant transformed the idea of representation from a scheme for giving full expression to individual will to a means for insuring that the duplicitous wills and insincere passions possessed by liberal citizens would not receive full institutional expression.

For Tocqueville, it was the progress of equality, a progress that he regarded as fundamentally just, that endangered liberty. Democracy in America, he observed, risked becoming a kind of "gentle despotism" because the principle of equality and the inner dynamic of America's free institutions actually disposed citizens to a lethargic contentment with a top-heavy, administrative centralization. But democracy did not silence all passions. Indeed, it incited the passion for equality. And democratic man sought to satisfy this passion by enlisting the central power in the task of eradicating from the social and political world every last vestige of inequality.

Inequality in all forms is hateful to democratic man because it involves dependency, in particular the dependency of the less well-off and untalented on the better-off and gifted. And dependency undermines a central dogma of liberalism. For the principle of the sovereignty of the people requires that each individual see himself as an author or maker of the civil law. But so long as inequality in society persists, the law will be viewed as the expression of some wills more than others, and therefore obedience to the law will be perceived by many as an illegitimate submission to another's authority. For Manent, Tocqueville provides an unsurpassed analysis of the problem of liberal societies, an analysis which points to the "motivating force" of the history of liberalism --- the human aspiration to make oneself both sovereign and free.

Like many European students of the history of modern philosophy before him, Manent argues that the idea of man's self-creation lies at the foundations of liberalism. Yet whereas liberalism's critics emphasize the Promethean ambition of this idea, Manent, in contrast, stresses the humbleness of the founding motive. In liberalism, Manent observes, the idea of man as self-creator does not in the first place arise from the hubristic assertion of authority, but rather develops out of the protest against the prideful presumption on the part of the religious authorities who claimed to know God's will and what was good for man. To rescue man from the stifling supervision of the clergy and the politically destructive passions engendered by religious devotion, it was necessary to remove him from God's care and consequently to leave him to fend for himself and create his own comforts.

The state of nature into which natural man was set free was unstable and dangerous. In the desperate and disordered situation in which he found himself natural man had no choice, if he was to survive, but to create an order for his world. The liberal principle of popular sovereignty grows out of the discovery that because he is essentially free, man is the author of his existence. But man rarely actualizes his freedom fully, or authors his existence eloquently. The intellectual history of liberalism is the record of constantly renewed efforts to envisage a form of political life which, true to the principle of popular sovereignty, permits or indeed empowers every man to be both fully sovereign and actually free by always only obeying those laws which he can see as an expression of his own will. Liberal thought develops through an increasingly subtle appreciation of the social, political, and natural obstacles to freedom. Spurred on by this growing sensitivity to coercion and restraint, each generation of liberal thinkers seeks to view as subject to human will and remaking dimensions of life previously regarded as fixed by nature or beyond the reach of civil law. Postmodernism may be seen as the latest such effort, a truly ambitious enterprise which carries the liberal principle that the individual must become sovereign and free by always obeying only those laws which he has authorized, consented to or made to a new and dizzying extreme.

Manent has written a concise and graceful essay on the history of liberal thought. Wisely, he does not try to make his account be all things to all readers. Some will worry about the omissions in his intellectual history. Indeed, one would like to know, for example, how Spinoza and Mill fit into his account of liberalism, for after all the one gave the theologico-political problem its name, and the name of the other is almost synonymous in the English-speaking world with liberalism. Others will be troubled by Manent's procedure, which can lend to the development of liberal thought the appearance of a continuous dialogue between great minds that stretches over time and across cultures. To such concerns Manent might well reply that what he has provided is not an exhaustive history but a model of how to think about liberalism, one that does not presuppose a continuous conversation among outstanding thinkers, but rather finds in the development of liberal thought a series of renewed encounters with and diverse answers to a core set of moral and political questions.

Pierre Manent's book makes clear that even the most emphatically political liberalisms always involve more than opinions about forms of government. Liberalism, as he reconstructs it, is an elaborate edifice of beliefs, practices, and institutions. To neglect any one of these elements is, on Manent's account, to endanger the whole.

Like a sturdy and stately old building that has been home to many generations, liberalism has undergone numerous modifications. Some have been necessary to maintain the building against wear and tear; some have made the building more beautiful. Naturally, not all changes have been improvements. Some were ill-conceived, and others, undertaken with the best of intentions, have caused serious damage. Even necessary modifications have imposed strains that the original builders could not have anticipated fully.

For some time maintenance has not kept pace with the changing needs of the building's occupants. And these days signs of neglect and disrepair are everywhere. But neither razing the building nor returning it to its original glory are practical options. What is needed is to build upon the foundations and basic structure, incorporating the latest materials in accordance with the most recent knowledge to make a home that is comfortable, secure, and suited to the needs, desires, and aspirations of the new generation that dwells in it. Unfortunately, the work of preservation has been delayed because it could not go forward without detailed knowledge of the foundations and basic structure, and for quite a while the original builders' blueprint was nowhere to be found.

Thanks to a variety of investigations in recent years, the blueprint, long neglected and forgotten, has been recovered; but it remains faded and brittle with age. Pierre Manent's book is an important contribution to the restoration of liberalism's blueprint.

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