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**Liberal Languages: Ideological Imaginations and Twentieth-Century Progressive Thought**

Michael Freeden

*Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford, 2005, x + 271pp.*

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Michael Freeden has established a substantial reputation as the principal interpreter of the New Liberal political thinking of the early 20th century, while making a major contribution to the broader understanding and analysis of political ideologies, and their relation to more abstract political theorizing. The current collection of previously published articles and chapters is divided more or less evenly between these two concerns.

One of the strengths of Freeden's work is his treatment of political thinking as having an historical, as against a logical, coherence. Freeden's own writings share several of the characteristics he depicts in ideology. The argument grows in a complementary, symbiotic way; building up, in a phrase he uses with good effect, a family of resemblances and relationships, rather than flowing deductively from some central, or superior, or single principle. The current selection consists of related but distinct studies, rather than a paraded turnout of contributions to a single principle or theory. New Liberalism, and particularly Hobson, is dealt with, but so also are New Labour and the Third Way, environmentalism, and nationalism. While most of Freeden's work is exegetical, though often with a critical edge, he engages here in some direct debate in his criticisms of the 'thinness' and 'stasis' in the arguments of liberals such as John Rawls.

Freeden uses the word 'ideology' to describe the broad gamut of political opinion and argument that forms the vernacular raw material from which more abstract, and often less engaged, political theory frequently emerges, or on which it draws. There is a notable reversal of familiar usage in Freeden's argument. 'Ideology' has often been used to indicate an artificial abbreviation and universalization, a presentation of the part as the whole. Freeden uses 'ideology' to describe, conversely, the varied and dynamic whole, in contrast to those theorists whose case, while coherent and with no, or few, ragged ends, ignores the complexity, even untidiness, of vernacular thinking.

A problem arises once the ideological raw material has been identified as a rich body of political activity, 'countless levels of written and oral expression' as Freeden neatly puts it, closer than high theory to 'the coal face of political activity' (p. 8). How much of it is worth studying, how far into the ideological dimensions of mundane politics is it necessary to go, in order to get an



adequate picture? On the whole, Freeden makes necessary compromises, and, while reacting against the aristocratic claims of high political theory, does not go so far as treating every speech and pamphlet as essential data. His is a bourgeois revolution, rather than a proletarian one. Although, perhaps appropriately, it is when Freeden moves furthest from his central concerns with liberalism and the contribution to it of thinkers such as Hobson, that he comes closest to his own account of ideology as a collective rather than an individual phenomenon, in his chapters on eugenics, or on poverty, and on the various ways in which government was assessed in late 19th and early 20th century thinking. Freeden is at his very best giving accounts of the complex range of thinking on such topics and, conversely, the very rare instances of obscure or clumsy phrasing, or of an uncharacteristic lack of precision, occur when he is furthest from historical exposition, and closest to the lofty theory about which he is generally somewhat sceptical.

A point that Freeden does not address in the current collection is that to some of their critics these New Liberals strained liberalism to the point where severe mental fatigue was setting in, and essential features of the liberal family — precisely those, in fact, such as personal liberty that Freeden praises — came under potential pressure. One response to Hobson on community, for instance, is to say that this is not really a liberal argument at all. However that would be to commit what, for Freeden, is the Platonic or realist sin against the evidence of actual human activity. It is reasonable to respond, nonetheless, by asking what distinguishes such a liberal argument from the arguments of conservatives or socialists. In the case of Hobson, the question has a chronological as well as an ideological dimension, given his organizational journey to the left. If individuals are less important, ideologically, than the weave of which they are a part, then no interpretative problem is caused by their changes of mind. Freeden notes just such a change in the thinking of WEH Lecky, but presents Hobson throughout as a New Liberal, and does not comment on Hobson's own practical placing of himself, from the 1920s, in the ranks of the socialists. If liberalism is what liberals do, then Hobson's socialist location does at least raise questions.

Freeden's criticism of the account given of liberalism by John Rawls can be perhaps deflected by his own account of the distinction between ideology and theory. He presents liberalism as an ideology, a set of vernacular arguments, engaged with particular and therefore changing political concerns, from which liberal political theory, of a purely academic kind, strays too far at its peril.

If theory, or high theory, is necessarily a distillation and rationalization of ideology, so that inconsistencies are removed either by subordination to a single principle or by simple removal, then theory will always be further removed from reality, and provide a less flexible and diverse means of dealing with it, than will ideology. In that case, Rawls's argument manifests a feature



of all theory, rather than a flaw of Rawls's particular instance of it. If that is so, then Freedman is moving towards a criticism, not simply of the narrowness or inappropriateness, or unreality, of Rawls, but of political theory as a species of thinking about politics.

Freedman concludes this selection by speculating, tantalizingly briefly, on whether, since thinking is an activity, the conventional thought/action distinction might be replaced. He does not pursue the point. Perhaps though the proliferation of hints and allusions, as well as of more substantially pursued arguments, is a necessary and desirable characteristic of a body of work that, by its very refusal of rigid system, continuously raises new and important questions of both interpretation and theory.

Rodney Barker  
Department of Government,  
London School of Economics, UK.

### **Identity in Democracy**

Amy Gutmann

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Amy Gutmann's *Identity in Democracy* is a recent addition to the important and continually expanding volume of scholarship dedicated to examining and effectively responding to the conceptual and practical challenges associated with 'identity politics' in contemporary liberal democracies. In this erudite and interesting study, Gutmann employs normative arguments and empirical evidence to reveal 'the good, the bad, and the ugly of identity politics' (p. 37). In the course of doing so, she hopes to provide a useful answer to the following question: How is the achievement and maintenance of democratic justice — understood as a combination of civic equality, individual liberty, and equality of opportunity — either facilitated or hindered by the presence of identity groups and their active involvement in the political process, and what can be done to help minimize the ability of such groups to impede the realization of such a goal?

According to Gutmann, neither the proponents nor the opponents of identity groups have yet successfully articulated the complex relationship between such groups and democracy. The actual role of identity groups in democratic politics has been problematically ignored by political scientists and