REVISTA ESTUDOS POLÍTICOS **Vol. 5 | N.1** ISSN 2177-2851

Review of "Liberalism: The Life of an Idea"

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Fawcett, Edmund. *Liberalism: the life of an idea*. Priceton Universiy Press: 2014, 488p

Any study of the liberal tradition must set out by addressing the perennial problem of polysemy. On the one hand, common sense states that what characterizes a liberal is a defence of the free market, low taxes and restricted government. On the other, it entails a belief in tolerance and social concerns together with a scepticism of the authority in power. Some of these principles overlap, while others are unable to coexist at the same time. In "Liberalism: The Life of an Idea", Edmund Fawcett seeks to make the history of the liberal tradition intelligible by examining some of its intellectual exponents. In fact, one of the reasons why this work has attracted so much interest is the narrative/ analytical approach adopted by Fawcett in focusing not only on the key figures in the liberal tradition but also on names that are not quoted so often (although they are just as interesting as, or even more interesting than, those who are well-known).Fawcett characterizes liberalism as a "modern practice of politics with no foundation myth" (xii). As a political practice, its origins date from the post-1815 era, although it can be argued that its intellectual roots may well stretch back much earlier than this. Even though the liberal narrative often invokes an idea of universality and timelessness, Fawcett recalls that it involves a practice (and a discourse) embedded in a "Euro-Atlantic" world, with its own peculiar historical essence.

According to Fawcett, since its initial growth, liberalism has been characterized by a certain ambiguity: the pursuit of freedom combined with a desire for order. On the basis of its typology, the liberal tradition can be shown to have passed through four key phases. The first of these runs from 1830 to 1880 — a time of "youthful self-definition, a rise to power and successes" (xiii). The second from 1880 until 1945 — a time when liberalism matured and undertook "a historic compromise with democracy", and gradually became what we know today as liberal democracy (idem). The third running from 1945 to 1989 — was a period of achievement and vindication and ended with the unconditional surrender of its main political/philosophical rival: Soviet communism. The fourth phase covers the period from 1989 to the present day — unquestionably a period of doubt and hesitation.

In the opinion of Fawcett, as well as these phases, the liberal argument is driven by four guiding ideas: 1) the fact that there is a clash of interests and beliefs which is inescapable in societies, when viewed from an ethical and material standpoint; 2) a sceptical attitude to man´s ability to repose trust in human power; 3) faith in human progress and 4) an attitude of tolerance involving respect for the property or privacy of individuals and other people.

Some of the roots of the liberal tradition can be discerned in these points. The frequency and intensity of religious conflicts in Europe in the 17th Century nurtured a belief in the inevitability of struggle. In Fawcett´s view, faith in "human progress" rose out of "Christian awakening and Enlightenment zeal". The urgency regarding the latter was underpinned by the thinkers and moral philosophers of the English Reformation of the 16th and 17th

Centuries. As Fawcett recalls, the originality of liberalism lay in the way these various influences coalesced to form an original and profound political insight. (xiv).

The central thesis of Fawcett´s work is the argument that the four main ideas or cornerstones of the liberal tradition, (acceptance of conflict, resistance to power, faith in progress and civic respect) have distinctive features that need to be highlighted — especially when contrasted with their "19th Century rivals" (conservatism and socialism) and their present — day competitors ("authoritarianism, national populism and Islamic theocracy").

Another factor of interest, because of its subtlety, in Fawcett´s argument, is the way it delineates the historicity of the liberal tradition — the memory that over a period of time, the liberals have conscientiously sought to "create a tradition". In other words, a particular discourse made up of philosophical, economic and historical terms is grounded on an everyday political lexis — quite often with explicit references and intellectual precedents found in the 16th and 17th Centuries and even harking back to the lines of argument employed by the Ancient Greeks and Romans.

According to Fawcett´s characterization, the initial stage of liberalism set out by searching for a "new order", following the radical changes that emerged from industrial capitalism and the three significant political "revolutions" that occurred in the late 18th Century (in the United States, Holland and France). The aim of the first liberals was to establish a new order that was dynamic and adaptable to the new era and met the new social, political and economic requirements or in the words of Fawcett, "a myth of order, in a masterless world" (p.4).

In setting out their objectives, the first liberals thought it ought to be feasible to create a political order that had an ethical dimension, although this should not be subordinated to "divine authority, established tradition or parochial custom" (idem). Furthermore, this same order should have a social character without "legally fixed hierarchies or privileged classes" (p. 4-5). With regard to economic factors, the liberal argument extolled national markets which operated without any direct interference with the monarchy or other State/government powers. According to this line of argument, monopoly privileges must be opposed as well.

Fawcett´s approach treats liberalism less as a political philosophy and more as a diverse set of ideas adapted in turn to historical/political/cultural circumstances. It concerns a narrative pattern which eventually turns into a problematic issue. Let me explain. In his anxiety to show the contingent character of the liberal tradition, Fawcett at times underestimates the importance of laying down guiding principles rather than providing evidence of particular historical circumstances. The collateral effect of this kind of approach is that it subordinates the philosophical principles of the liberal argument to a series of historical conjunctures. Even if the influence of the various conditions that form the basis of the liberal tradition are undeniable (and it is not my wish here, in any sense, to advocate an "immanent" reading of its principles), can the same not be equally claimed for socialism or the conservative tradition?

In any event, it is worth noting how Fawcett explores the tensions (and fortuitous contradictions) that can be found among the countless inner currents of the liberal tradition. A good illustration of this is the question of "resistance to power", especially if the arguments of Benjamin Constant are contrasted with those of Rousseau, for example. Whereas the latter advocated (or even extolled) a republican ideal of civic participation in the political life of the city, the former attempted to draw a distinction between two

meanings of liberty, in his work, "Ancient and Modern Liberty" (1819).

The first concept of liberty, "ancient liberty", was adapted to the notion of liberty found in Rousseau, or rather, the glorification of something similar — granting the right of some sections of society in the Greek polis to participate directly in the government. "Modern liberty" entailed the rejection of "interference by the State" (p.42) in the lives of individuals. Fawcett reminds us that, according to Constant, the idea of a "representative democracy" rested on an implicit premise: the rejection of any kind of intrusion (which, it can be said, is more frequent among people involved in everyday politics) in exchange for a much greater degree of privacy in one´s life — that is, freedom from any kind of external interference. However, it is certainly true that Constant, (as to the same degree was the case with De Tocqueville), feared that "the rejection of an active interference by individuals in everyday political life" could bring about a society that was selfish and unduly self-centred.

Another factor of interest in the book is the way it maps out some of the examples of artificial rhetoric used by the first generation of liberals who were involved in "creating the tradition". Here it is worth drawing attention to the case of the French historian and statesman, François Guizot. In his view, the distinction between a good goveernment and a tyrannical regime can be drawn from the past of Europe itself. It is undoubtedly true that, as Fawcett makes clear, the historical examples used by Guizot often fluctuate between the obscure and the mythical. In any event, he evoked the 8th Century Lombardy councils and the Anglo-Saxon "Witenagemot", in a description of the genealogy of liberal Europe. His main purpose was to appeal to an idea of reconciliation — it should be remembered that Guizot wrote with a French audience in mind (which can be basically split into two large sections: those in favour of, and those against, the French Revolution). Following the example of De Tocqueville and other liberals of his time, Guizot adopted an ambivalent view of the French Revolution in so far as he believed it had both positive and negative features.

In addressing the conservatives, Guizot highlighted the key role of the division of powers and government representatives in the French tradition. In other words, by carrying out a rhetorical manoeuvering, he was able to advocate liberal principles by appealing to tradition. With regard to the progressivists, he hoped to retrieve a history that could be instrumental in advancing the cause of constitutional government and political or social reforms (p.45).

Another factor of interest in Guizot´s line of argument (and which Fawcett cites as showing a line of continuity in the path followed by the liberals during the 19th, 20th and 21st Centuries) is the idea that despotism is not cirumscribed by a particular historical period — it can arise at any time, regardless of the historical background. Furthermore, Guizot underlined the fact that there is a lack of any definable constitutional form in despotism. In other words, it can take shape in one, a few or many forms. he categorisation of governments as "monarchies", "oligarchies" or "democracies"was superficial — since each of these types of government can degenerate into a tyrannical form. In the opinion of Guizot, and of many liberals who followed him, the key question was not "Who governs ?" but rather "How does he govern ?". The events that followed the Jacobin "reign of terror" (starting in 1792) seemed to Guizot, to provide supporting evidence for his arguments (p.46).

Fawcett believed that another key feature in the liberal "episteme" was the notion of the "sovereignty of the people" (particularly when understood on the basis of the terms of Guizot and the American constitutionalist, James Madison). It was a question of employing an idea that was based on a negative notion. In other words, the concept of

the "sovereignty of the people" is fashioned in accordance with an idea that is implicit in the non-sovereignty of any constitutive sector of society (by employing criteria based on faith, class or interest). The heart of the principle of the "sovereignty of the people" was essentially simple and objective: people could only have social emancipation/autonomy if no social sector was able to claim for itself the title of being a "single representative" of this same society. This means that the liberal argument lays stress on the pluralism of individuals and the community.

It is illuminating to note the distinction that Fawcett draws between liberalism and its two main ideological rivals of the 19th Century — the conservative and socialist traditions. Whereas the liberals traditionally had (and still have) an optimistic view of mankind´s progress, the conservatives have reacted (and still react) with scepticism to this epistemology. In their view, the ability to bring about "human betterment" was "slight or illusory". Any political programme that was based on an idea of "social reform" was at best. "a tactical indulgence", at worst, a heedless interference "with rooted social patterns" (p.65). With regard to the contrast between liberals and socialist, Fawcett states that there is an epistemological convergence between the two — their belief in human progress. However, whereas the former advocates gradual change in a way that takes place in line with already existing social parameters, the latter (the socialists) were sympathetic to the idea of creating a "new society". In more concise terms, Fawcett categorises socialists as "progressives of transformation" and liberals as "progressives of reform" (p.66). Although both traditions had an unmistakably progressive world view in common, a shared suspicion of the merits of including ´people´s power´ in democracy, made liberals "potential allies" of conservatives. In effect, this historical fact was always referred to in socialist diatribes.

At all events, the liberal tradition was, after all, plural. In its constitution, there remained a lingering ambiguity that was revealed in the continuation of two guiding principles. The first concerned the idea of the "public interest", the second the idea of the free market.

The basis of the idea of the "public interest" was underpinned by the Utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham. According to Bentham, the first question to be raised (about established social customs and constituted laws) was the following: "Does this custom (or Law) seek to achieve the greatest good to the greatest number of people?" With regard to the free market, its main theoretical support was provided by the writings of Adam Smith and the belief that maximum market sector productivity only takes place in situations where it is allowed to be responsible for its own activities (in particular when it is able to operate without having to cope with the problem of State interference).

However, the self-excluding nature of these two principles gives rise to the following problem. The underlining premise of the Benthamite argument is that it is lawful (and even desirable) to resort to the State apparatus if the purpose of the intervention is in the interests of social progress. However, Adam Smith´s argument is that the removal of State interference is designed to allow the market to create prosperity and freedom. Whereas one viewpoint advocates control, the other supports the removal of control. These two arguments have not always had a harmonious relationship under the "umbrella" of the liberal tradition.

Even though the internal contradictions of liberalism have proved to be longlasting and difficult to overcome, Fawcett shows that there was a historical turning-point at the end of the 19th Century. If the cases of Great Britain and Germany are taken as examples, it can be seen that there was a significant increase in government expenditure

in both countries during this period. What is more, the entrepreneurial class began to clamour for State assistance, among other things, so that they could be shielded from the growing number of demands being made by workers in this period. At the same time, the workers also sought assistance of various kinds from the State (which extended its powers and responsibilities) — in particular with regard to protection against the excesses and high-handed measures of the capitalists. In the opinion of Fawcett, the idea of a 19th Century essentially committed to "pure principles of classical liberalism regarding non-intervention by the government" was basically a constructive approach of the 20th Century and not an accurate historical representation of reality. He argues that with the advent of this "new liberalism" which gradually emerged at the end of the 19th Century, the examples of "binarism" ("individualism" x colletivism", "the market x the State" and "liberty x intervention") began to be superseded by an argument that reconciled features derived from Bentham and Adam Smith.

However, at the end of the 1930s, this "new liberalism" began to undergo violent theoretical and political shocks. These shocks were repeated in the 1970s and lingered on during the 1980s (p.197). In the case of the critics of the "new liberalism", any kind of reconciliation and attempt to overcome the old binarism was regarded as the "moral and intellectual weakness " of the opponents (idem).

Perhaps the most positive feature of Fawcett´s book was the attention devoted to the contingent aspect of the liberal tradition. This is the extent to which due weight should be given to the liberal reasoning that often appeals to universal and timeless principles while at the same time being immune to the successive historical events in which they are embedded. Fawcett is skilful in demonstrating (and to some extent sorting out) the confusion between what are traditional philosophic principles and what are discursive conflicts (I particularly refer to the uses of history in forming a mythology of its own and the identifiable features of this process). With regard to this, Fawcett´s analysis of the Great Depression in the US is instructive.

The author highlights the engrossing narrative of the Great Depression in the United State. He thinks it concerned a historical event that rapidly took shape as a "moral drama" (p.267). The American presidents at that time espoused diametrically opposed political philosophies. Herbert Hoover, a Republican, adopted an apologist approach to "voluntarism" and exercised executive restraint in a "modest and parsimonious" way. Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), a Democrat, projected the image of someone who was a defender of an "expansionist government" and "interventionist State". However, Fawcett shows that both presidents can be politically classified as liberals. That is, both advocated a programme based on "social progress, personal rights and private property" (idem). Both hoped "to stabilize American capitalism on defendable terms, for business and labor." (ibidem).

At any rate, there was a significant increase in the power structure and responsibilities of the federal administration under both governments. The supporters of Roosevelt believed that Hoover was at serious fault because of his failure to act when faced with an unprecedented economic/political crisis. Following the course of this narrative, FDR was responsible for saving the nation from economic and spiritual collapse through the New Deal. However, according to Roosevelt´s detractors (and Hoover´s supporters), the democratic government could be charged with having turned the people against the entrepreneurs (FDR was often accused of having exploited something analagous to animosity between the classes) and to have exponentially increased the discretionary powers of the federal

government. Nonetheless, Fawcett recalls that a significant part of the programs and measures adopted by FDR, were initially formulated/put into effect by Hoover.

Fawcett points out that although both FDR and Hoover could be described as liberals, divergent intellectual patterns can be discerned in their types of liberalism. This is shown by the fact that in his book "American Individualism" (1922), Hoover openly declared his predilection for a system of government in which "decentralized local responsibility" was the very base. Hoover's argument was not orthodox in so far as he recognised that in certain circunstances (with regard to National Institutes of Health for example), the federal government should play a prominent role in managing public services. However, this rule could be inverted. Other public services (such as transport for example) should be the responsibility of the municipal authorities — since they could be handled by local powers, in particular those with close links to the running of the community. Hoover advocated a system of non-interference by the State in private business dealings, although he believed in what Keynes had always argued: "good wages and well-managed unions are a positive force for business" (p.271).

According to Fawcett, in his speech on "Business Ethics" of 1928, Hoover shows that he is well aware that in countless situations the market operates in an unsatisfactory and even corrupt way. However, the type of "regulation" he recommended was always voluntary and never based on a coercive system. The best antidote to the concentration of power by giant corporations according to Hoover, was to establish an "association" of smaller ones. Hoover was in favour of "voluntary action rather than State activities" and of "self-regulation rather than regulation by the State" (p.272).

Fawcett recalls an episode in which FDR sought to offer a counterweight to the kind of liberalism offered by Hoover. Roosevelt sought help from Adolf A. Berle, one of his advisors, to write a speech to be delivered at the Commonwealth Club, in São Francisco, in 1932. The main aim of the speech was to offer a criticism of Hoover's political and economic outlook. Berle had been a co-author of the book "The Modern Corporation and Private Property", a work which described a historic shift in the character of capitalist enterprise of that time (for example, the management control of large corporations was increasingly falling into the hands of a single individual and ownership was scattered among large numbers of shareholders).

The speech written by Berle revived the great clash of views that was found in the early stages of the American liberal tradition: Thomas Jefferson versus Alexander Hamilton. Whereas the former advocated a weaker State of "small properties", "personal competency and freedom of speech of the individual", the latter was in favour of a strong State which could promote commerce and act as the main guarantor of a national financial system. According to the speech delivered by FDR, Jefferson initially won this battle (p.273). However, American capitalism had moved to the stage where a class of "titans of industry" had become excessively powerful, with an almost unlimited capacity for interfering with everyday politics. In the opinion of FDR (and of course, Berle), this had become the greatest threat to democratic freedom in that generation. This fear was not uncommon because through an ironic twist when providing feedback to the administration, the so-called "big business" requested (and often set up) a framework of "big government" to serve its own interests. According to Roosevelt, this state of affairs, was putting an end to the principle of "equality of opportunity " for American citizens. The appeal for regulations from the State at that time, was an extreme measure that was needed to "protect individualism" in the light of this threat (idem).

A clue to interpreting Fawcett can be found in the idea that a significant part of the anti-State sentiment that was widespread in the US during the 1980s, can be attributed to the disappointment of the children and grandchildren of the generation that experienced the attempts by the Roosevelt administration to raise "bright expectations" with regard to the powers of the government.

"Liberalism: The Life of an Idea" is a reasonably comprehensive attempt to provide an account of a subject that is intellectually contradictory and multifarious. I have deliberately chosen the adverb "reasonably" because in my view, there are some problematic areas in Fawcett´s work. One big problem is the lack of footnotes. The author has decided to leave these out and just include a list of "consulted works" at the end of the book. The book adopts a methodological/narrative approach which does not do justice to a subject that is so ambitious in its scope and analytical range.

Another questionable point is the lack of precision in the use of the term "liberal". Although Fawcett takes full note of the various discordant meanings of the term, it is a daunting task to encompass such disparate thinkers as Michael Oakeshott and Sartre within the same political/philosophical/intellectual.

At all events, "Liberalism: The Life of an Idea" makes some valuable points which are worth mentioning. In the first place, it provides a good idea of the panorama of the liberal tradition. Furthermore, the work is significantly more comprehensive than other studies in the field. This is because Fawcett is concerned with transcending the standard interpretation that regards liberalism as being essentially intertwined with the Anglo-Saxon tradition. On the contrary, he pays great attention to infrequently mentioned experiences of liberalism such as those in Germany and even Italy. In addition, Fawcett devotes a considerable part of his analysis to providing evidence of the contingent and historical nature of the liberal tradition. Since it is a political tradition that is often regarded as conveying transcendental and timeless values, it is worth noting his skilful deconstruction of what is, to some extent, an established "discourse".

Finally, "Liberalism: The Life of an Idea" suffers in comparison with a recent work "The Making of Modern Liberalism" (2012), by Alan Ryan, or even an old work (unfortunately not included in the biblioraphical references), "O Liberalismo: Antigo e Moderno" (1991), by José Guilherme Merquior. It is not possible here to undertake a comparative study of these three works owing to the limited scope of this study, but again I should stress the importance of the appearance of Fawcett´s work. Apart from some minor reservations, I believe it provides a wide panoramic view of the subject and an intellectually stimulating study of the liberal tradition. And after all, this is no small feat.

(Submitted on October 2014)
(Approved for publication on November 2014)

Cite this Review
TRIGUEIRO, Gabriel Romero Lyra. Review of "Liberalism: The Life of an Idea". **Revista Estudos Políticos**: online journal published twice a year by the Laboratory for the Hum(e)an Studies (Laboratório de Estudos Hum(e)anos, Fluminense Federal University, Brazil), and the Center for the Study of Political Theory (Núcleo de Estudos em Teoria Política, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil). Rio de Janeiro, Vol. 5, N. 1, pp. 316 – 324, December 2014. At: http://revistaestudospoliticos.com/