

# REVIEW

## Both liberal and not: liberalism within social democracy

Alexandre Lefebvre, *Liberalism As A Way Of Life*, Princeton University Press, 2024

In *Liberalism As A Way Of Life*, Alexandre Lefebvre presents what he calls a ‘predicament’ for liberal-minded people living in ‘liberaldom’, a Kierkegaard-inspired label for a world that does not live up to what liberalism can be (to say the least). The predicament is this: ‘we are liberals, but not’.<sup>1</sup> This is an apt predicament when working with the argument of Lefebvre’s enjoyable and distinctive take on liberalism and contemporary politics. Lefebvre, professor of politics and philosophy at the University of Sydney, draws upon a number of inspirations – academic and literary, as well as long-running TV shows and favourite movies – for a work that seeks to posit liberalism as both *the* leading political outlook for our times and something that each of us should work harder at.

Yet, for readers of a journal of social democracy, the ideological descriptor of ‘liberal’ may bring to mind another kind of distinction, albeit one much more positive about liberalism than the anti-liberal critics Lefebvre has in mind: yes liberal, but within social democracy.<sup>2</sup> Reading Lefebvre’s book reminded me of an event the former Labour foreign secretary David Miliband appeared at in 2018, hosted by *The Economist* magazine. Following Donald Trump’s election to the US presidency in 2016, the context was one of populist impact and questions about the future prospects of liberalism. Here, a shared concern regarding populism regularly means the bracketing together of centre-lefts and centre-rights, where those opposed to anti-liberalism are considered liberal. But Miliband was also quick to point out that, as a social democrat rather than a liberal, there was a difference – from his perspective – between liberalism and social democracy: a distinction between freedom from and freedom to.<sup>3</sup>

The academic hero of *Liberalism As A Way Of Life* is John Rawls, so of course Lefebvre is very conscious of the different meanings attached to liberalism (and the ways in which ‘liberal’ is used to signify a politics in different political contexts). His Rawlsian

version of liberalism would, in theory, change the world radically in a way recognisably social democratic, and so the distinction (above) means less: Rawls' 'difference principle' operating 'within a broader egalitarian framework that includes fair and progressive taxation... regulation of markets, and adequately funded public institutions'.<sup>4</sup> Here, Rawls – and Lefebvre – sit within a tradition of liberalism-as-social-democracy (or pretty close to social democracy) in the way John Dewey presented liberalism in the mid-1930s (I will come back to pragmatism in a moment).<sup>5</sup>

Lefebvre presents his case for this politics in two distinctive ways: first, he features an engaging discussion of liberalism in the contemporary political moment; in particular, his understanding of the status of liberalism not as a set of political structures often known as liberal democracy (important though they are), but as a 'comprehensive' doctrine, a version of the good life. In other words, a political ideology (by my reading). The case for this liberal ideology, I suspect Lefebvre accepts, has sometimes been insufficiently put, from a place of complacency. The case needs to be actively made and remade and *Liberalism As A Way Of Life* is a contribution to that effort. While we can see liberalism and its effects all around us – this is where Lefebvre takes a David Foster Wallace speech as his inspiration, with liberalism being the 'water in which we swim'<sup>6</sup> – it has, clearly, not led to the kind of society one can draw from Rawls.

The second distinctive feature of Lefebvre's book, via a reading of Rawls and inspired by the French philosopher Pierre Hadot, is working with liberalism through 'spiritual exercises', where the author acknowledges a foray into 'self-help' literature.<sup>7</sup> Lacking reading experience of this genre, this part of the book still felt very recognisable to me: various thinking tools associated with an ideology, helping to guide people in our social and political world. Some are perhaps closer to what Daniel Dennett called 'intuition pumps'.<sup>8</sup> Yet, this part of the book also raised, once again, distinctions that can be made between liberalism and social democracy, specifically *how* we, as political actors, bring about change in politics. Critiquing Lefebvre's approach here would miss the point: the idea of this part of *Liberalism As a Way Of Life* is to be distinctive, to offer something different to the many books written about liberalism in the context of anti-liberal political movements and arguments around the world.

Rather, this discussion point speaks to something important within political ideologies, for the idea of 'self-help' and trying, as an individual, to live and to persevere with a liberal way of life in 'liberalism' raises the matter of *political practice*. Within the development of socialism and social democracy, political practice – how to *do* politics in the political environment of the time – has always been a focal point for debate (and division).<sup>9</sup> This is not simply about electoral strategies at any one point in time, but a reading of power relations, a positing of

the significance of organisation and movements, a recognition of different world-views (and, importantly, of winning arguments), and the gradual building of institutions to help working people organise and build political power. Lefebvre's book does not have these things as a focus, and so this is not a criticism of the book's style and argument. Rather, it raises the question of the ideological resources we have – as left political movements and projects – to act in contemporary politics. In short, it suggests that liberalism needs social democracy.

In *Liberalism and Social Action*,<sup>10</sup> Dewey wrote convincingly about what he saw as the negative strands of early liberalism, and how liberalism had performed thus far. Early liberals, he suggested, had 'lacked historic sense and interest',<sup>11</sup> meaning they did not appreciate how progress towards the goals of liberalism required a much clearer analysis of the moment. And he suggested – in an argument many of us will have heard many times since, about both liberalism and social democracy – that 'liberalism must now become radical... For the gulf between what the actual situation makes possible and the actual state itself is so great that it cannot be bridged by piecemeal policies undertaken *ad hoc*'.<sup>12</sup> In Dewey's liberalism, 'material security'<sup>13</sup> was the way to achieve liberty for all – so liberals had to get on with enacting a social democratic settlement.

In a recent conversation with *Renewal*, Elizabeth Anderson put the case for a renewed class analysis on the left.<sup>14</sup> Her recent book, *Hijacked*, can be read as a restatement of the significance of left and right ideologies on work and how we perceive work.<sup>15</sup> Left and right, of course, have some clear overlaps with liberal and anti-liberal. Yet both Dewey and Anderson, in different ways – albeit within one pragmatic philosophical tradition – also emphasise political practice, and the way to make change, collectively through movements, institutions, knowledge and ideological contestation.

Lefebvre's book is a timely reminder of the virtues of left liberalism. It is another addition to the literature advocating for the continued relevance of John Rawls,<sup>16</sup> though I also find arguments questioning this perceived political relevance compelling,<sup>17</sup> hence what I have said about the importance of social democratic political practice. The liberal tradition was partly constitutive of British social democracy. It remains a companion ideology, in some ways. Interpretations of liberalism on the left are an active component of social democratic ideological debates, as interpretations of liberalism on the right are within conservative political traditions. At the same time, the approach of the book reinforces how, for left liberalisms to be effective, liberals need social democracy.

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## Notes

- 1 This point appears on p134 of *Liberalism As A Way of Life*. A literary inspiration for Lefebvre's book is David Foster Wallace, specifically Wallace's 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College, subsequently published as *This is Water* in 2009. The line from Lefebvre about liberals being 'liberals, but not' reminded me of another Wallace essay, 'Federer Both Flesh and Not', which leant its name to Wallace's posthumously published essay collection, *Both Flesh and Not*, which I have tried to invoke with the title of this review. Readers of David Foster Wallace's work, whether fiction or essays and reportage, will appreciate the appropriateness of a detailed footnote on this point.
- 2 For more on liberalism within Labour's ideology specifically, see Nick Garland's review of Jon Cruddas's *A Century of Labour*: N. Garland, 'Liberal after all: Jon Cruddas comes full circle', *Renewal*, 32.1, pp91-95.
- 3 'David Miliband on the future of liberalism', *The Economist's Open Future festival*, New York, 15 September 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onYyO6iDzK8>
- 4 A. Lefebvre, *Liberalism As A Way Of Life*. Princeton University Press, 2024, p124.
- 5 J. Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 11: 1935-1937 Essays and Liberalism and Social Action*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991; E. Anderson, *Hijacked*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2023.
- 6 Lefebvre, *Liberalism*, p18.
- 7 Lefebvre, *Liberalism*, p13.
- 8 D. Dennett, *Intuition Pumps*, Penguin, 2013.
- 9 E. Goes, *Social Democracy*, Agenda, 2024.
- 10 It is worth noting here that historically-contingent (and place-based) political terminology is at times the difference between 'liberalisms' and social democracy.
- 11 Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 11*, p25.
- 12 Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 11*, p45.
- 13 Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 11*, p41.
- 14 K. Pike, 'Social democratic ideology: A conversation with Elizabeth Anderson', *Renewal* 32, 1, pp11-21, p19.
- 15 E. Anderson, *Hijacked*, Cambridge University Press,
- 16 See Daniel Chandler, *Free and Equal*, Penguin.
- 17 K. Forrester, 'The Future of Political Philosophy', *Boston Review*, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/katrina-forrester-future-political-philosophy/>, 17 September 2019.