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## BOOK REVIEW FORUM

### **What Was Liberalism, and Who Was Its Subject?; Or, Will the Real Liberal Subject Please Stand Up?**

JAMES VERNON

**T**hese days it seems many of us are writing about the history of liberalism in Victorian Britain and its empire. We cannot explain this by the relentless self-importance of Victorian liberals who truly did believe that they could and should reform, improve, and civilize the world. Neither can we put it down to those modernization theories, so fashionable in the decades following World War II, which reified Britain's combination of rapid industrialization, imperial expansion, and relative political stability as an exemplary liberal model of modernity. While Marxists highlighted the social costs of this liberal modernity, as well as its dependence on a coercive state, their focus remained chiefly on the drama of class struggle. It was the theory wars of what we might term "the long 1980s"—the promiscuous influences of Foucault, feminism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and queer theories—that returned our attentions to liberalism by articulating a new critique of its disciplinary and exclusionary nature, its imperialisms, and its rule of freedom. And, of course, liberalism has returned in different guises to the politics of our contemporary world. Liberal universalism has been rehabilitated as the basis for ethical and political action through the discourse of human rights (and the theorization of cosmopolitanism) as well as the economic and political forms of the neo-liberalism that has come to dominate so much of the world since at least 1989.

And yet, for all its prevalence, "liberalism" remains a remarkably imprecise term that is frequently alluded to but rarely specified. Those studying liberalism from different disciplines, subdisciplines, and theoretical traditions approach it differently and are rarely in conversation with each other, even if they work on a singular place and

time like Victorian Britain.<sup>1</sup> One of the many virtues of Elaine Hadley's consistently engaging *Living Liberalism* is its determination to draw upon the insights of political theorists, historians, and literary critics to pin down what liberalism was in a historically specific way.<sup>2</sup> Hadley focuses not on liberalism generally but on what she describes as *political* liberalism in mid-Victorian Britain between the 1850s and 1880s. Note that Hadley's political liberalism is lower case. It does not refer to the politics of the Liberal Party formed at this moment.<sup>3</sup> Neither does it refer to the ideology or ideas long associated with liberalism: a *laissez-faire* political economy organized around free trade and the gold standard; the quest for cheap, rational, and meritocratic government through financial and administrative reforms; the politics of opinion moderated by constitutional mechanisms of representation; freedom of religion within moralized secular forms like rational recreation; and, of course, the injunction to civilize and improve the world through various forms of imperialism.

Instead Hadley is interested in how the formal domain of the political was conceived and what was expected of those who were to participate in it. Living with liberalism entailed living up to "how liberal politics in the mid-century imagined its liberalized subjects to operate" (3). This was not about adherence to a particular idea or party but to a way of being in the world. The subjects of liberal politics were expected to think for themselves and act as individuals, not as representatives or members of a wider collectivity or community. It is Hadley's contention that the liberal subject was individuated in this way by the production of a way of thinking that she terms "liberal cognition" (9). It was the specific forms, techniques, and conventions that promoted this frame of mind—characterized by, for example, its powers of disinterestedness, abstraction, logical reasoning, and sincerity—that made a liberal subject capable of forming his or her own individual opinion.<sup>4</sup> As "political liberalism wished to mobilize the individual of abstract thought in the realm of the concrete and everyday" (20), these remarkably formalized ways of thinking were also grounded in bodily and material practices (captured in the demanding phrase "abstract embodiment" [16]). The book's best examples of these processes, and to my mind the best chapters, focus on the *Fortnightly Review's* staging of a plurality of individuated opinions through its novel use of the signed article and the debates and new electoral practices that surrounded the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872.

Of course, ambivalence lay at the heart of this privileging of liberal form over content. While formal conventions shaped these liberal ways of thinking and acting in the world, they were not to be followed or used unthinkingly or out of habit. And even if how one thought or voted was more important than what one thought or who one voted for, it was still possible to act and vote instinctively or in the interests of others. Liberalism, we have learned to recognize, is always haunted by the paradox that its freedoms were structured by rules which had to be constantly tested.

I have two predictable points of engagement with Hadley's powerful and illuminating argument: the first interrogates the relative absence of the social in *Living Liberalism* and the second raises a question of method and the theorization of historical change. Hadley repeatedly uses her chosen texts to allude to the disintegration of a social body where patterns of power and authority had once been embedded in local, familiar, and face-to-face forms. We are then tempted to see the techniques of abstraction and individuation she rightly identifies as central to political liberalism as emerging in response to the problem of how to live in and govern over a mass, market-based society of strangers in which it was no longer possible to rely upon personalized forms of knowledge and authority. Political liberalism may have championed the politics of opinion over that of interest and influence, but it feared that losing the visible hand of paternalism in a society of strangers could produce an unruly demos mobilized by the destructive forces of class and sect. Instead, the techniques of liberal individuation became a new invisible hand, a way of dispersing mentalities of self-government to distant and anonymous strangers for whom the old forms of power and authority lodged in place and person were losing purchase. And yet—as in Hadley's account the liberal subject required abstraction from social life in order to be an individual whose opinion counted—the social recedes from view in *Living Liberalism*. We are, however, at a loss as to how to understand the transformation of this social body. Was it the product of changing forms of economic production and exchange as well as the rapid growth and migration of populations that restructured social life in Victorian Britain (i.e., what used to be called social context)? Or was it a consequence of the discursive mapping of the social question (arguably around those very subjects for whom the techniques of individuation had failed) that so accelerated from the 1830s?<sup>5</sup> We are instead left with Dorothy Hale's social formalism where novels (in this case mainly

those of Anthony Trollope) give form to society and, for Hadley, enable the individuated liberal subject to imagine inhabiting it.

The strength of *Living Liberalism*, its close attention to individuation, is also its weakness. The liberal subject was not always an individual, for liberalism was never able to entirely extricate its subjects from the social; these subjects thus remained imbricated with corporate forms that appeared embedded in society. I do not dispute Hadley's central claim that a new type of individuated liberal political subject was forged between the 1850s and 1880s and that the political domain was slowly shaped around him.<sup>6</sup> Hadley's best evidence for this is the introduction of the secret ballot and her important emphasis on the new ethics consolidated around it by the prevention of practices that were now designated as corrupt or unruly. There is no question that during the 1870s and 1880s the act of voting was profoundly transformed and slowly assumed its modern individuated form. Even though since 1832 the franchise was granted to propertied, and male, individuals, it was the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872, as well as the Corrupt Practices Acts of 1853 and 1883, that sought to establish the vote as the right of an individual elector. Previously, even in the reformed system after 1832, the electoral system sought to represent and balance the natural interests of different groups and communities. Similarly, an elector was often considered to possess that vote on behalf of those broader communities (like locality, family, trade, estate, or factory) to whom he was supposed to virtually represent or be held accountable. The Corrupt Practices Acts of 1853 and 1883, which liberal reformers had pressed for since the early nineteenth century, introduced measures against a long list of customary electoral practices now defined as corrupt precisely because they exposed voters to undue influence and intimidation by others—be they non-voters, landlords, or employers. Nonetheless, as Hadley and others remind us, neither the corrupt practices legislation nor voting secretly entirely insulated the voter from bribery, intimidation, or undue influence—they simply changed its form and reduced its scale (Rix 65–97).<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the individuated liberal political subject may have become a permanent feature of the electoral system during the 1870s and 1880s, but it took many decades for it to be naturalized. The Redistribution Act of 1885, which quickly followed the Third Reform Act's dramatic expansion of the electorate the previous year, appeared to nudge Britain closer to a modern liberal system of representation as it

made single member constituencies (first introduced in 1867) the norm, albeit alongside twenty-four surviving double member constituencies. The Act was a compromise that met the demands neither of those advocating proportional representation or equal electoral districts where each individual's vote would be given a formal equivalence, nor of those who resisted the breaking apart of constituencies that represented meaningful territorial communities. Nonetheless, the corporate model of representing specific communities prevailed and was used to justify the still considerable variations in constituency size (for both single and double members). This corporate model of communal representation was not simply a relic of an earlier moment. It was reanimated by the new social imaginaries of Henry Maine and the idealists during the 1870s and 1880s and was still evident through the military service qualification as well as the plural votes of those who possessed the university and business franchise in the Representation of the People's Act in 1918.<sup>8</sup> It also powerfully shaped the communal system of electoral representation in India and Nigeria where—informed by colonial sociology—specific religious groups, tribes, and castes were allotted their own separate electorates or seats from 1919.

Clearly, we should not view the corporate and individuated political subject as mutually exclusive. Voting in India's late colonial electoral system took place by secret ballot and under the terms of Britain's 1885 Corrupt Practices Act, effectively reproduced in the Government of India Act of 1919. The voter was supposed to vote as an individual and be protected from undue influences of bribery and corruption while doing so as a representative of a particular community with its own natural interests (Gilmartin 55–82; Jaffrelot 78–99). Indeed, back in Britain, Hadley's own mid-Victorian ascendant moment of individualized opinion was also marked by the articulation and mobilization of new collective subjects and interests—political parties (which quickly organized the new electorate after 1867), workers (organized by sector in the New Unions), and women (campaigning for suffrage). Presented less as an *a priori*, organic entity than as an effect of the deliberation of individuals who discovered that their interests were shared with a collectivity, these new corporate political subjects appeared more easily compatible with an individuated model of representation. My point is that liberalism never produced a political system solely around individuated opinion. That was just one version of the liberal political subject. Others were imagined as still too embedded in the social to be abstracted from it

(and not just in the colonies). And neither should we think of these varieties of liberal political subjectivity as mutually exclusive. The university and business franchises lasted until 1948 precisely because they privileged the right type of corporate interest and allowed individuals with informed and sincere opinions as much influence as possible (Meisel 109-86).<sup>9</sup>

I would characterize *Living Liberalism*, in my own demanding term, as a work of historical formalism. It is a book that only has eyes for an individuated liberal political subject. Its analysis of that subject, and the forms of thought and embodiment that constitute it, are exemplary. Yet as an analysis of political liberalism it falls short because it fails to engage with those elements of liberalism's political practice that do not cohere to the form. It is a formalist account whose analysis is historically situated, but it is not much interested in explaining how change happens other than to explain the effects of forms whose emergence (seemingly fully formed) remains mysterious. I do not simply mean, for instance, how the Ballot Act passed through parliament (important though that is) but how, when, and why the forms of cognition and embodied practice took shape. Hadley's chief strategy for addressing this issue is to return to intellectual history: familiar figures like John Locke, David Hume, Adam Smith, and J. S. Mill are repeatedly used to lay out the basis of the liberal forms of cognition. Sometimes, the trail of causation is left even vaguer, as in the suggestion that evangelical emphases on introspection and forthright moral opinions informed the *Fortnightly's* use of signed pieces (146). It is as though Hadley can't quite carry the weight of her own conviction that the forms of cognition and embodiment she so skillfully excavates created the liberal individual, not the ideas of liberal individualism. I imagine that that history of form would look very much like the chapters on the *Fortnightly Review* and the ballot; that is, they would be grounded in how a set of practices helped produce the very forms that they were subsequently seen as representing. Such a history of liberal forms might lead to a more nuanced recognition of their twisted formation that so often led the practice of liberalism awry. It is perhaps the unevenness of historical change, its unfolding at different rhythms and with different logics, that accounts for the continuing opacity of liberalism in both its Victorian and its contemporary neo-liberal forms.

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**NOTES**

My thanks to Elaine Hadley for a rich and suggestive book with which to engage, to the editors of *Victorian Studies* for inviting me to do so, and to Daniel Ussishkin for asking the right questions of an earlier draft. My title is a homage to Peter Bailey, one of the finest Victorianists around, who has long been grappling with how liberalism was lived. This one is for you, PFP.

<sup>1</sup>For an elaboration of this argument, see Gunn and Vernon.

<sup>2</sup>In a book of many dutiful and discursive footnotes, my favorite bemoans how “the ‘liberal subject’ was both the most ubiquitous and ironically the least historicized category during a period of scholarship when the motto ‘always historicize’ had only intensified in a field—Victorian Studies—that has always been historical in orientation” (3).

<sup>3</sup>And classically captured by John Vincent’s work despite its absence from *Living Liberalism*.

<sup>4</sup>This is in marked contrast to the myriad literatures on character, manliness, independence, respectability, and so forth that assume that liberal subjects marked by these qualities thought in those ways.

<sup>5</sup>Surprisingly, given her otherwise extensive engagement with Mary Poovey’s work, not to mention the huge literature from Maine, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Max Weber forward, there is no exploration of how the techniques of abstraction and individuation may also have been vital to the still emergent forms of economic liberalism.

<sup>6</sup>After all, I made this argument in *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture 1815–1867*—a book conveniently reissued in 2009 and once again available in all good book stores. The gendering of this political subject as exclusively male and propertied is not an issue that particularly concerns Hadley, although she shows that liberal cognition was antagonistic to the influence, impulse, and emotion that were thought to characterize women and the affective realm of family life.

<sup>7</sup>See also Malcolm and Tom Crook; Lawrence 45–48; O’Gorman.

<sup>8</sup>For two pertinent intellectual histories, see Den Otter; Mantena.

<sup>9</sup>1948 also saw the final abolition of the last ten remaining double member constituencies.

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