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## The L-Word

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Review of *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*. By Edmund Fawcett. Princeton University Press. 468 pp. \$35.

"We all declare for liberty," Abraham Lincoln declared in 1864, "but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing."

Lincoln might well have made the same claim for "liberalism." Widely used in the United States, England, France and Germany since the 1830s, liberalism, Edmund Fawcett, a former chief correspondent and editor at *The Economist*, reminds us, has meant decidedly different things to different people. In *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea*, Fawcett draws on the experiences and ideas

of dozen of thinkers and politicians in an informative, lively, and provocative history of a political tradition he deems "worth standing up for." Fawcett treats liberalism less as a philosophy or a project in pursuit of a single goal (be it liberty, equality, or free market capitalism) than as an outlook, a practice, and a "norm-governed adaptation to historical circumstances."

According to Fawcett, four periods mark the life of liberalism. From 1830-1880 liberalism defined itself, rose to power, and achieved significant successes. Between 1880 and 1945, it became more inclusive and democratic, and barely survived two world wars and the Great Depression. From 1945-1989, a chastened liberalism defended the liberal democratic order and triumphed over communism. Since, then, Fawcett notes, liberalism has been under sustained assault and liberals have run away from the L-word.

Through it all, Fawcett argues, four broad ideals have guided liberal practice: "acknowledgement of inescapable ethical and material conflict within society, distrust of power, faith in human progress, and respect for people whatever they think and whoever they are." He maintains that the liberal insistence on pursuing all four ideas, despite charges of incoherence and overreach, is actually a source of strength and endurance.

*Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* is not without flaws. Fawcett knows how to turn a phrase, but does not always obey the rules of grammar. He is also, at times, sloppy about facts. On a single page, for example, he gets the first names of Nicola Sacco and Peter Kropotkin wrong, misspells the last name of Emma Goldman, and claims, incorrectly, that the 1919-1920 Palmer raids against alleged communists occurred during the administration of Warren Harding.

Fawcett's capacious definition of liberalism, a virtue of his book, also has a downside. Character mattered more to liberals than others in nineteenth century America, Fawcett claims. He doesn't address how conservatives appropriated character as their issue in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Nor does he adequately differentiate modern-day liberals from conservatives. What does his designation of Michael Oakeshott as a "liberal quietist of conservative temper who distrusted the very idea of political ideas" really mean? Should Margaret Thatcher, "who looked favorably on markets and unfavorably on the state," be understood as a liberal because she broke the power of trade unions, British banking, local councils, and ministerial departments -- and was a strong nationalist? Does it matter that Thatcher passes Friedrich Hayek's "checklist for not being conservative with relative ease"? And did the "once liberal" Republican Party in America "shrink into something at or beyond the edges of liberalism" after Ronald Reagan left office?

That said, Fawcett's book is an immensely interesting, informative, and important assessment of liberalism. "In anxious moments," Fawcett writes, liberals looked on conflict with "stoical dread," while "in calmer moments" they welcomed it. They viewed state, market, and civic institutions as "tools to promote human betterment and respect that were "subject to technical improvement, decay, and repair." Unlike conservatives, who deemed social reform "at best a tactical indulgence, at worst a heedless interference with rooted social patterns," liberals kept faith with progress. Even though they resisted power, Fawcett reminds us, liberals were the creators of colonial empires, defending them "when needed with ruthless force" because they "brought progress and modernity in the form of schools, medicine, science trade and rising

prosperity." And, among "the rival longings in the liberal breast" were a nationalism that gave rise to war and a universalism that gave rise to declarations on human rights.

The post-World War II liberals delivered, Fawcett suggests. But they also came to expect a world of fluidity, constrained choices, "and endless regrets." In the 21st century, liberals "gave ground to the warfare state, to national pride, and to exclusionary prejudice," crossing "bumpily" into "an unfamiliar shore visible only in outline." And they realized that their historic compromise with democracy was "at risk from fiscal overstretch" and illiberal activity from the far right.

Liberalism is as relevant as ever, Fawcett concludes, passionately and persuasively. In his view, a chastened "liberalism of melancholy" (if that does not "sound too world weary") can continue to play a vital role if it stays true to its foundational means and ends: a "search for order amid endless conflict and unceasing change guided by resistance to power, faith in progress, and respect for people."