

Duncan Bell
University of Cambridge

<http://mws.polis.cam.ac.uk/contacts/staff/bell-duncan.html>

What is Liberalism?

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The author

Duncan Bell is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Cambridge, and a Fellow of Christ's College. He works on the history of modern British and American political thought (with a focus on imperial ideologies) and also in some areas of contemporary political theory. He is the author of *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton, 2007), and the editor of several books, the most recent of which is (with Joel Isaac), *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War* (Oxford, 2012).

The paper

Liberalism is one of the most elusive ideas in the humanities and social sciences. Across and within scholarly discourses it is construed in multiple and contradictory ways. It is little wonder that Judith Shklar once complained that “overuse and overextension have rendered it so amorphous that it can now serve as an all-purpose word, whether of abuse or praise.” This essay engages with the confusion, not with the intention of offering a new liberal theory or adjudicating between existing ones, but rather through assessing some of the methodological issues involved and sketching an historical interpretation of that “overused” category. Section I criticises two common ways (*stipulative* and *canonical*) in which the question is typically addressed, while defending a *contextualist* alternative. Section II suggests that liberalism can be seen as the sum of the positions which have been affirmed by self-proclaimed liberals. The remaining two sections offer an interpretation of the development of an important strand of Anglo-American liberalism. In the century between 1850-1950 the meaning of liberalism was transformed. Viewed initially as one of several clashing political ideologies that emerged in the wake of late eighteenth century revolutionary ferment, by the middle of the twentieth century liberalism was often conceptualised as the constitutive ideology of the West, its roots buried deep in European history. In order to analyse this shift, Section III charts the evolution of the language of liberalism in nineteenth century Britain, focusing in particular on the changing fortunes of John Locke, while Section IV argues that the way in which most political thinkers today understand the “Lockean” identity of liberalism is largely a product of the ideological conflict of the mid-twentieth century.

Recommended reading

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- Pocock, J.G.A., "The Myth of John Locke and the Obsession with Liberalism" in *John Locke*, ed. Richard Ashcraft and Pocock (Los Angeles: Clark Library, 1980)
- Shklar, J. "The Liberalism of Fear" (1989) in Shklar, *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)
- Strauss, L., *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968)
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