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Alan S. Kahan, *Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe: The Political Culture of Limited Suffrage*. Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. vii + 239 pp. Notes, works cited, and index. \$69.95 US (hb). ISBN 1-4039-1174-6.

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Alan Kahan's new book on liberalism in nineteenth-century Europe represents a thoughtful attempt to define the core characteristics of that rich and complex intellectual tradition by focusing on liberals' parliamentary debates over how to institute various forms of limited suffrage in England, France, and the German states before and after unification in the period from 1830 to 1885. Kahan's earlier work has illuminated the intellectual biographies of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill, and, especially, Alexis de Tocqueville; his new project now explores the political and intellectual history of the more general national movements in which these three figures played such important parts.[1]

Kahan initially presents nineteenth-century liberals in familiar terms as "both the confident heirs of Voltaire and the frightened successors of Robespierre" (p. 1), or, in other words, as historical figures who hoped to sponsor progressive reform without provoking either radical revolution or conservative reaction. Unlike those historians, social theorists, and political activists who have defined liberals in economic terms by focusing on their commitment to the preservation of private property, however, Kahan seeks to define liberals in political terms by focusing instead on their commitment to what he calls "the discourse of capacity" (p. 5), a common language that grew out of a century-long series of arguments over how to determine who should participate in the evolving political life of the nation. "Where democrats talked about universal rights (and conservatives talked about historical or hereditary rights)," Kahan explains, "liberals talked about capacity: who possessed it, who might acquire it, and by what means" (p. 6).

Rather than concentrating his analysis on the various nineteenth-century conflicts between liberals and radicals, liberals and socialists, or liberalists and communists, Kahan turns his critical attention to the internal tensions that divided liberals among themselves, especially the conflict between those who supported the two different varieties of liberalism that he defines as "socially oriented" and "individualist" (p. 11). Speakers and writers in the first group, proponents of what Kahan identifies as the "liberalism of social representation" (p. 11), focused on creating parliaments that would mirror a given national society at a specific historical moment by assembling a balanced representation of its various social groups, classes, or interests. Speakers and writers in the second group, proponents of what Kahan identifies as "individualist liberalism" (p. 11), focused instead on recognizing the potential political contribution of any citizen with sufficient education and aptitude. Although Kahan acknowledges that "political language in action is apt to be more confused than in the grammars constructed by historians" (p. 48), he uses the persistent alternation between arguments in the first category and those in the second as a way of structuring his chronological and geographical comparisons among the successive episodes in a series of no less than twenty-four separate nineteenth-century suffrage debates.

Kahan divides his work into two parts and five chapters. In part one, "The Discourse of Capacity," three chapters focus on published parliamentary papers and political essays to explore British, French, and German debates over the pros and cons of expanding the national, regional, or municipal suffrage in the periods from 1830 to 1847, 1848 to 1865, and 1866 to 1885. In part two, "Language and Culture," two chapters synthesize a wide variety of recent works on middle-class culture, social mobility, and the emergence of consumer society to suggest the precise nature of the historical contexts in which the discourse of capacity first rose to prominence in the political cultures of England, France, and Germany in the period from 1830 to 1885, then lost its influence in those same countries in the period from 1885 to 1914. An evocative "concluding note" identifies persistent echoes of the discourse of capacity in contemporary political and academic life, a topic to which Kahan promises to return in his next book.

One of the most valuable aspects of Kahan's work is his insistence on comparing the varieties of liberal discourse in three different national settings. European liberals may have argued about the vote in similar terms regardless of where they lived, but their individual debates took place under such different conditions that they produced different short-term political results and long-term historical consequences in every case. The British debates that culminated in the Great Reform Bill of 1832 may have begun at virtually exactly the same time as the French debates that culminated in the new national and municipal suffrage laws of 1831, for example, but liberal language appealed to different supporters and faced different opponents in England and France. British and French liberals may both have been reacting to the French Revolution of 1830 when they introduced proposals to expand the suffrage in their respective countries, but the British Parliament would ultimately enfranchise 15 to 20 percent of the adult male population in 1832 where the new French National Assembly only enfranchised 2 to 3 percent in 1831 (p. 37). Kahan explains this discrepancy by pointing to British liberals' greater political security in a country where they dominated Parliament, where they could count on even the most conservative land-owners to respect the legitimacy of constitutional monarchy, and where neither artisans nor members of the industrial working-class had yet mobilized in any number to demand their right to the vote. French liberals in the National Assembly, by contrast, had to contend with a hostile aristocracy on the right, a vocal minority of deputies with strongly democratic Republican sympathies on the left, and a volatile Parisian population with a fifty-year tradition of supporting revolutionary change outside in the street. The result, ironically, is that France, the country with the stronger revolutionary tradition, nevertheless became the country with the less expansive suffrage provisions in the period from 1830 to 1847.

Perhaps an even more surprising comparative result for this period comes from looking east to the situation of the German states in the *Vormärz*. While Kahan shows that liberals in England, France, and the German states were all more likely to accept arguments based on what he calls "the social version of capacity" (p. 24), arguments that stressed the importance of property qualifications as the basis for the vote, he also finds that it was German liberals who were the most likely also to speak and recognize arguments couched in what he calls the "individualist version of the language of capacity" (p. 25), arguments that focused instead on the existence of "a universal capacity and desire for education" as the proper indicator of political potential (p. 56). German liberals were also the most likely to embrace the term "democrat" as a word with positive connotations (p. 53). Finally, when it came to deciding who should vote, they were the most likely to recommend abandoning property requirements or putting them second to educational qualifications. Seeking to reconcile the tension between their desire to let all men vote and their desire to make sure that the most qualified voters would have the most substantial influence on the composition and behavior of the legislatures that resulted, German liberals designed a series of recommendations for indirect, tiered, or weighted systems of what Kahan describes as "universal but unequal suffrage" (p. 57).

Where chapter one explores reactions to the French Revolution of 1830, chapter two considers reactions to the European Revolutions of 1848. Here again, comparative surprises abound. Rather than opening the chapter with the French Provisional Government's famous proclamation of universal manhood suffrage during the February Revolution, a development that French liberals deplored, Kahan devotes the first section of this chapter instead to German liberals' debates at the Frankfurt parliament and in the Prussian Assembly, where, he maintains, "the Prussian suffrage system, radically different from any suffrage law adopted in France and England, was arguably the most successful of the liberal suffrage laws of the nineteenth century" (p. 77). While he admits the irony of awarding this title to a three-class suffrage system that was "not, strictly speaking, a liberal creation, nor in its formative stages subject to serious parliamentary debate," he points out that it "lasted longest, . . . [that it] assured liberal electoral dominance until 1879 and a significant liberal presence in the Prussian House of Delegates until the end of the Prussian Monarchy in 1918" (p. 77), and that if one looks only at the number of voters in the first two tiers, the Prussian suffrage under this system actually turns out to be broader than the English suffrage created by the Reform Act of 1832 (p. 78). Even John Stuart Mill apparently preferred the Prussian system to the British in this period; British liberals considered expanding the suffrage in ten separate debates between 1848 and 1865, but could come to no consensus on how to proceed. Meanwhile, French liberals in the same period did their best to find constitutional ways of limiting the universal male suffrage they had inherited from the more democratic founders of the Second Republic; in 1850, for example, they removed 30 per cent of their voters from the electoral rolls by extending the residency requirement from six months to three years (p. 83).

Chapter three continues the story by considering the history of liberalism from 1866 to 1885, the twenty-year period that Kahan describes as the one in which the language of capacity began to lose its appeal--first in France, where the

constitution of 1875 marked the last time that the leaders of the Third Republic made any serious attempt to limit the suffrage through registration or residency requirements; then in England, where the liberal participants in the debates over the Third Reform Act of 1884 started to redefine the “language of individualism” in ways that led them to speak about individual rights to vote instead of individual capacities for the vote (p. 139); and most ambiguously in Germany, where national unification represented the fulfillment of a long-standing liberal goal in 1871, but liberals themselves never held a majority in either the German Reichstag or the Prussian lower house after 1879.

Moving from part one to part two, chapters four and five identify the reasons for the decline of liberalism’s appeal by focusing on what Kahan identifies as key developments after “the watershed of 1885” (p. 179): less tolerance for social hierarchy, more social mobility, a change in the self-definition of the middle classes, and the rise of a consumer culture that facilitated the spread of middle-class values and strategies of self-presentation to those sections of the working-class that could increasingly afford to buy their clothes and domestic furnishings on credit. Kahan neatly sums up his argument here when he draws a parallel between the new structures of purchasing power and the new ideas about political aptitude: “Consumer culture offered people goods on credit, presuming they would pay later. In a consumer culture, it only made sense to offer them the vote the same way, to presume they would use it wisely instead of demanding proof of their capacity first, thus giving credit instead of demanding cash” (p. 189).

Kahan’s tight focus on liberal politicians’ arguments over who should vote accounts for both the strengths and the limitations of this analysis of what he describes in his book’s title as “the political culture of limited suffrage.” On the one hand, as he points out, “liberal portraits of the ideal voter served as the template for liberal cultural ideals and values” (p. 8). That being the case, analyzing the detailed records of parliamentary suffrage debates is indeed one of the best ways of discovering what kinds of voters liberal speakers were willing to publicly support and what kinds of political participation these same speakers were willing to publicly encourage. Kahan’s work takes liberals on their own terms, and the result is a study that does full justice to the nuance and complexity of their concerns as they argued over whether to define the ideal voter in terms of his property, his income, his tax payment, his profession, his residency, his literacy, his higher educational advancement, or any one of a wide variety of other factors that might predict his ability to cast the well-qualified ballot that would help in the creation of the best possible parliament or other representative government body.

On the other hand, however, as Kahan himself acknowledges, the same focus on parliamentary debate that helps him to make useful international comparisons by providing “a convenient and broadly commensurable index of liberal language” (p. 10) also hinders him from being able to consider other important contributions to the development of different European political cultures in the nineteenth century – the work of those who expressed themselves through newspapers, journals, social clubs, political leagues, protest movements, or other extra-parliamentary initiatives. To put it another way, while Kahan’s decision to focus on parliamentary debate may offer the best possible way of discovering how liberal political insiders decided whom they did and did not want to invite to join them in the exercise of legislative authority, that same decision limits the number of other ways he has of discovering the extent of the larger audience for their arguments. Although he can measure the varying strength of liberalism’s appeal in different times and places by looking at liberal politicians’ comparative degrees of success in winning parliamentary majorities in national elections in different countries, for example, he cannot determine the extent to which such political figures’ use of the discourse of capacity either appealed or did not appeal to those who remained ineligible to participate in elections at all.

Kahan’s decision to explain nineteenth-century liberals to us in their own terms, in other words, does not leave him much space to talk about why their terms differed so much either from those of their opponents at the time or from those of their critics today. When, for example, he identifies “all real liberals” as those who “supported universal suffrage, but only for a future time when everyone was really capable” (p. 8), he leaves it to the related endnote to explain that “following contemporary usage, “universal suffrage” here will refer to voting rights for all adult *males*, except in rare instances when votes for women are in question” (p. 203, n. 16). Explicit arguments over whether or not women should vote may have been rare in the halls of nineteenth-century British parliaments, French assemblies, and German Landtags and Reichstags, but that hardly means that they were absent from the nineteenth-century political landscape as a whole. To focus only on the French case, for example, two decades of historical work from a range of critical perspectives has already documented the lives and analyzed the work of the various social reformers, political activists, utopian socialists, and republican feminists who demanded women’s right to consideration in public life during the July Monarchy, the Revolution of 1848, the Second Republic, the Second

Empire, the Paris Commune, and the founding decades of the Third Republic.[2] Kahan hints at the international dimensions of the argument when he mentions that British philosopher John Stuart Mill and German historian Heinrich von Sybel disagreed with each other about whether or not women should have the right to vote (p. 13), but this tantalizing reference is not enough to explain why so many liberals used the phrase “universal suffrage” in such a partial sense that women were not included.

Kahan’s innovative international focus on the different dialects of the discourse of capacity explains many, if not quite all, of the internal contradictions of liberal political theory. It should be interesting reading for anyone who wants to study French liberalism or parliamentary politics in a comparative European context.

NOTES

[1] Alan S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001). Kahan is also the editor, with Olivier Zunz, of *The Tocqueville Reader: A Life in Letters and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), and the translator of de Tocqueville’s *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, ed. François Furet and Françoise Mélonio, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 2001).

[2] See, for example, Yolande Cohen and Françoise Thébaud, eds., *Féminismes et identités nationales: Les processus d’intégration des femmes en politique* (Lyons: Centre Jacques Cartier, 1998); Steven C. Hause, with Anne R. Kenney, *Women’s Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984); Laurence Klejman and Florence Rochefort, *L’égalité en marche: Le féminisme sous la Troisième République* (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques et Des femmes, 1989); Claire Goldberg Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); Claire Goldberg Moses and Leslie Wahl Rabine, eds., *Feminism, Socialism, and French Romanticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Karen M. Offen, *European Feminisms, 1700-1950: A Political History* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2000); Michèle Riot-Sarcey, *La démocratie à l’épreuve des femmes: Trois figures critiques du pouvoir, 1830-1848* (Paris, 1994); Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

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