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 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
consideration in public life during the July Monarchy, the Revolution of 1848, the Second Republic, the Second
social reformers, political activists, utopian socialists, and republican feminists who demanded women’s right to
work from a range of critical perspectives has already documented the lives and analyzed the work of the various
century political landscape as a whole. To focus only on the French case, for example, two decades of historical
assemblies, and German Landtags and Reichstags, but that hardly means that they were absent from the nineteenth-
except in rare instances when votes for women are in question” (p. 203, n. 16). Explicit arguments over whether or
explain that “following contemporary usage, “universal suffrage” here will refer to voting rights for all adult
suffrage, but only for a future time when everyone was really capable” (p. 8), he leaves it to the related endnote to
winning parliamentary majorities in national elections in different countries, for example, he cannot determine the
liberalism’s appeal in different times and places by looking at liberal politicians’ comparative degrees of success in
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
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. 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


Jean Elisabeth Pedersen
Eastman School of Music
University of Rochester
jpedersen@esm.rochester.edu

Copyright © 2004 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 4 (November 2004), No. 113

ISSN 1553-9172