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Freedom from Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism

Abstract:

Freedom from Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism provides a strikingly new account of the dominant political and social theory of our time. In a pathbreaking reframing of the historical debate, the book charts the historical development of liberalism in response to the characteristic fears and hopes of Western liberals since the late eighteenth century. It shows how liberal arguments typically rely on three pillars: freedom, markets, and morals, or politics, economics, and morality/religion, to create bulwarks against fear and support for the liberal goal of a world in which no one need be afraid. When liberals ignore one or more pillars, their arguments fail to convince. The book combines accounts of well-known thinkers including Tocqueville and Rawls with discussion of less-known but pivotal actors such as A. V. Dicey and Jane Addams. Extending from Adam Smith and Montesquieu to today's encounters between liberals and populists, the book examines the twists and turns of the liberal tradition while demonstrating its fundamental continuity: the liberal tradition is an oyster whose overlapping layers never entirely disappear from view. The examinations of liberal thinkers are supplemented by discussions of how liberals have dealt with crucial issues. Some of these issues, such as the debates over male or female suffrage, or the relationship of liberalism to colonialism or nationalism are familiar; others, such as liberal anti-Catholicism, will come as a surprise to most readers. In all cases, Freedom from Fear sheds new light on liberal thought and practice past and present.