

The politics of 'thinking about politics': An insightful but unfortunately polemical festschrift of Michael Freeden

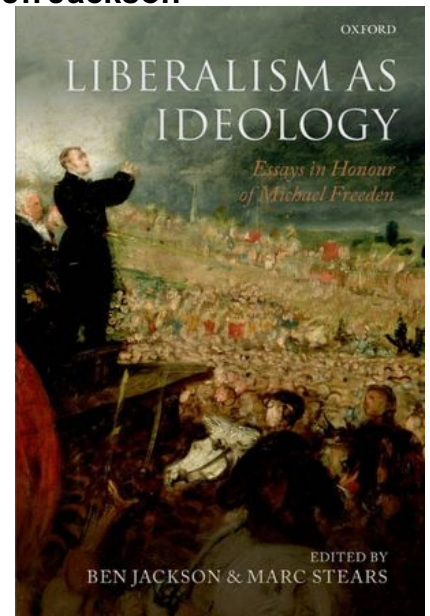
Jul 5 2012

*This book brings together an international group of historians, philosophers, and political scientists to evaluate the impact of **Michael Freeden**'s work and to reassess its central claims. Although the book contains several highlights, **Mark Fisher** feels that the pervasive back-slapping and high-fiving characteristic of a festschrift works largely to undermine the volume as a critical study.*



Liberalism and Ideology: Essays in Honour of Michael Freeden. Ben Jackson and Marc Stears (eds.). Oxford University Press. February 2012.

In the concluding essay to *Liberalism and Ideology*, a collection of essays written in honour of [Michael Freeden](#), the Oxford don himself states that 'responding to this academic gift of supreme generosity is a delight, an embarrassment, and a challenge.' If it were not for the repeated praise of Freeden's sincerity throughout the volume's pages, one might wonder if this wasn't itself a bit hyperbolically generous. Freeden has known many honours over the course of his career: in addition to a Professorship in the Oxford Department of Politics and IR, he was made founding editor of his own journal in 1996, the *Journal of Political Ideologies*, and in 2002 opened an associated Center for Political Ideologies. Similarly, he has known a few great challenges, too: aside from those inherent in the 'honours' listed above, he's used his post at Oxford, the epicenter of liberal analytic philosophy in the Anglo-American world, to become one of the most determined English-speaking critics of that very style of political thinking. Against the backdrop of such a career, it says much about Freeden that he approaches this *festschrift* with such humility, but it says perhaps even more about the value contained between its covers.



According to its editors, Ben Jackson and Marc Stears, two ambitions guided the creation of this volume. The first, and most obvious, was to do honour to Freeden's far-ranging contributions to the study of political thought. This is accomplished very well by the two sections that structure the

volume, each loosely meant to reflect the major phases of Freedden's scholarship (thus far). The first section features essays that engage with Freedden's early work on the history of liberalism in the English-speaking world. These pieces treat a wide range of different 'liberal languages' and generally serve to flaunt the sheer wealth of Freedden's historical insight into the flexibility of the liberal tradition during the twentieth-century. In addition to novel refinements and extensions of Freedden's work on British 'new liberalism' and American 'philosophical liberalism', essays in this section also seek to extend Freedden's work by offering studies on both European and Indian liberalism.

In the second section, Freedden's more recent work on ideology and the role of ideological analysis in political theory takes center stage. Here, the general thrust of the essays is to compare Freedden's thinking with the contemporary schools of 'analytic' and 'realist' political philosophy, best represented by the thought of John Rawls and Raymond Geuss, respectively, as well as to situate Freedden's method amongst alternative approaches to both the historical study of political thought and ideology. In doing so, the volume's contributors draw out what is truly distinctive to his study of both with skill. The result is a very precise appreciation of Freedden's unique awareness of the importance of the political philosopher as a producer of political ideology, the inefficacy of analytic political philosophy in producing successful ideology, and the need for students of political thought to take a step back to study the ideological fray from a distance (in Freedden's language, to 'think about politics' rather than to 'think politically'). In taking this last step, Freedden's research program calls for nothing short of a revolution in the discipline. For his supporters, this is unfortunately a revolution that the majority of his colleagues will do their best to resist.

In this reviewer's opinion, the highlight of the volume is Freedden's own concluding essay, provocatively titled "The Professional Responsibilities of the Political Theorist". In very broad strokes, Freedden lays out an ideal that he wishes to guide the revolution, painting a portrait of a theorist who is tirelessly self-aware, open to a wide variety of approaches, tentative in his or her findings, and simultaneously accessible and detached. Few, I think, will doubt that such a scholar would be a welcome addition to any politics faculty. A great number more, however, may worry about the feasibility of this ideal in practice. Nevertheless, the spirit with which Freedden writes, and the general good sense that the piece encourages will likely prompt many theorists to reflect on their practices in a salutary way.

If the volume succeeds admirably in its first ambition, that of doing justice to the breadth of Freedden's thinking, it fares less well in its second ambition, that of creating a critical volume with appeal to a wider audience. In this, the pervasive back-slapping and high-fiving that is characteristic of a *festschrift* works largely to undermine the volume as a critical study. To its editors' credit, the volume does include an essay by Gerald Gaus seeking to defend analytic philosophy from many of Freedden's claims. However, in both this essay and Freedden's cursory response to it, the reader is left with an impression of two scholars merely rehearsing old arguments which they have long since lost hope will convince their adversary.

The congratulatory tone of the volume serves furthermore to limit the number of readers who will likely take the time to engage with its arguments. Little effort is made to take the claims of liberal analytic philosophers seriously, and instead they are often the recipient of passive-aggressive jabs by the contributors. Indeed, one of the threads that holds the volume together as a totality (excluding Gaus' essay) is a hostility to liberal analytic philosophy. This will likely limit the appeal of the volume to those who are already sympathetic to the contributors' stance and to further alienate analytic philosophers from a potentially productive engagement with Freeden's ideas.

For scholars of all ages, this volume will serve very well as a thorough but digestible introduction to Freeden's work. Furthermore, younger scholars who find themselves at odds with the dominant practices of Anglo-American political theory would benefit greatly from its content, as the volume details a way forward that may not have previously considered. Unfortunately, those who do not feel such angst in the Anglo-American academy will likely find this volume unpalatable, despite the high hopes of its editors. In this, it is a missed opportunity.

Mark Fisher is presently pursuing a PhD in political theory at the University of California at Berkeley. Prior to this, Mark earned an MPhil in Political Thought and Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge and a BSc in Government at the LSE. Mark works primarily on the history of Ancient Greek political thought and is currently preparing a dissertation that will track Athenian theories of decline in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War. [Read more reviews by Mark.](#)

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