

Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: Professor Helena Rosenblatt is a professor of history. Her specialty is 18th and 19th Century European Intellectual History. She is the author and editor of several books, who has written the timely and critically-acclaimed *Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to 21st Century*. Welcome to The Thought Project.

Helena R.: Thank you, Tanya. It's really nice to be here.

Tanya Domi: It's great to have you. Liberalism, the idea of liberalism and the rise of illiberalism is on the tongue of many pundits and is included in countless private and public conversations going on in America today, and certainly throughout the world at this moment. How could you have been so prescient about this topic and its timing?

Helena R.: Well, I'd love to take credit and say that I was so prescient, but I've just been interested in liberalism for a very long time and I think it was kind of a happy coincidence, actually. Of course, now, I realize how very, very timely the topic is, but I set out with a very historical agenda, if you will, in mind.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, a survey, indeed, I think. That in-depth survey going back to the Romans.

Helena R.: That's right. Well, when I first started, and I was approached by an editor at a major academic press, there was really no history of liberalism on the market and there was nothing like it. People mention liberalism. There's all sorts of ideas out there about liberalism and, of course now, as you mentioned, about with illiberalism growing around the world or people writing books defending liberalism, attacking liberalism, blaming liberalism, all sorts of books out there, but a history of liberalism certainly not like the one I've written exists.

Tanya Domi: It's got a unique niche. This book, which I've already introduced to our listeners, but the *Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the 21st Century*, you said about this book, this book is really about words and that you offer a word history of liberalism because it is so misunderstood and muddled, perhaps, in the minds of many people. Indeed, it is proving to be quite a distinct topic of conversation in present-day America. For example, this word, the idea of liberalism, is certainly under attack, has been under attack for quite some time, and many people don't even like to call themselves liberal. I see this sort of migration to progressive now from liberalism and so even the word itself is tainted. So tell us this history. I think it's absolutely fascinating.

Helena R.: Well, thank you. Yes, I noticed when I started this project, I thought I would do a pretty straightforward traditional approach with a chapter each, let's say, on the great liberal thinkers. I might start with Locke, move on to Smith, maybe certainly John Stuart Mill would be in there. When I started to think a little bit more about this and I started to

ask, like, who said that John Locke is a founding father of liberalism? Did he mention it? Did he call himself a liberal? Was there something called liberalism at the time? Was there even a word? Of course, I started then to do research and now there's really exciting. You can do word searches and stuff like that, so I discovered some very interesting things.

Helena R.: But what I wanted to do, I thought that what people do when they write histories of liberalism is that they start with the concept of liberalism. Then they go back in history and they find pieces of it in these great thinkers. They line them up and they kind of cherry pick them and their ideas to add up to this thing called liberalism. If you look in a lot of places whenever they discuss liberalism, very often the scholar or the writer will start by saying, "It's a slippery concept, it's a vague term, it's hard to define, but I will define it this way." So it's like a personal definition and then they construct the history to justify that definition.

Helena R.: What I wanted to do and as a historian, I thought it would be really interesting to kind of reverse the process and say, "Well, wait a second. What did liberals say about liberalism? How did they describe themselves and what they were for? What did liberalism mean to the people who used the term?" I traced this. That's why it's the Lost History of Liberalism. It's a very historical approach that follows this word, but more than the word. It's not a semantic history because it's a concept, right? Liberalism is a bundle of concepts, I would say, and it gets redefined over time. All sorts of interesting, surprising things are discovered through this approach, which is a new approach, a conceptual history approach.

Tanya Domi: I think it's appropriate. So many people have different concepts of what liberalism means. I may speak in my class about the liberal form of governance, and it's not political. It's actually a construct in the way governments establish themselves and share the public good and etc, etc.

Tanya Domi: Anyway, it's very interesting how it gets all muddled, and it's been really perverted, particularly in America at this time. I would say that a lot of people, Americans, are so, I think, really self-absorbed that they really don't know and you remind the readers quite effectively, that actually the French invented liberalism and gave rise to its meaning and the Germans later reformed it. You argue that France not only invented it, but it's been central, central to its existence. It seemingly is manifest, I think, in its national motto of "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité". Indeed, its gift to the United States, the Statue of Liberty, came after the conclusion of the American Revolution.

Tanya Domi: Talk about the French in this context. I think it's really important that we remind ourselves and reclaim history, so to speak.

Helena R.: Well, a couple of things then. The word 'liberalism' was coined in the aftermath of the French Revolution, oh, around 1812 to '14 and you know Tanya, it was actually a pejorative. It was a smear word, at first, like a lot of isms are, and it was called a religio-heresy. That's interesting because a lot of these isms in the 19th century were Anabaptism, Calvinism, for example, isms-

Tanya Domi: Connected to the church.

Helena R.: Yeah, and isms are generally bad, at first, and then eventually they will take on the word themselves. But yes, throughout the centuries, I mean the 19th century afterwards, liberalism is very much attached to the French successive revolutions. They had one in 1789, another one in 1830, another one in 1848, another one in 1870. Even in America, the word doesn't really enter the political lexicon until the early 20th century.

Tanya Domi: Century.

Helena R.: So this idea of an Anglo-American tradition is a construct. Traditions usually are constructed after the fact and we can go into why that happened. But an interesting fact, for example, because it's hard for people to understand this French origins and the Frenchness of the word and the discussion, in 1830, the Encyclopedia Americana does not even have an entry on liberalism. The entry on liberalism first appears in the Encyclopedia of Political Science at the end of the 19th century and then it's a translation of a French article.

Tanya Domi: Interesting.

Helena R.: In America, when they used the word 'liberal' in the political sense because, of course, the word 'liberal' had been in use for a long time. I'm not suggesting that the word 'liberal' was invented, but it meant something slightly different. But the word 'liberal' in the political sense in America and in England was often written with an E at the end or in italics to sort of indicate its foreignness and something quite scary to people.

Tanya Domi: Alien.

Helena R.: Alien and kind of scary because it was attached to revolution, to upheaval and to those French who keep having revolutions.

Tanya Domi: Interesting. It's really interesting. Right now, it's an interesting thing to think about given yesterday's events like at the UN where President Macron basically said, "We're not going to trade with the Americans around these issues," and, of course, we know what happened with Mr. Trump, who was laughed at, really, by representatives of the world.

Tanya Domi: So not only is liberalism comes late to America, but you have asserted, which I find absolutely fascinating and I didn't really put it together, was that you have asserted that at its heart, most liberals were moralists. Of course, I understand who the moralists were, particularly in the late 19th century and 20th century in America. You say this is a fact lost to history and so tell me, how did this out picture when you think about moralists in connection to liberalism. I'm thinking, quite frankly, like listeners to think, I'm thinking of the abolitionists and I'm also thinking of the temperance movement in America.

Helena R.: Sure, but I would go further back.

Tanya Domi: Please.

Helena R.: I will go further back and I can return to this idea of the modern or the common, the current definition of liberalism.

Helena R.: When I said that people have an idea of liberalism and then go back into history to find evidence of this, and I told you that people say it's vague, it's hard to define, so one thing people seemed to agree, whether they are for liberalism or against liberalism, whatever their approach is, people when they describe scholars in particular and writers of all kinds, when they talk about liberalism, they all say it's all about rights, individual rights and individual interests and the government is there to protect us.

Helena R.: Well, it's very interesting because if you go back to the early instances of the word, the liberals of the time, somebody like Benjamin Constant, who is a founder of liberalism, one of the first who theorized liberalism, he's just as much about duties and about goodness and about the common good than he is about the individual. Madam de Stael, too, and the early liberals never mentioned rights without mentioning duties. They speak about things like self-sacrifice, generosity, compassion.

Helena R.: This goes back actually to the earlier definition of the word 'liberal' so my first chapter, I talk about the meaning of the word 'liberal' and 'liberality', which was the noun that went with 'liberal' before 'liberalism'. So if liberalism was invented and coined in the early 19th century, 'liberal' and 'liberality' were the terms that go all the way back to Roman times.

Tanya Domi: They were antecedent to this.

Helena R.: They're antecedents and they're very much moral concepts, right?

Tanya Domi: Right.

Helena R.: And they're attached to civic work. Going back Cicero, to be liberal was to be a good citizen. It was to love freedom, but also to be generous, to be magnanimous. Liberality meant magnanimity and they thought society couldn't cohere without this kind of sacrifice to others, the very opposite of self-interest.

Tanya Domi: So it infers duties-

Helena R.: Duties-

Tanya Domi: and responsibilities.

Helena R.: ... and responsibilities to the common good. It's something that seems to have dropped out of current discussions. Liberals rarely today, I find, use that language to describe themselves. Patriotism, moral duties. It's as if they have-

Tanya Domi: Vanquished it.

Helena R.: ... ceded to that word to the conservatives. We're very good at talking about patriotism, right, but it's 19th century. Liberals spoke about patriotism all the time and about ...

Tanya Domi: It's very interesting. I actually see a research into this, particularly really in places like Facebook. There's lots of discussion about patriotism these days and it's among people that you would call progressive or a liberal. Having served in the military myself-

Helena R.: Oh, I didn't know.

Tanya Domi: ... and looking at that obligation, 15 years, there's a sense of patriotism and duty and obligation to the country.

Tanya Domi: I actually think that later, when I worked in the State Department, there's another sense of duty and obligation and patriotism and there's a lot of discussion about that going on right now. Because a lot of us who feel invested in the country and what the country's principles and values, how those were out pictured have seen to have disappeared in the last two years and there's great lamentation about that these days.

Helena R.: Right. It seems that the issues are very often framed in terms of rights and choices. I would never be opposed to that and neither would the liberals I'm discussing, but they really did believe that you have rights because you have duties. These rights will help you become a better person, a more giving person, or a more educated person. That may sound strange to us today, but for example, the right, freedom of conscience that's supposed to make you a more sincere religious person and more interested in doing good in this life, as opposed to engaging in a lot of ceremonies and what they regard as superstitions. Freedom of thought also was meant to help you educate yourself. All of this to make better citizens.

Helena R.: I don't want to exaggerate what I'm saying here, but it's just a lost dimension of liberalism. It's rarely discussed. Like I said, most people just talk about it.

Tanya Domi: And you never claimed that in this text. This is not really nonsecular. I think it's actually conflated. In your Guardian op-ed, you state that, "A common mistake is to conflate liberalism with democracy. Indeed, the two concepts are not synonyms," I'm quoting you. You actually assert that many of the founders and the inventors or creators of liberalism were far from being democrats, small D.

Helena R.: Exactly.

Tanya Domi: Can you expound on that?

Helena R.: Absolutely. Well, I was saying that liberalism emerged in the wake of the French Revolution. Liberals wanted to safeguard the achievements of the revolution. I would say of rule of law, civil equality, representative constitutional government, a number of rights. When they looked at the people and democracy, they thought of the crowds in the street, the violence that had occurred. It was under the terror, this word-

Tanya Domi: Mobs.

Helena R.: Mobs, yeah, anarchy, that kind of thing so they wanted to ... they believe that the vote and office-holding should be based on capacity and to have capacity required, they thought, some property and some education. So there was a tension between liberalism and democracy all throughout the 19th century. The liberals were not the first to suggest expanding the electorates to all men, not to mention women.

Tanya Domi: One person, one vote?

Helena R.: Right. When they start talking about liberal democracy, now there's an interesting term again.

Tanya Domi: Liberal democracy.

Helena R.: Yeah, happens at mid-century and it's an aspirational term. It's not a descriptive term. It's another word, a democracy that has been made liberal and what do you mean by that? Well, it's one that is moralized and educated because that word 'liberal' continues to have that moral meaning, that it kind of brought with it from ancient Roman times. There are lots of texts and articles in newspapers where they speak of making democracy liberal.

Helena R.: This, again, happens in France. Under, for example, Napoleon the Third, who institutes universal male suffrage and it ends up as a dictatorship, the people elect a dictator. We can talk about whether those were real elections or fair elections or not.

Tanya Domi: Sure.

Helena R.: But in principle, they have this view of the crowd, of the people as being either irrational and violent and/or very gullible to dictators and demagogue so what you need to do is educate them and moralize them so that they can see beyond their immediate self-interest.

Tanya Domi: So that in a democracy, you're actually ruled by people or people are ... the American version of democracy is more a representative democracy so you keep the people under control more or less, right?

Helena R.: That's right. There was a confusion about the term. Here we go again. There was a confusion about the term for a long time. Some people thought of democracy as direct democracy. One man, one-

Tanya Domi: One man, one vote, right.

Helena R.: ... or as like mob rule. It was built into the term and, over time, they start to think of it as representative democracy and that's how you get to liberal democracy, eventually.

Tanya Domi: So this idea of mobs, and the mob taking over has always been out there. It's sort of like the boogeyman, the potential for overthrow-

Helena R.: And they're undereducated.

Tanya Domi: ... and they're uneducated and ...

Helena R.: And can lead to populist results-

Tanya Domi: Right, populist

Helena R.: when they're not educated, and they don't really know what their real interest is. There's a good deal of elitism in this as well, as you can imagine.

Tanya Domi: Oh, absolutely. This is a good segue to talk about, I suppose, more in a contemporary context, but maybe perhaps there's something historical that you can introduce into this. But we are witnessing a global rise of illiberalism and we're seeing it from India to the Philippines to Europe, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Turkey and, of course, here at home in the United States. This is animating lots of discussions, both in government and outside of government, both in the academy and in think tanks and there's a lot of concern about it.

Tanya Domi: You mentioned this in the opening of your op-ed where you cite Fareed Zakaria's book, which, of course, I read a quarter of a century ago, it's hard to believe, and then all these questions of existential crisis that are now animating discussions, illiberalism, what do you have to say about that? How does that maybe intersect or how is it informed by your book?

Helena R.: Well, again, some people were confused by this notion of a liberal democracy. How can you have such a thing? If you think of what I've just said, that liberalism and democracy are actually two traditions that have become intertwined at different times in history and they certainly are today, but they don't mean the same thing. You can have a democracy that does not respect the rule of law, various rights as we see around the world, but that claim that they are democracies. Of course, these dictators and would-be demagogues, they appeal directly to the people. They say they embody the will of the people so they are the real expression, if you will, of the people. They say they're against the elites and they are the true representative of the people.

Helena R.: You have this going back to Napoleon, the first Napoleon, Napoleon the Third. Of course, you didn't have the media that you have today, but you had similar processes and the ways of going about things using media, using spectacles, using ceremony, all the methods that they had disposable to them, the Napoleons, and then you can talk about Bismarck, to appeal directly to the people.

Helena R.: This is what the liberals at the time got very worried about and upset about. They saw this manipulative form of democracy. It was some kind of democracy because it was

based on universal male suffrage, but it wasn't liberal because it was twisted, in a sense, and it did not respect-

Tanya Domi: Perverted.

Helena R.: ... Perverted. It was not respectful of rights, yeah.

Tanya Domi: I think that not only this existential crisis we're talking about right now, but we're also actually looking at the American democracy itself being at risk. Yesterday probably was sort of a dark day in the history of the United States going before the world body of the UN and the president of the United States is laughed at. He, actually, as you were describing these dictators historically, I was thinking of Mr. Trump.

Helena R.: Of course.

Tanya Domi: I mean he epitomizes that. He goes around the country to do these rallies in the places where he won. He won't go where he didn't win and he says, "I'm the person that's changing everything and this is the best it's ever been and I can do it. You just have to trust me. It'll be all right. It'll be the best it's ever been."

Tanya Domi: Liberalism is talking about this as to be feared, obviously, but when you start talking about the [inaudible 00:25:04] of those principles and those values of democracy and how liberal democracy is being perverted, how does the historian in you view that?

Helena R.: Well, I'll take another example, which shows kind of the flip side of that and we're talking about America, so let me talk about Abraham Lincoln, that he was a model for many of these liberals because for a very long time, educated people in France and in Europe thought that this American experiment was doomed to failure. Here you have a large democracy and they believe that the large democracies were not going to work and they were going to degenerate. Here, you see all the problems of democracy in Europe, American democracy is bound to fail. Then you have Lincoln and why do they call him a liberal who is liberalizing democracy, educating democracy? Because they think of him as somebody engaged in moral uplift. He is not a demagogue, even though he appeals to the people, because he does not appeal to their lowest instinct.

Helena R.: That's another thing that demagogues do and that the liberals at the time were worried about, appealing to their lowest instinct instead of lifting them up, moralizing them. This sounds very kind of old-fashioned and actually it shows how cynical we have become in a way. It sounds this way, but they really did think that he was engaged in moral uplift and this made him a great liberal leader of a democracy.

Helena R.: Gladstone was looked that way, too. His enemies, the Tories and the Conservatives, accused him of demagoguery. He had this great power of speech.

Tanya Domi: Oratory.

Helena R.: Oratory. But he also was seen to educate democracy. His speeches would be full of examples. It meant to educate the population and tell them about self-sacrifice and what it meant to be a citizen and how important it was to vote, what a trust it was to vote.

Helena R.: Well, it's not a right. For liberals the vote is not a right. I mean maybe today it is, but I'm saying in the 19th century-

Tanya Domi: Century, it wasn't.

Helena R.: ... it was a trust, not a right. So you needed to have some kind of capacity to exercise it.

Tanya Domi: And judgment.

Helena R.: And judgment.

Tanya Domi: Clear judgment. So the book is Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to 21st Century. Congratulations. It was great to have you here today. Very soon, next week, as a matter of fact, you are hosting here at The Graduate Center, an all-day conference, The Many Faces of Liberalism on October 2nd. There'll be an evening program as well, the GC Presents. Congratulations. This is certainly a good time to have moral link and less Trump.

Helena R.: Yes. Thank you, Tanya. It's been a pleasure.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to the Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Professor Helena Rosenblatt of The Graduate Center.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.