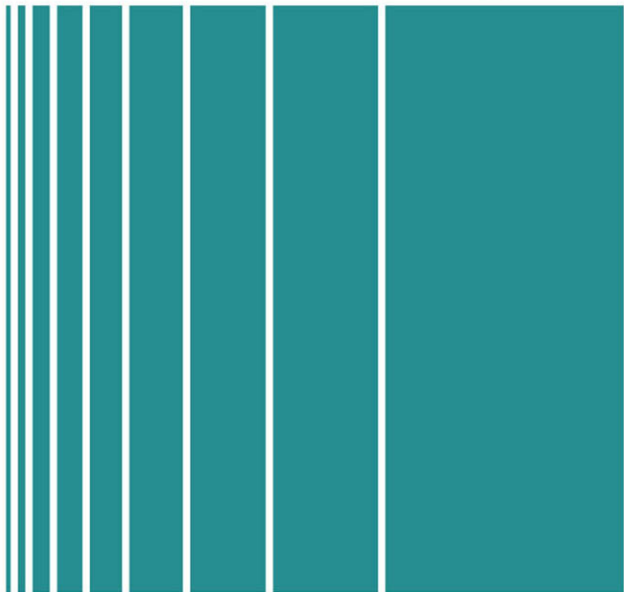


# HOBHOUSE LIBERALISM



## **LIBERALISM**

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L. T. HOBHOUSE

# LIBERALISM

Introduction by  
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## INTRODUCTION

When *Liberalism* was first published in 1911 a critical reviewer in the London *Spectator* observed, "It would be impossible to have the essential principles of any political creed more clearly stated than they are in this little book." As a conservative who found the author's liberal principles leading to "an odious conclusion of despair," the reviewer added: "Professor Leonard Hobhouse is a philosopher and a master of precise statement; though he employs here close processes of reasoning in a small space there is not a paragraph or a sentence that is too elliptical to be easily understood. From this point of view the book is an exceptional achievement. But we hope and believe that the book, through those very virtues, will do as much to make people draw back from the creed propounded as it will do to attract and convert."<sup>1</sup>

Curiously, however, the initial appearance of *Liberalism* attracted little attention; although one of the least reviewed (it received only two general notices), it became in time one of the most cited of Hobhouse's sixteen books, and his name joined those of Locke, Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and T. H. Green on the honor roll of liberal philosophers. Years later, in 1945, when William Aylott Orton wrote *The Liberal Tradition* he observed, "The obligation I share with all liberals to the work and teaching of L. T. Hobhouse will, I trust, be evident." And later still, in 1962, when C. Wright Mills wrote *The Marxists* he said that Hobhouse's *Liberalism* was "the best twentieth-century statement of liberal ideals I know." Reprinted eight times before it was allowed to go

<sup>1</sup> *The Spectator*, Vol. 107 (August 12, 1911), p. 248.

out of print in 1950, *Liberalism* is again being made available in response to the recurrent demand for its articulation of liberal thought.

Leonard Trelawny Hobhouse was the product of a remarkably proper and conventional Victorian background. He was born in St. Ive near Liskeard in 1864, the youngest of seven children of the Venerable Reginald Hobhouse, Archdeacon of Bodmin, and Caroline Trelawny, daughter of Sir William Trelawny. The father went to Eton and Oxford; the son went to Oxford after preparation at Marlborough College. Leonard Hobhouse received his B.A. at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in 1887, and became a Fellow of Merton College. Three years later he became an Assistant Tutor at Corpus, and in 1894 was elected a Fellow there. He had received the very best of a classical education (he was taught Latin even before he entered school) and yet, evidently, his restless mind encountered difficulties in reconciling this learning to the actual experience he encountered. His father was a staunch conservative; at Marlborough, Leonard found great intellectual excitement in the liberal works of John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Giuseppe Mazzini. He was an active member of the school debating society, upholding, it might be noted, the side of "democracy." His intellectual interest in philosophy quite naturally reached outward into sociology and politics. John A. Hobson, the economist, observed in his memoir of Hobhouse that "though he was always 'disinterested' in his pursuit of philosophic truth, knowledge and the life of reason were never conceived by him as ends in themselves, but as contributions to the wider purpose of a better human life. To this extent and in this sense he remained always a pragmatist. He sought to obtain a body of truth on the conduct of life in order that those who assented to it might apply it to human betterment."<sup>2</sup> Late in the 1880's and in the early 1890's Hobhouse gave evidence of a sensitive social conscience and became active in the cause of trade unionism and workers' education; even though Oxford at that time hardly provided a congenial atmosphere for one of such sympathies. While, along with Graham Wallas, he was organizing conferences at Oxford on questions relating to trade unionism, he was writing philosophical articles for *Mind* on "Experimental Certainty," "Induc-

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Hobson and Morris Ginsberg, *L. T. Hobhouse* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), pp. 26-7.

tion and Deduction," and "Some Problems of Conception." His practical interest in contemporary problems is found in his short first book, *The Labour Movement* (1893); his philosophical interests are shown in his second book, the monumental *The Theory of Knowledge* (1896), which went into three editions.

In 1897, when Hobhouse was thirty-three years old, he left Oxford to take on a new vocation: editorial writer of the *Manchester Guardian*. In thus stepping out of the ivory tower and into a world of immediate judgments he took up again a line of interests that he had had earlier as a student. At Marlborough he had been one of the editors of the school paper, the *Marlburian*; at Corpus he had been active in the Pelican Essay Club. As a member of the editorial staff of the *Guardian* he could join his obvious journalistic abilities with his maturing liberal views. Yet the five years he spent on the *Guardian* were exhausting years for all that they were active, exciting, and creative ones. In Manchester he did not quit his academic interests but added to them. He became Professor of Sociology at Owens College (later the University of Manchester); he spent his days in scholarly research and writing and publishing his third book, *Mind in Evolution* (1901). He took an active part in political protests against the Boer War, and continued to champion trade unionism, old age pensions, and what for the day was described as left-wing liberalism. At night he worked on his articles and editorials for the *Guardian*. During his last year with the paper he wrote some 322 full-length book reviews or long articles. It was all too much, and in 1902 he gave up his active editorial work on the *Guardian* and left Manchester for London.

After a course of lectures at Birmingham University, another at the University of London, another book, *Democracy and Reactions* (1904, his protest against British imperialism), and a year-and-a-half stint as editor again on the short-lived *Tribune*, Hobhouse went back to full-time academic life by accepting an appointment as the first Professor of Sociology at the University of London. He held this position from 1907 until his death in 1929. The range and scope of his mind over these years was truly impressive as he sought, like Spencer before him, to integrate a vast body of knowledge into something akin to a comprehensive system of thought which drew upon anthropology for its understanding of the beginnings, worked through psychology, eco-

nomics, and political science toward the philosophically desired end of a harmonious universe. This comprehensiveness and sense of direction may be seen in the titles of some of his books: *Morals in Evolution* (1906); *Social Evolution and Political Theory* (a companion piece to *Liberalism*, both published in 1911); *Development and Purpose* (1913); *The Metaphysical Theory of the State* (1918), an attack on the theories of Hegel and Bosanquet prompted by the First World War; *The Elements of Social Justice* (1921); *Social Development* (1924). In the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* Hobhouse wrote the articles "Comparative Ethics," and "Comparative Psychology"; his last published articles were "Aristocracy" and "Christianity in its Sociological Bearings," written for the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*. Again, the breadth of the man, and the respect in which he was held in America as well as in England may be seen in the fact that upon various occasions he was invited to be a Professor (of Sociology presumably) at the University of Wisconsin, of Political Science at Columbia, of Philosophy at Harvard, while in addition invitations for lectureships were extended by Yale and the University of California.

Guido de Ruggiero, in *The History of European Liberalism* (1927), wrote, "The best formulation of the new English Liberalism of the twentieth century is in our opinion that of Hobhouse. Here we find the teachings of Mill and Green in a modernized form."<sup>3</sup> Hobhouse endeavored in England, as did John Dewey in the United States, to reconstruct social philosophy so that the traditional values of individualism might be preserved even as they were turned toward social betterment and harmonious personal and social fulfillment.

*Liberalism* was written at a time in English politics when there was a fundamental division between the old liberalism, which was defined, doctrinaire, and dying, and the new liberalism, which was aspiring, amorphous, and still largely inarticulated. On the one hand there was a clear-cut body of doctrine and a decimated political following; on the other hand there was a growing political movement which lacked a defined social doctrine. In the eyes of many the old liberalism, which had been associated with the doctrines of "peace, retrenchment, and reform," with freedom

<sup>3</sup> Guido de Ruggiero, *The History of European Liberalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), p. 155.

of trade and freedom of contract, died with Gladstone in 1898. "The nineteenth century might be called the age of Liberalism," Hobhouse wrote, "yet its close saw the fortunes of that great movement brought to their lowest ebb." Peace gave way to the wars of imperialism—in England the Boer War, in the United States the Spanish-American War. Retrenchment gave way to armament races, and reform no longer meant the abolition of such restraints on trade as the old Corn Laws but new "restrictive" legislation passed in the interest of social reform. "In the politics of the world," an article in the *New York Nation* noted in 1900, "Liberalism is a declining almost a defunct force. Only a remnant, old men for the most part, still uphold the Liberal doctrine, and when they are gone, it will have no champions."<sup>4</sup> Hobhouse's reformulation of liberalism was addressed, however, to a new generation; it was to the "younger men," he once wrote, that he had addressed his book on the subject.<sup>5</sup> For Hobhouse saw in the younger generation of university men the best hope for social reform. In 1911, when *Liberalism* was published, Hobhouse gave a course of lectures at Columbia University. The excitement of political reform in America then affected him and returning to England he wrote an enthusiastic article in *The Contemporary Review* entitled "The New Spirit in America." "Altogether one might hazard the prediction," he wrote, "that what the universities think to-day the United States will think tomorrow; and the universities are thinking in terms of a heightened social consciousness, and a singularly broad and generous interpretation of social duty and the common good."<sup>6</sup>

To turn nineteenth-century liberalism in the direction of twentieth-century social reform while still preserving the fundamental base of individual freedom, Hobhouse was compelled to cope with many of the divergent philosophical positions of his day. One finds in his writing, even when not mentioned directly, his awareness of Hegel and the English idealists, of Marx as well as the English economists, of Spencer and the evolutionists, of Henry George and the single-taxers, and the philosophical radicals from Bentham to the younger Mill. If he rejected, as he emphatically did in *The*

<sup>4</sup> *The Nation*, LXI (1900), p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> Hobson and Ginsberg, op. cit. p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> L. T. Hobhouse, "The New Spirit in America," *The Contemporary Review*, July 1911, p. 6.