These two books both set out to answer the question ‘What is liberalism?’ They share a methodology for reaching a conclusion. But they leave readers with quite different impressions of contemporary liberal thought.

In classifying political beliefs, both books use Michael Freeden’s work on ideology. Borrowing a term from linguistics, Freeden argues that ideologies have ‘morphologies’. By this he means that ideologies share common clusters of concepts. These concepts can vary in their meaning and weight, but similar cluster content puts intellectuals, activists and parties into the same ideology. Peripheral or adjacent concepts can exist alongside the base cluster of concepts.

For Freeden, liberalism’s conceptual core consists of liberty, rationality, individuality, progress, sociability, the general interest, and limited and accountable power. Edwin van de Haar doesn’t list his core liberal concepts in a way clearly intended to be comprehensive, but on my reading it includes freedom, individualism, tolerance, classical natural rights, belief in spontaneous order, a realistic view of human nature, constitutionalism, and limited government.

These lists contain ideas that serve different purposes within an ideology. Some—liberty, tolerance, constitutionalism, limited government, individuality and the institutions of spontaneous order—are liberalism’s political agenda. Other concepts are assumptions or theories about people and social organisation, such as rationality, sociability, and the feasibility of spontaneous order. Others still provide high-level normative justifications for liberalism: the value of individuality, progress, the general interest, and natural rights.

Differences in the two authors’ lists are not always or necessarily as significant as they appear. Freeden’s ideas are more abstract, and some concepts from van de Haar’s list could be implied. Tolerance, which Freeden mentions directly only a few times, could flow from liberty, individuality, sociability and limited power. Nevertheless, the two men differ substantially on how to characterise contemporary liberalism. Freeden is not convinced that classical liberalism and libertarianism are clearly within the current liberal family, while van de Haar regards this issue as settled in favour of inclusion.

Freeden’s doubt comes, at least in part, from his view of liberalism’s history. He sees liberalism as having five ‘temporal layers’ or time periods in which certain liberal ideas become prominent (he acknowledges that the chronology is not strict). A theory of restrained government power developed first (for example, John Locke), then a theory of markets providing individual benefits through exchange (for example, Adam Smith), then a theory of individual development provided no harm is done to others (for example, John Stuart Mill), then state-supported welfare to ensure individuals develop both liberty and flourishing (for example, Leonard T. Hobhouse and John A. Hobson) and finally a theory of recognising and supporting minority identities (for example, Will Kymlicka).

In Freeden’s analysis, thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek, usually described as classical liberals, are throwbacks to liberalism’s first two stages, and miss too much of what came later to be fully liberal. Freeden puts Hayek in the blurred area between liberalism and conservatism, sharing morphological characteristics of each.

The adjective ‘classical’ is doing temporal work. It distinguishes classical liberalism from the ‘social’ liberalism that developed in the second half of the 19th century in Mill’s later thinking...
and that of Hobhouse and Hobson. Freeden is an important scholar of social liberalism's history. Some classical liberals, however, think that social liberals are (at best) in a blurred ideological area with social democracy.

While Freeden rightly notes that just because people call themselves liberals does not mean that they are liberals, van de Haar's broach church approach is preferable. If Freeden's definition of liberalism excludes self-described liberal thinkers who draw explicitly on liberal history, use a range of concepts favoured by liberals, and are regarded by others as liberals, then something is wrong with his definition of liberalism or his understanding of classical liberalism.

Van de Haar thinks that other work by Freeden mischaracterises aspects of classical liberal thinking. *Liberalism: A Very Short Introduction* does not have enough on classical liberalism to let readers make a judgment. Except for Hayek it ignores classical liberal writers, although it spends several pages on ‘neoliberalism’, a caricature of market economics that tells us little about real-world intellectual movements.

Like van de Haar, I see classical liberalism as very much within the liberal tradition. Its primary concerns go back to the first two or three stages of Freeden's temporal layers, but in ways that are prompted and shaped by much later events. In the second half of the 19th century many liberals believed that the state could and should do more to improve individual lives. By the second half of the 20th century, industry nationalisation, the welfare state and war had vastly expanded government even in countries regarded as liberal democracies. It is unsurprising that liberal ideas evolved again to respond to new threats to individual freedom.

As van de Haar's book points out, classical liberalism advances on as well as draws on pre-20th century liberal thought. Particularly in economics, Austrian and Chicago school economics added significantly to our understanding of how economies work. Public choice analysis contributed to our understanding of politics. Van de Haar notes that Hayek supported a range of welfare state activities; he might have added that Milton Friedman advocated a negative income tax to support people on low incomes. Although in the morphology of classical liberalism these are peripheral rather than core ideas, the social liberal legacy is partly intact within contemporary classical liberalism.

*Degrees of Freedom* covers the range of liberal ideas more reliably than Freeden's book. Although van de Haar's own sympathies are classical liberal, he describes major social liberal ideas fairly. He says it became the most dominant of the liberal ideologies, and discusses the big impact since the 1970s of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*. But if Freeden is not broad church enough, sometimes van de Haar is too indiscriminate in who he lets sit in the social liberal pews.

Drawing on a book by Gerald Gaus, *Contemporary Theories of Liberalism*, van de Haar discusses Jurgen Habermas’s idea of deliberative democracy, which does not obviously share significant overlapping morphology with any version of liberalism. The same section refers to John Gray's suggestion of a *modus vivendi* liberalism, which is closer to early ideas of liberal tolerance than to social liberalism. Isaiah Berlin is also discussed in this chapter. While Berlin is an ambiguous liberal figure, as van de Haar recognises, his best-known essay defended the negative liberty (freedom from) of classical liberalism against the positive liberty (freedom to) favoured by social liberals and non-liberals. Whichever way Berlin's personal beliefs should be characterised, his major contribution was on the classical liberal side.

While putting both classical liberalism and libertarianism in the liberal family, van de Haar distinguishes between them. He regards libertarianism as having a simpler morphology, with little room for the peripheral ideas in favour of a welfare state found in classical liberalism. Libertarians on van de Haar's account support a very limited or no state, justified by a strict interpretation of natural rights and strong belief in the power of spontaneous ordering forces.

Many years ago I wrote a blog post expressing similar views. It was vigorously disputed by some readers. They pointed to thinkers regarded as libertarians who drew on utilitarian rather than rights-based arguments. An online poll I conducted subsequently offered support for both perspectives.
The poll showed that self-described libertarians hold more radical views than self-described classical liberals, but they tend to be on the same side on policy issues. This political relationship between libertarians and classical liberals helps explain why the two terms can sometimes be used interchangeably.

Liberalism’s complex political relationships with conservatism on the right and social democracy on the left also contribute to definitional issues. Van de Haar reports on how various conservative or conservative-leaning thinkers relate to liberalism, especially classical liberalism. The two ideologies are deeply intertwined in democratic politics. Many individuals hold ‘classical liberal’ views on some issues and ‘conservative’ views on others. Others identify with one philosophy or the other, but form tactical alliances against left-wing forces. The Liberal Party of Australia is a manifestation of this ideological blurring and coalition forming.

Social liberals, by contrast, often find themselves with social democrats who are willing to use the state to try to improve individual lives, and who are less embarrassing allies than conservatives on sensitive issues of gender, race and sexuality. The Democratic Party in the United States and the Liberal Democrats in Britain are examples of this, although the latter did form a coalition government with the Conservatives between 2010 and 2015.

In democratic politics there is no pure liberalism, or at least none capable of forming majority government on its own. But I don’t think Freeden and van de Haar are mistaken in believing that there is a cluster of concepts that repeatedly appear together through political history that justify the label ‘liberal’. We just do not entirely agree on what these concepts are or their relative importance. While the Freeden and van de Haar lists both have merit, I believe that it is a political agenda that most readily identifies liberalism, rather than normative justifications or methodological approaches.

All liberalisms in various ways seek to give individuals status above or against the state or group, all seek mechanisms for controlling state power, all support tolerance if not acceptance of diverse groups in society, all support private property, and all support institutions of voluntary collaboration, such as the market and civil society. If these themes are high in a political movement’s priorities, it can reasonably be regarded as liberal. The adjectives—such as social or classical—add nuance. They may be quarrelling relatives, but both are part of the liberal family.

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The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy
By Daniel A. Bell
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Reviewed by Benjamin Herscovitch

Contemporary China is one of the greatest stories of our time. Leaving behind the blood-soaked political chaos and chronic economic dysfunction of the Mao years, China has in mere decades emerged as one of globe’s greatest powers. This startling trajectory since paramount leader Deng Xiaoping’s tentative market-oriented reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s has provoked voluminous academic, public policy and popular debates about the apparent strengths of China’s brand of ‘market Leninism’. In the wake of the sovereign debt and global financial crises that afflicted some of the world’s leading liberal democracies, influential intellectuals in China and elsewhere even began to openly wonder whether the China model of political authoritarianism combined with state-led capitalism might be a superior alternative to the post-Cold War liberal democratic orthodoxy.

Daniel A. Bell’s latest book, The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy, is the most strikingly original recent contribution