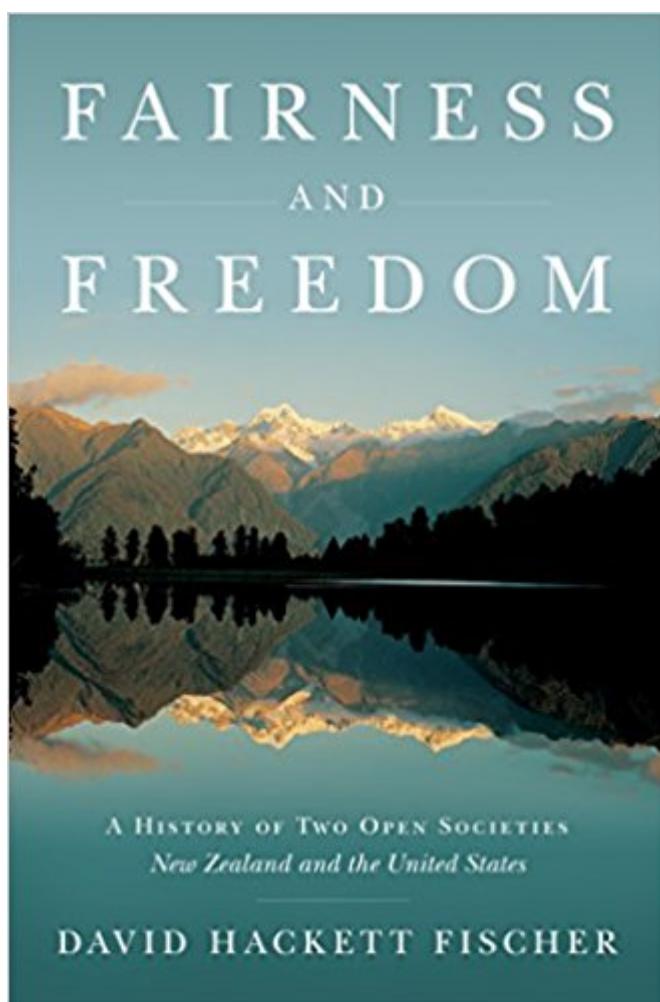


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Fairness And Freedom: A History Of Two Open Societies: New Zealand And The United States



Synopsis

Fairness and Freedom compares the history of two open societies--New Zealand and the United States--with much in common. Both have democratic polities, mixed-enterprise economies, individuated societies, pluralist cultures, and a deep concern for human rights and the rule of law. But all of these elements take different forms, because constellations of value are far apart. The dream of living free is America's Polaris; fairness and natural justice are New Zealand's Southern Cross. Fischer asks why these similar countries went different ways. Both were founded by English-speaking colonists, but at different times and with disparate purposes. They lived in the first and second British Empires, which operated in very different ways. Indians and Maori were important agents of change, but to different ends. On the American frontier and in New Zealand's Bush, material possibilities and moral choices were not the same. Fischer takes the same comparative approach to parallel processes of nation-building and immigration, women's rights and racial wrongs, reform causes and conservative responses, war-fighting and peace-making, and global engagement in our own time--with similar results. On another level, this book expands Fischer's past work on liberty and freedom. It is the first book to be published on the history of fairness. And it also poses new questions in the old tradition of history and moral philosophy. Is it possible to be both fair and free? In a vast array of evidence, Fischer finds that the strengths of these great values are needed to correct their weaknesses. As many societies seek to become more open--never twice in the same way, an understanding of our differences is the only path to peace.

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Customer Reviews

Fairness and Freedom combines four of my favorite subjects: language, political theory, history, and the durability and importance of cultural mores. Fischer looks at the United States and New Zealand through the prism of what Fischer sees as foundational values of the respective societies--the vernacular ideas of liberty in the US and fairness in New Zealand. Fischer draws on his earlier works, Albion's Seed (e.g., he repeatedly references Rawl's mixed north-south Maryland heritage while discussing Rawlsian political theory) and especially Liberty and Freedom, but Fairness and Freedom is something unique, the first book to be published on the history of fairness. Fischer is careful with his language, as should be expected from a historian who already wrote a book entitled Liberty and Freedom. Liberty, freedom, fairness, equity, and justice all have distinct meanings.

"Liberty is about the rights and responsibilities of independence and autonomy. Freedom is about the rights and responsibilities of belonging to a community of other free people." On the other hand, "[f]airness...exists in the eye of the beholders--unlike justice, which refers to an external standard of law, or equity, which implies an external and even empirical test of being even, straight, or equal by some objective measure." (For simplicity's sake, I'll stick to liberty and fairness throughout my review.) This dichotomy is in part a sort of linguistic-cultural founder effect--liberty was more common in British usage and played a greater role in the debates of the day during colonization of America, likewise for fairness during colonization of New Zealand. Readers of Fischer's previous work, Albion's Seed, will be well aware of American colonists' views on liberty. These founding ideas were affected by and in turn amplified by contact with the respective indigenous populations. The massive American frontier also played a role in the divergence. America and New Zealand went on to have dramatically different experiences with immigration, the women's movement, racism, and the Progressive movement. Fischer addresses each in depth. These sections are in general excellent short summaries of important chapters in American and Kiwi history. The freedom and fairness paradigm is particularly evident in foreign policy. America has from its founding pursued a

largely unilateral course while New Zealand has always been a strong proponent of multilateralism. One could argue that these approaches were inevitable for the world's largest economy and a very small and vulnerable one, but America was acting unilaterally in foreign policy long before it became the world's largest economy and New Zealand was much more aggressive in pushing multilateralism than it needed to be. I found New Zealand's actions during and in the run up to WWII to be particularly strong examples of its commitment to multilateralism. While Europeans appeased and Americans willfully ignored, Kiwis pushed for an aggressive response to Italian and Japanese belligerence. When war broke out, they made the shocking decision to leave most of their troops in the Middle East, judging Germany to be the greater threat and relying on Australia and the United States to wage war in the South Pacific. Obvious differences in approach between the two allies persisted during the Cold War. New Zealand's "leaders spoke eloquently of international justice and the rule of law. The purposes of the United States were case more in terms of a struggle for liberty and freedom against a Communist aggressor."Fischer rounds the bases with the Great Depression, the military, and reform and restructuring. The New Deal surely represented a turning point in the role of the federal government in America, but Fischer shows us that its expansion during the Great Depression did not remotely compare to that of New Zealand, which became one of the most socialistic countries in the world during that period. America and New Zealand have different military traditions and experienced different patterns of reform and restructuring (although government reform in both cases curiously came from the left).The format is not quite the drag on Freedom and Fairness it was on Albion's Seed but ,devoted to a methodical approach, Fischer sometimes both veers from his thesis and resorts to regurgitating textbook history. The section on the Progressive movement in the US is particularly disappointing from this perspective. He does little to demonstrate just how antithetical to American ideas of liberty it was, how it co-opted (or did not co-opt) the language of liberty and freedom, and how opposition to the Progressive movement was rooted in concepts and used the language of liberty and freedom. The Progressive movement's abhorrent record on race and gender gets a single throwaway line.Fairness and Freedom ends with a summary of the virtues and vices of liberty and freedom (in America) and fairness (in New Zealand). For example, Fischer criticizes the opposition to all new taxes in the name of liberty in America and the Tallest Poppy Syndrome in New Zealand. But Fischer sees liberty and fairness less as opposites than as "two ideas that are useful as ways of reinforcing each other." He thinks Americans would do well to add another splash of fairness to their healthy dose of liberty and likewise with New Zealand and liberty and fairness.The notes, etc. take up over 40% of the Kindle version. They include: an appendix (discussing scholarly work on fairness in other fields), notes, list

of maps, list of illustrations, acknowledgments, index (indexed to the print version). Fairness and Freedom is heavily illustrated--the list of illustrations is 20 pages long in Kindle version. Unfortunately, the maps are usually quite hard to read.

What I liked: Fischer compiled a well organized "compare and contrast" between the development of the US and NZ. From that, I learned a lot about NZ in both an absolute and relative sense. As a first time visitor to the country, that provided a very good backdrop for the trip. What I didn't: The framework ("NZ = fairness and US = freedom") became quite tired after a while and candidly a bit forced. No matter the topic, the big reveal was the same, which is a little too simplistic for my taste. Candidly, the data/quotes/etc. started to feel cherry-picked to prove a hypothesis vs. an unbiased representation of the data. On a similar vein, Fischer layers in more than his fair share of value-judgments in what purported to be largely an objective compilation. It's pretty clear that Fischer has an affinity that leans toward socialism / progressiveness. I could care less what his politics are - I was simply hoping for an objective presentation of information that would educate me on NZ. Instead, I felt like I was at a coffee shop meeting of liberal academics who live in their own bubble and don't even realize it. I would have prefer much less editorializing. Net-net, you could read the first 20 pages on the book, stop there, and get what you want from it. If you read the whole thing (as I did), then I suspect you'll walk away bored and disappointed (as I did).

I learned a lot about New Zealand, but also a lot about US and world history. It really made me realize the need to have both Freedom and Fairness for a well functioning society. Complete freedom can't be realized as a society must have some rules to live/govern. The hard part is finding fairness when society gets as large and complexed we have in the US.

Being an American living in New Zealand for the last decade, I've thought a lot about the many ways Americans and Kiwis agree and disagree. For starters, Kiwis who love the current government and those who hate it agree that NZ government works effectively -- at least things get done. And when the people don't like the direction it's going, they vote in a new government. Parliament is an "elected dictatorship." That's fair. Is American government fair? Does the notion of fairness even come into it? To the extent that it does, it's very different. Americans' notion of fairness is generally that everyone should somehow be treated "the same." So kids born in a home with no books and parents who are unemployed and kids born into the professional classes should be treated "equally" by funding all schools at the same level. Amazingly, the kids from the poor homes don't do as well

as the kids from comfortable homes! And this process perpetuates itself. Kiwis have the notion that, since you don't get to pick your parents, you shouldn't be blamed if they fail you. The richest schools get the least funding and the poorest schools get a lot more. This is no small matter. New Zealand ranks very near the top compared to other nations by almost any measure of its school system. The US, by contrast, is way down the list. Except, of course, if you only consider, say, the upper half -- then it's up there with the best. That's fair, right? This book explores the notion of fairness in a lot of different contexts. It's long and academic -- a little dry -- and I haven't (yet) finished it. But the point I found compelling was the fundamental difference in outlook about fairness. If there is a single issue where Kiwis and Americans see more differently, I don't know what it is. This is a country that has many different ethnic groups and prejudices just like the US (Auckland has four ethnic groups that are not too far from equal in representation: European, Asian, Maori, and "other Pacific Islanders"). And the first two groups tend to be much more over-achievers than the latter two, very similar to the American model. But the application of community resources is much more skewed toward helping those who most need it. "Unfairly," I'm sure many Americans would assert.

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