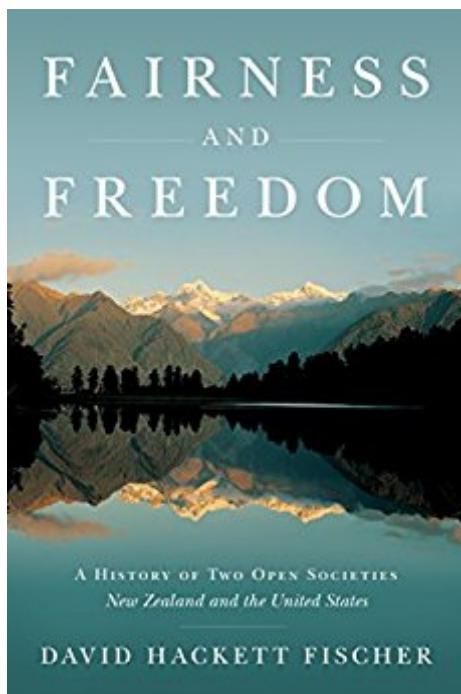


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Fairness And Freedom: A History Of Two Open Societies: New Zealand And The United States



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.

Hackett Fisher set himself an ambitious task in writing a parallel and comparative history and analysis of two settler societies: the United States and New Zealand. Any reader will learn something from reading the book, and yet most are likely to come away a little disappointed. Perhaps that is partly a reflection of the scale of the task. I would add three specific observations: 1. Hackett Fisher is clearly quite sympathetic to the social democratic tradition that has played such a significant part in New Zealand, and to the idea of "fairness" which he regards as a defining

emphasis of New Zealand life, policy, and political debate. But he gives almost no attention to the relative economic decline of NZ. Prior to World War One, NZ and the US were among the handful of countries with the highest incomes in the world. NZ now languishes with Greece, Italy and Spain - a relative decline paralleled in few other countries (think Argentina or Uruguay). Perhaps there is a connection between a focus on fairness, and outcomes that mean that so many NZers need to leave NZ to secure First World incomes and living standards.² It is also striking how little attention Hackett Fisher gives to religion, and the influence of religion in public life. In the US that place is prominent, while in NZ barely visible - but it was not always so, if one looks back to the Protestant Political Association and the sedition trial of Bishop Liston. Similarly, I was surprised to get through the book and find no mention of abortion - an issue which shapes political debate in the US but, sadly, excites little ongoing political interest in NZ.³ A similar point could be made about alcohol.

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