

## Book Review

Samuel Moyn: *Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of our Times*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2023. Pp. 229.)

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This book, adapting Samuel Moyn's Carlyle Lectures at Oxford, presents itself as a rescue mission for liberalism. "Cold War liberalism," reads the first sentence, "was a catastrophe— for liberalism." Moyn indicts tendencies in mid-to-late twentieth-century liberal theory for their abandonment of a vaguely described better path: one that was "sunnier," more open in its embrace of both the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, more firmly committed to a progressive sensibility about history, and above all more radical, emancipatory, and socialist. In a word, Moyn charges liberals of that era with having abandoned idealism, in a way that (he concludes) has left liberal politics without resources to navigate its current crises.

Moyn is an improbable figure to try to save liberalism from itself. As a public intellectual, he was renowned as a critic of liberalism from the left, even before his complaints about liberal "tyrannophobia" during the first Trump presidency. As a scholar, he is best-known for his major historical works on the twentieth-century histories of human rights, humanitarian limits on conduct in war, and the politics of economic redistribution. In some of those works, "liberal" hardly appears except after the prefix "neo-," and in others, liberal internationalism and liberal human rights discourse are important foils. I won't deny that these works have occasional admiring comments about one liberal or another in their most progressive or left-leaning moments, but one does not walk away from them thinking of Moyn as either an immanent critic or a helpful friend of the liberal tradition.

In the actual event, Moyn does not present much of the alternative vision of sunny, progressive, Enlightenment liberalism that provides the benchmark against which he finds Cold War liberals wanting. (Nor can he quite decide when it was lost: the 1940s or 1917 or the era of Tocqueville or that of Burke.) He relies for the most part on a severely flattened version of Judith Shklar's first book, *After Utopia*, for the vision of Enlightenment liberalism *manqué*, and devotes himself instead to critical accounts of six mid-to-late century thinkers, including the later-career Shklar. The other targets are Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, Hannah Arendt, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Lionel Trilling. This is an exceptionally odd selection. Odd selections are sometimes justified if they help reveal something that is otherwise hidden; I'm not persuaded that this is the case here.

*Liberalism Against Itself* is in large part a book about the phenomenon Moyn calls *anti-canonization*—the construction of an intellectual demonology to define a political agenda by stylized contrast, even though that demands the flattening of diverse thinkers into a homogenized Other, attributions of guilt by association (however slight), and reductions of philosophical richness to mere political positions. The phenomenon itself is well-known, if not necessarily analyzed across thinkers. Popper's anti-canonization of Plato, Rousseau, and Hegel, or Berlin's of the Parisian Enlightenment, or Arendt's of Bentham and Marx, are familiar to political theorists. What stands out about *Liberalism Against Itself* is, at least in part, its indictment by parodic demonstration. The reader who has appreciated Berlin in spite of the slipperiness of his categorizations, or Arendt in spite of the sometimes tenuous associations she makes among her targets, might think again after reading this book. Moyn's critique of Cold War liberals relies on accounts of neoconservative Himmelfarb and avowed nonliberal Arendt who, the reader is assured, are especially revelatory about Cold War liberals in virtue of the things they said that actual Cold War liberals did not. The examined thinkers are mainly Jewish, which Moyn insists mostly doesn't matter because they were somehow kind of Christian, except when it comes to Zionism when it matters very much.

The book is particularly interested in holding Cold War liberalism responsible for neoliberalism, the great *bête noire* of Moyn's long-term *corpus*, although neoliberals are treated only through a loud apophasis. Berlin disdained Hayek, Shklar was one of his sharpest critics, Arendt shows no sign of awareness he existed, and so on. Yet they are all somehow jointly to be held to account for the putative triumph of his ideas. If at the level of detail the book is more carefully footnoted than Popper's, Berlin's, or Arendt's sometimes impressionistic histories of ideas, the sweeping generalizations are no less strained, and are sometimes more baffling.

As has become strangely common, this is a book about Cold War liberalism in which the actual Cold War goes largely unmentioned. Actual dissidents from the Communist states—Solzhenitsyn, Havel, Milosz—are invisible, as are the Berlin Wall, the Helsinki Accords, and so on. Moyn's thinkers' analyses of totalitarianism as a phenomenon that encompassed Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union alike are quickly dismissed as an artifact of mid-century power politics, not offered any real intellectual criticism or even engagement. It's well and good to write about what got left out of Cold War liberalism's view of international politics, and Moyn is at his clearest and most powerful in writing about the questions of imperialism and decolonization that Cold War lenses occluded. But one might still want to know something about Cold War liberals' view of the Cold War itself in order to understand them.

Moyn's real target is what he calls here (following Shklar) *survivalism*, a central concern with the avoidance of great and violent political evils. The bad kind of liberals spend too much time worrying about the Terror, and not

enough hoping for future revolutions. An oddity is that Moyn does not connect the complaint here to the one he has offered in his previous works about human rights, international humanitarian law, and the law of war. To read this book one would think that survivalism was a weird intellectual mutation within the Anglophone academy. But the human rights movement he has inveighed against elsewhere had quite different sources; the Helsinki Accords were not about the French Revolutionary Terror. The fact that the human rights movement developed and gained widespread moral admiration through the same decades when the Holocaust was a living memory and Communist rule in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc was a live fact suggests that, just maybe, “survivalism” was a morally reasonable response to the facts of twentieth-century politics.

In damning a wildly disparate group of thinkers, including Shklar for most of her intellectual life, by a standard ostensibly set in her first work, Moyn leaves no room for the question of whether she might have had *reasons* for her gradual turn toward a more survivalist kind of liberalism. He characterizes the course of her intellectual life and career quite unfairly as one of “retreat” (37), with her late writings on civil rights, race, the welfare state, and migration quickly dismissed. This suggests that, in the end, the failure of the liberals (and others) wasn’t of some test set by Shklar’s early work; Moyn’s objection isn’t ultimately that they were the wrong kind of liberals. The test emerges out of Moyn’s own work; the failure is that they (well, some of them) insisted on remaining liberals at all.

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