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A Symposium on Alan Kahan’s *Freedom From Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism*

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Joshua L. Cherniss, with a response by Alan Kahan***

Alan S. Kahan: *Freedom from Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp 528.)

Introduction

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Freedom from Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism is a major contribution to the latest “revisionist moment” in the study of liberalism—a flurry of recent scholarship that claims to excavate liberalism’s origins in order to expose its true purposes and to undercut the criticisms of the tradition’s outspoken detractors.¹ Within this lively debate, *Freedom from Fear* takes a novel perspective on the dominant political and social theory of our time. Kahan frames the development of liberalism as a series of responses to the characteristic fears held by Western liberals since the eighteenth century. Virtually everyone in Kahan’s “layered” history of liberal thought, from Thomas Macaulay and Alexis de Tocqueville who wrote during what Kahan labels the “short nineteenth century” (77) to the “inchoate” (434) opponents of populism today, set out to create a world in which no one need be afraid (6). Kahan’s thesis leads to a provocative conclusion about the essence of liberalism. The values of freedom and equality that have come to define liberalism in fact flow out of theorists’ preoccupation with quelling our deep-seated fears about arbitrary power, whether that power manifests as an ambitious despot, a well-intentioned priest, an agitated mob, or the emboldened majority. Fear is *the* great impediment to human freedom, and like or not, we all possess the equal capacity to be afraid.

¹William Selinger and Gregory Conti, “The Lost History of Political Liberalism,” *History of European Ideas* 46, no. 3 (2020): 341–54.

Even so, *Freedom from Fear* is more than a somber story marked by dread and apprehension. For just as liberals feared revolution, violence, fanaticism, nationalism, despotism, and poverty, they also hoped to find their way beyond these phenomena. According to Kahan, liberals set their sights on a “utopian” future, on the formation of a society utterly free from political fear. Liberalism, then, has always been equal parts fear and hope, pessimism and perfectionism, an accretion of anxieties along with the steadfast will to overcome them. In line with liberal exemplars ranging from Montesquieu to Léon Bourgeois to Judith Shklar, Kahan’s incomplete history concludes with a tempered expression of hope for fortifying liberal institutions in the twenty-first century. If liberals are willing once again to lean on the moral pillars that supported their centuries-old edifice against an onslaught of enemies, free societies will stand a chance against the latest fear-inducing displays of power.

All of the participants in this roundtable ask whether viewing the liberal tradition through the lens of fear blurs the lines that separate liberal political theory from its alternatives in republicanism, socialism, or totalitarianism. Yet they are also engaged in the same overarching project as the author: to protect free societies against the illiberal waves that threaten to overtake—and to terrify—them.