

REVIEW ESSAY

Liberalism during Its Respectable Era

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Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023)

Joshua Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021)

Liberalism has been everyone's favorite whipping boy for a while now. Run a search for "liberals" on *Jacobin*, the most trafficked website on the left, and you will learn about how they are too ineffectual to stand up to the authoritarian right, while they also anticipated many elements of Trumpism. Do the same with *National Review*, the lodestar of Buckleyite conservatism, and you will be told that liberals are too weak to steer the course of American foreign policy, while they also maintain a stranglehold on the media, universities, and courts. Venture if you dare into the darker, conspiratorial corners of the right-wing Web and you will discover that all-powerful liberals sit at the helm of a global pedophile ring. All these takes cannot possibly be true at once. But the sum of them makes one thing certain: liberalism is the most disrespected political ideology in the Western world.

It was not always so. There was a time when liberalism was the most respected political ideology on both sides of the Atlantic. Arguably the *only* respected political ideology. Two new books on liberalism during its respectable era help make sense of why it was once held in such high esteem. Joshua Cherniss's *Liberalism in Dark Times* argues that liberalism conquered Western political culture in the middle of the twentieth century because its leading voices understood limits at a time when dangerous utopian ideologies ran roughshod across the globe. Samuel Moyn's *Liberalism against Itself* contends that liberalism molded itself to the interests of a conservative Cold War state by turning against its Enlightenment roots. Cherniss and Moyn agree that liberalism captured the imagination of powerful people because it tempered itself. That might be the only thing they agree upon when it comes to the history of liberalism.

Both Cherniss and Moyn explicitly wrote their books with the present in mind. Cherniss wants to revivify "tempered liberalism" because illiberal forces are again on the rise, much like they were in the middle of the twentieth century. He analyzes tempered liberalism as the best approach to containing the ruthless illiberalism of both

left and right. Moyn, in contrast, seeks to stick a fork in liberalism once and for all. Or rather, Moyn would like to consign to the dustbin of history the tempered version of liberalism otherwise known as Cold War liberalism, which he considers the progenitor of neoliberalism and neoconservatism.

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Moyn first gained renown with his 2010 book *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, a scathing analysis of human rights, a liberal ideal for the international order that he argued had become the hegemonic rationale for empire. But whereas *The Last Utopia* skewers post-1960s liberalism for replacing the failed utopias of an earlier era with a shallow and opportunistic form of perfectionism, *Liberalism against Itself* condemns mid-century liberalism for altogether ridding itself of the utopianism that had been a crucial component of its overall philosophical makeup since its origins. Moyn argues that the historical role Cold War liberalism played was to convince Westerners that improving society, a long-standing Enlightenment objective, was nearly impossible. In a world where the communist enemy trafficked in a bold form of utopianism, efforts at perfection in the capitalist world were simply out of the question.

Liberalism against Itself dedicates a chapter to each of the six intellectuals who, for Moyn, best articulated Cold War liberalism: Judith Shklar, Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Hannah Arendt, and Lionel Trilling. Shklar is the tragic hero of the book because she starts off as a critic of liberalism's turn against the Enlightenment before taking that turn herself. Moyn calls her 1957 book *After Utopia* "the greatest anatomy and critique of Cold War liberalism ever composed" (13). What made it great was its clear-eyed diagnosis of Cold War liberalism as a "liberalism of fear" (14), a politics that, due to pervasive panic about communism, surrendered "an Enlightenment vision of emancipation" (16). The Enlightenment, in the dystopian imagination of Cold War liberals, had opened the door to totalitarianism with its positive vision of how people might collectively get free. In contrast, Cold War liberals offered a negative vision of liberty, freed from mass groupings. In this way, Moyn shows how Cold War liberalism embraced a libertarian vision that paved the way for neoliberalism. Shklar, the premier critic of Cold War liberalism, ultimately became a Cold War liberal herself due to creeping disillusionment with the possibilities for emancipation. Like those she had decried, she developed cynicism about the "grandiose historical expectations" (37) of an earlier liberalism. The horrors of the twentieth century, which seemed to Shklar at least partially a product of utopianism, had chastened her political hopes.

Cold War liberals turned against liberal emancipation because it resembled Marxism. Prior to their deadly war against fascism, and their ensuing struggle against communism, Western liberals typically forwarded a theory of history that rested on progress—much like Marxists. That is, they assumed that history had a logic to it that tended in the direction of justice for the growing masses. And although few prewar liberals believed that progress or justice were inevitable, their mildly historicist expectations provided liberalism with just enough ambition to attract multitudes of followers who desired a better future. Moyn's analysis remains in the realm of high intellectual history, but even descending into the depths of a more prosaic political history illustrates his argument. Franklin Roosevelt, the world's most powerful mid-century liberal, advanced a popular reform package, the New Deal, that was nothing if not

mildly historicist. To wit, one of its major programs was called the Works Progress Administration!

Cold War liberals ditched gentle historicism, if not moderate reformism, and replaced it with a pessimism bordering on defeatism. They “relinquished any attempt,” Moyn writes, “to situate their vision of freedom in an unfolding though time” (76). The person most responsible for ridding liberalism of historicism was Karl Popper, author of the 1944 book *The Poverty of Historicism*. After Popper, any “commitment to the unfolding of collective freedom in historical time,” any allegiance to historicism, “now seemed an apology for terror” (76). Detecting the future in the present was akin to forcing people into the Gulag. This was a prime example of what Moyn means when he says that Cold War liberalism consumed itself and when he furthermore claims that the consequences of such cannibalism were disastrous. If liberalism cannot imagine a better future—if it cannot imagine emancipation—it has no role to play in a world riven by reactionary forces. That is, no role to play *unless* liberalism itself enlists in the armies of reaction. When Jewish intellectuals like Gertrude Himmelfarb embraced Christian nationalism as the best orientation for ensuring that a mass society like the United States remained militantly anticommunist, they slipped liberalism into the river of reaction. The resulting backwash came to be called neoconservatism.

One of Moyn’s more compelling points, an analytical nugget that intellectual historians in particular will find intriguing, is that Cold War liberalism was predicated less on a *canon* of past thinkers, and more on an *anticanon*. Cold War liberals purged great minds of the past that had previously been included in the liberal canon, such as Rousseau, whose Romanticist longings for an antirational, subjective general will apparently made possible the bloody, proto-totalitarian French Revolution. They also negated figures who had lurked on the edges of the liberal canon, such as Hegel, the historicist par excellence whose instructions to find meaning in history had impressed nineteenth-century liberals but horrified panic-stricken Cold War liberals. Standing atop the liberal anticanon, of course, was Marx. Moyn correctly recognizes that, prior to the Cold War, the bearded nineteenth-century philosopher “was for many liberals a friendly sparring-partner,” as “the ascent of Marxist interpretations of socialism prompted a cornucopia of novel crossings of liberalism and socialism” (67). Once the Cold War set in, of course, Marx-friendly liberals went the way of the dodo. To further prove his point that liberalism turned against itself by excising emancipation from its vocabulary, Moyn might have done even more to show just how important Marx was to that particular project.

Cold War liberals not only wrote Marx out of their canon. Marx was the archetypal foil that helped Cold War liberals come to grips with an American political tradition they were busy inventing in the postwar period. Nobody was more responsible for creating this anti-Marxist, American tradition than the political scientist Louis Hartz, author of the renowned 1955 book *The Liberal Tradition in America*. Hartz argued that all of American history had been liberal. He recognized there were historical exceptions, most glaringly the political philosophy of the Slave Power, which Hartz called “an alien child in a liberal family.” But over time, the liberal tradition crushed all that stood in its way. Whereas both a reactionary like George Fitzhugh and a revolutionary like Marx were, in Hartz’s words, “crucified by the American general will” (Hartz must have missed the message about Rousseau), liberals like John Dewey

“flourished in consequence of their crucifixion.” An examination of Hartz and of more popular, if less sophisticated, Cold War liberal thinkers like him proves that Moyn’s theory of the liberal anticanon was spot-on, at least with regard to Marx. As Clinton Rossiter wrote in his 1960 book *Marxism: The View from America*, “The American tradition has no Marx. Its essence is pluralism, which means that each of its children is encouraged to make his own interpretation of its principles; and it is, after all, the product of centuries of unplanned accretion rather than of a few years of imperious dogmatizing.”¹

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The liberal political theorist Joshua Cherniss wrote *Liberalism in Dark Times* more than sixty years after the liberal historian Rossiter wrote his anti-Marxist treatise. Yet the distance traveled between the two books does not seem that far. The tempered liberalism that Cherniss champions is the antithesis of “imperious dogmatizing.” Like Moyn, Cherniss analyzes a set of thinkers who embody the version of liberalism he wishes to bracket: Albert Camus, Raymond Aron, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Isaiah Berlin. But unlike Moyn, who gives synopses of his thinkers in order to show how they destroyed the political project they claimed to uphold, Cherniss props his figures up as defenders of liberal freedom in a brutally illiberal world. *Liberalism in Dark Times* is about what Cherniss calls a neglected strand of liberalism, comprising those who appreciated that liberalism would only survive in a ruthlessly illiberal world if it understood itself not as a doctrine but rather as an ethos, a temperament, a disposition. To be a good liberal is to remain uncertain about everything, including a vision of the good life or a preferred approach to achieving it, because an ethos of certainty might lead to overreach in the pursuit of the good. And the pursuit of the good, if ruthless, can be worse than evil, as Stalinism showed the world. Cherniss contends that every illiberal ideology, especially Marxism, is a road to totalitarianism.

Before unearthing the genealogy of tempered liberalism in the works of Camus, Aron, Niebuhr, and Berlin, Cherniss takes up the task of contrasting two earlier intellectuals, Max Weber and György Lukács. These two prominent thinkers, and how they responded to the political crises of their time, represent something of a cautionary tale. As mass movements grounded in Manichean political philosophies overtook their homelands, Weber to his credit responded in a way that anticipated the tempered liberalism of the later Cold War; Lukács to his discredit embraced illiberalism in the pursuit of justice. Weber came out ahead in this comparison because he pointed to the necessity of balancing conviction with responsibility; that is, political actors had to maintain constant vigilance about the equilibrium between means and ends. Dogged insistence on achieving a particular end, no matter how idealistic, required ruthless means, which would in turn disfigure the end result. Lukács did the opposite of Weber by making a “pact with the devil” in his support for the Bolshevik Revolution (60). By prioritizing ends over means, Cherniss insists that Lukács sought an escape from responsibility. If we accept in retrospect that the Bolshevik Revolution was a net negative—or, more importantly, that an undesirable outcome was foreseeable—such analytical logic is

¹ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York, 1955), 10. Clinton Rossiter, *Marxism: The View from America* (New York, 1960), 14.

fine as far as it goes. But Cherniss downplays that Weber the responsible one supported German entry into the First World War, an unmitigated disaster for liberalism and much more, while Lukács the irresponsible one sharply opposed it from the outset.

After setting the table with a chapter on Weber and Lukács, which is meant to delineate the ethical superiority of good-tempered liberalism over ill-tempered leftism, *Liberalism in Dark Times* carries on in this vein. Take the chapter on Camus. As an antifascist partisan during the Second World War, Camus coupled a liberal ethos that rejected the nihilism of the Nazis with a social-democratic politics that might offer a tangible alternative to fascism. But in the eyes of Cherniss, what stands out about him is his later embrace of an anti-Marxist politics of limits. “The error of revolutionary rebellion,” Cherniss writes, ventriloquizing Camus, “is to fail to recognize limits” (87). Likewise in the chapter on Aron, who was attracted to left-wing politics early in life, which persisted during the Second World War as an approach to antifascism. The parts of Aron’s *oeuvre* that draw Cherniss’s focus are later ones that skewer the left. In the face of Marxist historicism and “prophetism,” he preached an “active pessimism” about anything that smacked of utopianism (116–17).

Compared to Aron the anti-prophet, Niebuhr was an unlikely candidate to serve as a model for tempered liberalism. The Protestant theologian never fully eschewed justice-oriented prophecy as an appropriate register. But by exorcizing the demons of his earlier flirtation with Marxism, Niebuhr became America’s most famous liberal skeptic during the early Cold War. American power might be fallible, given that, like all forms of power, it emerged from human frailty and pretention. But in comparison with the communist enemy, American power was by far the lesser of two evils because it was less utopian and thus less hubristic about human nature. And then there was Berlin, who witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution firsthand. “The real characterological model for the homicidal idealists of Berlin’s day,” Cherniss writes, “was Lenin” (176). Berlin never harbored illusions about Marxism and thus personified the tempered liberal disposition because he, more than anyone else, articulated a vision of pluralism at odds with the ruthless illiberalism of the left. “The ethos of pluralism,” Cherniss says, “is marked by certain dispositional proclivities: a reflexive suspicion of absolutism, zeal, and hastiness, and a reflexive tendency to see as many sides of an issue, and to calculate the costs of a proposed course of action in terms of different genuine values as accurately as possible” (190).

Liberalism in Dark Times offers the intellectual historian compelling and mildly revisionist analyses of key mid-century thinkers. But Cherniss’s claim that this tempered strand of liberalism has been neglected is curious. Given that even the most durable bookshelf would groan under the weight of books written about Cold War liberalism, he must mean that the strain he isolates was a forgotten alternative to mainstream liberalism that even historians have erased. But tempered liberalism as characterized by Cherniss, even as an ethical disposition, fits easily alongside the anti-ideological technocracy championed by powerful liberal politicians in the first decades of the Cold War. John F. Kennedy certified this sensibility in a 1962 speech, likely written by the liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr, in which he declared that the nation’s problems were merely “technical and administrative” and, as such, “do not lend themselves to the great sort of passionate movements which have stirred this country so often in the

past.”² Given that this tempered version of liberalism was responsible for millions of deaths in Southeast Asia, it is easy to dismiss Cherniss’s plea for a return to the halcyon days when liberal intellectuals supposedly had the wherewithal to check their utopian desires. But concluding this review by calling attention to liberal hypocrisy would not be very satisfying.

There is another, more rewarding way to criticize *Liberalism in Dark Times*. Cherniss wholeheartedly adopts the anticanonical style of dealing with Marx. Such an approach was problematic when the Cold War intellectuals innovated it. But it was understandable given the historical context. Blaming Marx for the world’s problems at a time when hundreds of millions of people were rejecting liberalism, often in the name of Marx, was a ready-made explanation. But transposing the Cold War liberal account of Marx, which was shallow and inaccurate even then, to our times is borderline historical malpractice. Although Cherniss avoids analyzing anything Marx actually wrote, as he mostly just riffs on what liberal intellectuals wrote about Marx, the book is littered with stereotypical one-liners about Marx’s dogmatism, extremism, and, most importantly, illiberalism. But what Cold War liberals failed to acknowledge, a mistake Cherniss repeats, is that Marx was, in one decisive way, more liberal than liberals.

Marx constantly wondered about how to increase human freedom. Classical liberalism prioritized formal political freedom; that is, how people might get free to act on their political beliefs. (Twentieth-century liberalism expanded such a conception by suggesting that political freedom demanded recognizing and honoring the pluralistic variety of beliefs.) Marx never necessarily opposed the liberal theory of political freedom, but rather thought it was limited. The old Rhinelander wanted to extend the domain of freedom to that sphere of life where people living in a capitalist society rarely experienced it; that is, to the workplace. In this particular way, Marx’s vision of liberty was more expansive than the liberal one—more *liberal*—because it encompassed the workers of the world who, compelled to sell their labor in order to survive, spend much of their time under the thumb of ruthless, illiberal bosses. This helps explain why so many pre-Cold War liberals were Marx-curious.

Another problem with *Liberalism in Dark Times* is that Cherniss pitches tempered liberalism as the best approach to dealing with the ruthless illiberalism of today. A reader might assume that Cherniss is referring to the authoritarian right when he makes this claim. He indeed frets about the “brutalities of an increasingly authoritarian, overtly nativist and racist right” (219). But like the Cold War liberals he analyzes, Cherniss reserves his wrath for the left. “Some on the left,” Cherniss warns, “show signs of falling prey to the errors of their forebears” (219). In other words, he believes that the left is mimicking the authoritarian right, as it did in the twentieth century, by taking an illiberal approach, by “repaying ruthlessness in kind.” A reader might wonder, to whom on the left does Cherniss direct this insinuation? Rather than name names, Cherniss cites a single book, on the penultimate page of his dense monograph, as a stand-in for contemporary ruthlessness on the left. Over three hundred pages of intellectual history, mostly consisting of close readings of leading twentieth-century thinkers—Weber,

²For the Kennedy quote see Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 265.

Lukács, Camus, Aron, Niebuhr, Berlin—all in service of dismantling Vicky Osterweil's 2020 book *In Defense of Looting*, a relatively obscure book about the history of rioting.³

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We are indeed living once again in dark times. High concentrations of wealth and power, widespread alienation, ecological catastrophe, war, genocide, and, yes, escalating right-wing authoritarianism all loom large. Both Moyn and Cherniss want their books to help us create better political, philosophical, and ethical frameworks for solving these contemporary problems. Judging by this objective, *Liberalism in Dark Times* is a rather pointless exercise. By seeking to revive a political disposition that was formed in opposition to the left, at a time when most leftists, lacking institutional power of their own, support left-liberal politicians like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn, Cherniss guides his readers to a dead end.

Liberalism against Itself is much more helpful. By accurately pinpointing liberalism's wrong turn, when Cold War liberals hollowed out its Enlightenment core, Moyn shows how liberalism transformed into neoliberalism and neoconservatism, reactionary political ideologies partially to blame for our current catastrophes. Moyn also argues that by ditching utopianism, Cold War liberals exchanged hope for hopelessness, which explains liberalism's ongoing inability to inspire people to come together to collectively solve the great problems of our dark times.

³Vicky Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action* (New York, 2020).