

Review of Joshua L. Cherniss' *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021, 305 pp.

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By 1950 a half-century of political and social events seemed to suggest that the liberal mindset of limited government and promotion of individual rights that had generally dominated Europe and America during the 19th century was dying. World War I and the Great Depression seemed to undermine the cosmopolitan liberal idea of *doux commerce*. The intelligentsia of the day were teaching and promoting socialism, eugenics, and other technocratic ideas. Two totalitarian threats, German fascism and Japanese imperialism, had been defeated on the battlefields of Europe and Asia only to be replaced by the specter of communism. In the United States, 'illiberal liberalism' was taking hold as Senator Joseph McCarthy's used the threat of communist infiltration of the United States government to justify prosecuting political opponents.

How would liberals be able to defend liberalism without abandoning the ideals of liberalism? That is the key question Joshua Cherniss seeks to explore in his book: "How to combat anti-liberal movements, which are not constrained in the way that liberal movements and regimes are, without sacrificing political efficacy or betraying basic liberal principles in the name of defending them?" (5). To answer this question, Cherniss looks at four major liberal thinkers of the 20th century: Albert Camus (chapter 3), Raymond Aron (chapter 4), Reinhold Neibuhr (chapter 5), and Isaiah Berlin (chapter 6). In particular, he seeks to explore their ethos, a "'stance' or 'bearing' formed by patterns of disposition, perception, commitment, and response, which shapes how individuals or groups go about acting politically" (6) to synthesize it into a liberal ethos. Cherniss wants to re-align liberalism around a tempered ethical center, as opposed to a formal institutional structure or set of general principles: How can one *be* a good liberal as opposed to merely *speaking* like one (6-7)? This leads to one of his major claims: "There is something not only paradoxical, but (potentially) self-defeating, and even pathological, about seeking to live a *liberal* 'creed' through an illiberal ethos" (7). To defend liberalism means not only

supporting liberal *institutions*, but to treat *people* in a liberal way. Cherniss argues that promoting a liberal mindset is important to defending liberalism, both in the post-war period he analyzes and in light of contemporary challenges to liberalism.

Cherniss is not attacking specific illiberal systems, but developing a ‘tempered’ liberal ethos and arguing against an illiberal ethos. This represents his major contribution to the literature. One will not find many references to fascism, socialism, imperialism, or other ideologies within this book except insofar as they represent the various governments under which people were living in the 20th century. Rather, he “criticizes a set of impulses often exhibited in anti-liberalism: intolerance, self-righteousness, craving for simplicity and certainty, deafness to dialogue, righteous ruthlessness” (13). These impulses serve to tempt us into an “anti-anti-liberalism resembling that which it opposes in dogmatism, self-righteousness, and intolerance” (13). Camus, Aron, Neibuhr, and Berlin were tempted into abandoning the liberal ethos in order to save it, but Cherniss discusses how they resisted. This is a book written for liberals about liberalism.

Much of modern research explore liberal institutions rather than ideals of liberalism. For example, liberal political economists such as James Buchanan discuss at length necessary institutional arrangements (‘constitutional political economy’) to protect and promote a liberal society. Debates within liberalism tend to occur over the proper role for government in social and economic arrangements. Political thought tries to define concepts such as liberty, equity, justice, and the legitimacy of political institutions and policies. However, without denying the importance of these conversations, Cherniss develops a narrative on the mindset of liberalism. His major contribution to the literature is developing this ethos, or stance, that characterizes liberal thought, rather than try to tease out universal ideals or desirable political institutions. In other words, rather than focusing on constitutions or the concept of the rule of law as the foundation of a liberal society, Cherniss attempts to reorient the conversation around a liberal mindset to *preserve* these institutions as liberal.

By focusing on the liberal ethos, Cherniss provides a new lens through which to view political conflict and debate in the 20th century. The Cold War was just one aspect. The liberal thinkers covered in this book were battling for the very soul of liberalism as well. Defeating the communists would be an empty victory if we liberals merely adopt their anti-liberal methods. Consequently, we can better understand the development and

challenges faced by liberal thinkers in the post-World War II years. Additionally, I think we have a framework to understand the strong liberal desire following the fall of the Soviet Union to promote peace through trade. The economic policies of much of the world in the 1990s and 2000s suggest that the liberal ethos won the day, not merely the facade of liberal institutions.

The book can be divided into three parts. Part 1, which comprises chapters 1 through 2 motivate Cherniss' argument for a liberal ethos. Part 2 consists of chapters 3 through 6. These chapters act as mini biographies of the liberal thinkers: their struggles in a tumultuous world, their interactions with other thinkers and each other, and how political realities shaped their philosophies. Part 3, the conclusion chapter, attempts to synthesize the lessons of the 20th century, the tensions within liberalism that Camus and the others uncover, and apply the lessons for the 21st century.

The focus on an ethos is necessary for the story Cherniss wishes to tell. Quoting from Bertrand Russell, he tells us "the 'essence' of liberalism 'lies not in *what* opinions are held, but in *how* they are held'" (35, emphasis in original). Inversely, anti-liberalism "was defined not just by an alternative model of political institutions, but also by an ethos of discipline, dedication, resoluteness, and ruthlessness, which rejected traditional (liberal) moral standards as signs of weakness" (35). Ethos helps us understand the fervor of anti-liberalism. Fascism, communism, and Naziism did not represent merely different allocations of political power for their supporters. They were struggles of good versus evil, life versus death, progress versus stagnation. Liberalism was not merely differing opinions on government. Liberalism was a moral failing in the eyes of the anti-liberals. Consequently, just about every tool was open to anti-liberals to crush it (36-37). During the 20th century, liberals were besieged by anti-liberalism and had to reorient liberalism to address its weaknesses, develop its temper, and exemplify the liberal spirit (38). Thus developed the 'tempered liberalism' of the 20th century.

In this book, 'tempered liberalism' represents two things: first, the historical position of the aforementioned liberal scholars; second, a normative position that Cherniss advocates in the conclusion (198). It is a character and method of analysis that is "opposed to systematization, insistently independent of doctrine, and reliant on discriminating judgment" (198). Skepticism is the order of the day, both external and internal. Tempered liberalism matches closely with Adam Smith's warning against

the Man of System, who becomes enraptured of the beauty of his plan at the expense of his humanity (Smith [1759] 1982, 233–234). Like Smith, Cherniss' tempered liberalism is aimed both at opponents of liberalism and at supporters of liberalism. Just as we are skeptical of the grand schemes of the anti-liberals, we must be skeptical of our own plans.

Self-restraint plays a key role in the mind of the tempered liberal:

They [the liberal scholars discussed in the book] called for fortitude in tolerating others—which means mastering tendencies toward disapproval, irritation, and the desire to step in and take control when others are making a mess of things. Liberal fortitude is often a matter of exercising forbearance—a disposition, posture, and practice that refrains from exercising power, or exploiting one's advantage, over others. (199)

Liberal forbearance is tempered by humanity and Smithian sympathy: “The perception of others' humanity, and the sense that those others are fellow creatures who call forth sympathy and a basic degree of respect” (199).

This theme of humanity and sympathy is ever present throughout the book and the thinking of the scholars. In that sense, this book follows thinkers (including Cherniss) very much in the tradition of Adam Smith. In the discussions of each thinker, one can spot the liberal influences of Adam Smith. For example, on Camus' discussion of justice, Cherniss writes: “The pursuit of justice should be balanced by other moral considerations, and by a love of life that goes beyond morality, nourishes it, and prevents it from becoming doctrinaire” (76). Justice is a method of thinking, not so much a state of being. That the virtues temper each other is a major theme throughout Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

In the conclusion, we are treated to Cherniss' own thoughts on tempered liberalism. He argues that we are experiencing many of the same issues as the post-World War II world:

We have of late seen of increasingly naked, cynical ruthlessness, which makes fewer concessions to liberal norms—and the embrace of such ruthlessness among leaders (and rank-and-file) of mainstream parties in supposedly stable liberal democracies [...]. The appeal of strongmen and bullies is still potent, as is the lure of all-encompassing, supposedly infallible ideologies, and the pressure to take sides, and prosecute the struggle furiously. (219)

Both the Left and the Right (one assumes he is referring to American politics) are provoking each other into “righteous, energizing fury” against liberal institutions (219). Thus, his analysis is timely. We can look to the liberals of old for hope.

There are no specifics on how to apply the lessons of tempered liberalism to contemporary social and political problems. But, as I say above, that is a feature rather than a bug of *Liberalism in Dark Times*. This is a book about the liberal mindset, as opposed to anti-Trumpian conservatism or anti-Progressivism. Rather than lecture on specifics, Cherniss extolls us to sustain “the will to fight for liberalism” and maintain “awareness of the reasons it is worth fighting for” (220). When we focus on fighting this or that policy, personality, or party, we may lose our ethos of liberalism and descend into anti-liberalism ourselves. One must not fight evil by allying with the Devil. When one deals with the Devil, the Devil always wins.

In the conclusion, Cherniss presents us liberal academics and educators with a challenge. How do we instill this liberal ethos in ourselves and our students? How do we internalize the lessons of Aron, Berlin, Cherniss, and the others so that we can reorient our societies around tempered liberalism? How do we forge a tempered liberal ethos within ourselves? Cherniss leaves that question as an exercise to the reader. Indeed, the exercise must be left to the reader as the preceding chapters show: all the liberal thinkers faced different political and social problems. The uniting bond was the tempered liberal ethos, but the specifics of each thinker’s response differed. Liberalism is about this ethos, rather than specific constitutions or institutions.

There is one criticism of the book. Cherniss sets out to defend the liberal mindset from illiberal threats, both within (for example, ‘How can liberalism win when our enemies use illiberal tactics?’) and without (for example, ‘Liberalism has failed. We need a new system’). His focus is on threats from within. He is generally successful in his goal. I was convinced after reading of the virtues of a liberal mindset guiding our activities, as opposed to simply advocating for liberal institutions. However, I fear those already not sympathetic to a ‘tempered liberal’ mindset will reject his arguments. In that way, Cherniss faces the same problems as Camus, Aron, and the others as they sought to overcome the illiberalism of the 20th century. I suspect the book will not have the direct impact of shifting popular political sentiments back toward liberalism. This book may not win over the hearts of illiberal readers, but it does build a strong ethos

from which readers of *Liberalism in Dark Times* can engage illiberalism and strengthen our resolve.

Those of us not trained in political philosophy will find some of the discussion difficult to follow. However, *Liberalism in Dark Times* is well worth the investment of time. Liberalism is facing another crisis, just as we did nearly a century ago. After the fall of the Soviet Union, liberalism rested too much on its laurels, and, like the liberalism of the early 20th century, perhaps became a little decadent. But this book provides a beacon of hope: liberalism has long been tested by illiberalism and our predecessors faced significant illiberal threats from around the world. Despite the darkness, they kept to liberalism and helped it prevail in the late 20th century. We in 2022 are not unique in our struggles and the lessons of the 20th century tempered liberals provide insights into how to weather this storm: know when to be heard-headed and when to be soft-hearted, as this will help keep one tempered without becoming manipulated. Respect the dignity of all, from the oppressed to the oppressor, as this will keep one from slipping into vengeance. Know why it is we support liberalism: the basic dignity of all. This is how liberalism survived the illiberal onslaught of fascism and socialism in the 20th century. And this is how we liberals must respond to the issues of the 21st century. To paraphrase David R. Henderson: liberalism is a hardy weed, not a delicate flower.

REFERENCES

Smith, Adam. (1759) 1982. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.

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