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## Review

# Liberalism in dark times: The liberal ethos in the twentieth century

Joshua L. Cherniss

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In the short story, ‘Wilson’s Failure’ published in English in 1940, the Austrian author Stefan Zweig (1881–1942) questions the priorities that the American president, Woodrow Wilson, made at the Paris Peace Conference and settled in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 (Zweig, 2013 [1940]). Wilson paid more attention to the institutionalization of the liberal idea of perpetual peace in terms of the League of Nations than to the hard work of political wisdom in the muddy negotiations and compromises about a peace settlement likely to create stability in the region. Zweig emphasizes how Wilson’s liberal idealism fails to address the terms of political reality and to solve the political issues at stake immediately after the First World War at a time in history where the European populations’ belief in liberalism was decreasing and their faith in nationalism growing.

Zweig’s short story addresses the crisis of liberalism in the early twentieth century that constitutes the background of Joshua L. Cherniss’ book, *Liberalism in Dark Times*. The historical context of the liberal political thought that Cherniss reads in his book is the crisis of liberalism and capitalism in the 1920s and 1930s, and the rise of totalitarianism – communism, fascism and nazism – with severe consequences for the inhumane warfare in the Second World War and the political climate in the Cold War. The focus in *Liberalism in Dark Times* is how a handful of liberal political thinkers reconstructed liberalism in various ways given the historical political context and their own political experiences in avoiding the pitfalls of an idealist liberalism and an anti-liberal politics.

The *Leitmotiv* is what one of the chosen liberal political thinkers, Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997), calls ‘the liberal predicament’, i.e. ‘how to combat anti-liberal movements ... without either sacrificing political efficacy or betraying basic liberal principles in the name of defending them? Faced with ruthless anti-liberal attacks, to remain a good liberal ... threatens to make one a failed liberal. Yet to become



ruthless in the fight against ruthlessness threatens to leave one no longer a liberal at all' (quoted on p. 5). The liberal predicament indicates a walk on a tightrope.

In his reconstruction of liberalism, Cherniss has chosen to read how Albert Camus (1914–1960), Raymond Aron (1905–1983), Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) and Isaiah Berlin approached the liberal predicament in their political thought by reflecting their political context and experiences with the aim of balancing between liberal ideas, reality and efficacy. Cherniss gives this alternative liberalism the name, 'tempered liberalism', which gives priority to the ethical disposition to live out a liberal ethos in political life that the four political thinkers articulate in their works.

The intellectual context of this reconstruction of a tempered liberalism is the work of Max Weber (1864–1920). Weber inspired the tempered liberals both through his critique of the impotence of an idealist liberalism and with his aim of combining liberal ideals of freedom and individual choice with a duty of political efficacy in order to make the political ideas happen in the struggles of real political life. Weber's conception of moral pluralism as a multiplicity of higher ideals and values in conflict constitutes his background understanding of politics as a passionate struggle between incompatible higher ideals and values. Crucial in the political ethics which Weber formulates is his reflection on the relationship between political ends and means, and his diagnosis of how various ideological positions in his contemporary political life combine political ends and means.

An example is Weber's account of Bolshevism that, first, conflates the ends ideally held and the ends achievable, and second, fails to recognize the gulf between ends and means adopted, i.e. the revolution has implications in controversy to the ends aimed at. Cherniss highlights how Weber's former student, György Lukács (1885–1971), at first hand follows Weber in his critique of Bolshevism and of the internal tensions between purist political ends and realist use of means without moral scruples, but later reverses this critique to a defence of the sacrifice of principle for the sake of 'real' achievements and responsibility for the future. This serves as an example of the utopianism and fanaticism that tempered liberals react to by defending moderation and a balance between extremes. Weber gave deep insights into the tragic condition of taking political responsibility and acting politically with the risk of violating personal morality. At times, he defended a heroism that became controversial in the readings of his work by the later tempered liberals, who historically had other experiences of the vicissitudes of totalitarianism, charismatic leadership, ideological extremism and ecstatic mass movements.

Based on this Weberian framework, Cherniss' *Liberalism in Dark Times* consists of a historical reconstruction of the various aspects of a tempered liberalism by close readings of the four chosen liberal political thinkers in their political context, dedicating a chapter to each of them. Following this historical reconstruction, Cherniss articulates tempered liberalism as a normative perspective of relevance in



contemporary politics. He reads the four liberal political thinkers as exemplary and aims to learn not only from their theoretical and political arguments, but also from their intellectual engagements and liberal commitments in the concrete political debates and struggles they were part of, but without claiming perfection. Their different political contexts – this brings examples from American (Niebuhr), British (Berlin) and French (Aron and Camus) – constitute the horizon for their concrete political experiences and engagements, and by highlighting, the context Cherniss' readings give a deeper insight into the character of the political dilemmas addressed by each author.

Across the individual characteristics of the exemplary liberal political thinking and public engagements, Cherniss highlights a number of common features that constitute a tempered liberalism. First of all, their articulation of a liberalism at a time of crisis in opposition to communism, fascism and nazism, and to the evils of totalitarian experiences, takes its point of departure in the concrete political circumstances and focus on concrete political phenomena; they do not rely on the idea of a universal moral theory. They have a liberal commitment to balance between their liberal ideals and the ambition of political efficacy that Berlin's liberal predicament shows as mentioned. Their own examples show their personal doubts and hesitations, changes of political points of view and ethical transformations.

Crucial in a tempered liberalism is the cultivation of a liberal ethos as indicated by the subtitle of Cherniss' book. He describes the liberal ethos as an individual disposition that guides one's ways of living and ways of acting, not least the way one brings liberal ideals into concrete action. The ethos is aspirational for the continuous cultivation of the individuals' sensibility, temper, attitude and self-understanding, and the characteristics of a liberal ethos, as formulated by the four thinkers, are described by words like responsibility, modesty, fortitude, tolerance and forbearance, intellectual flexibility and judgement, integrity, decency and respect. An aspect of the liberal ethos is the recognition of moral pluralism and disagreements in political life and the rejection of quests for certainty and truth; rather, it emphasizes the reverse in terms of the acknowledgement of its fragility and fallibilism and a liberal practice of self-limitation.

*Liberalism in Dark Times* is a historically sensitive presentation of what Cherniss reconstructs as a tempered liberalism within the interwar period, the Second World War and the Cold War as reservoirs for the political thinking of Aron, Berlin, Camus and Niebuhr. He situates his readings of a tempered liberalism in dialogue with a broad variety of positions in the landscape of relevant contemporary political theories: political liberalism in a Rawlsian style, Shklar's liberalism of fear, neoliberal capitalism, the recent rise of realism in political theory, and Aristotelian, Nietzschean and Foucaultian conceptions of political ethos. The book is not only deep in its detailed readings of Weber, Lukács, Camus, Aron, Niebuhr and Berlin, but also broad- and open-minded in the intellectual



engagements with the variety of traditions and positions in contemporary political theory.

Not least, Cherniss' reconstruction and revival of a tempered liberalism as a normative perspective of actual relevance set remarkable signposts for integrity and moderation, responsibility and responsiveness in reaction to the polarization and radicalization going on in democratic political life today. As normative political theory, it is minimal, and its strength is its exemplarity as a source of inspiration and reflection, rather than as a systematic approach. The emphasis on self-formation and cultivating a liberal ethos is highly demanding for the democratic citizenry, and therefore, it is the Achilles heel of a liberal democracy. However, in Cherniss' reconstruction, a tempered liberalism and liberal ethos give modest hope that one can do better in imagining, judging and living out liberal ideals by political engagements, although fragile and fallible. This is the hope that one can improve in a liberal spirit for the future of a vital democratic life.

## Reference

Zweig, S. (2013 [1940]). Wilson's failure. In *Shooting stars: Ten historical miniatures*, tr. Anthea Bell. London: Pushkin Press.

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