



## Liberalism against itself: cold war intellectuals and the making of our times

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Samuel Moyn's *Liberalism Against Itself* provides an erudite and challenging analysis of 'Cold War liberalism', a term used to describe a loosely connected body of works written by diverse intellectuals between the 1940s and the early 1990s. Moyn is explicit about his own position from the book's outset: 'though labeled by its enemies, Cold War liberalism has recently been written about almost exclusively by its friends. After a long era of apologetics, this book offers the case against.... Cold War liberalism left the liberal tradition unrecognizable and in ruins' (pp. 6–7). Throughout the book, he argues that Cold War liberalism is one of the historical forces responsible for the backlash against liberalism that has been sweeping across much of the world for the past few years (see pp. 169–176).

This book is politically argumentative; it is not a historical survey. Moreover, the author deliberately refuses to discuss many of the more 'canonical' Cold War liberals, such as Raymond Aron, Leszek Kołakowski, and Richard Hofstadter. He instead looks at figures who 'cast more unexpected light on critical features of their time' (p. 8). The book has six main chapters, and the theorists discussed are Judith Shklar, Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Hannah Arendt, and Lionel Trilling. The chapters do not give an overview of their thought, but instead home in on particular aspects of their philosophies. This, Moyn believes, will allow us to evaluate the substance and legacy of Cold War liberalism.

Some of the chapters are somewhat uncharitable and unoriginal; Karl Popper, for instance, is criticized for his poor understanding of Hegel and Marx. The most interesting are those in which Moyn gives a more nuanced appraisal, as he does, for instance, in the chapters on Judith Shklar, Isaiah Berlin, and Lionel Trilling. Shklar is celebrated for *After Utopia*, which is presented as a foil for the Cold War liberalism that she later embraced. In Moyn's view, *After Utopia* delivers a powerful

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indictment of Cold War liberalism for its repudiation of the Enlightenment, and its loss of faith concerning the possibility of historical progress, perfectionism, and human emancipation (pp. 20–28). Moyn goes so far as to say that ‘*After Utopia* offered an implacable critique and diagnosis of Cold War liberalism...’ (p. 37).

While Isaiah Berlin is criticized for his belief that Enlightenment thought is a potential wellspring of totalitarianism and terror, Moyn points approvingly to his reluctance to let go of Romanticism. As Moyn writes, ‘For all his other mistakes and oversimplifications...Berlin was right to insist that liberals embrace the absolutely fundamental contribution of Romanticism to the most defensible version of their creed’ (p. 41). In this way, Moyn attempts to show how, at their best, theorists such as Shklar and Berlin put forward ideas that stood in opposition to the shallower expressions of Cold War liberal ‘survivalism’.

This book is openly controversial, and it is hardly surprising that it is already attracting criticism. Some intellectual historians will not be satisfied with the readings of Cold War liberalism that it offers. However, I would like to home in on other interesting questions raised by *Liberalism Against Itself*. First, even if we accept that both the theory and practice of liberalism have been left ‘in ruins’, is Moyn correct that Cold War liberalism is to blame? Secondly, even if Moyn is right that Cold War liberalism involved the abandonment of the Enlightenment, how should we understand ‘the Enlightenment’ in the first place?

I think that one of Moyn’s main contentions—namely that many forms of liberalism are (often unintentionally) conservative-leaning and unfit to deal with the major challenges of our era—is essentially correct. It is commendable that someone from the liberal tradition has so eloquently and forcefully made this point. However, I am not convinced that Moyn has correctly identified the causes of this ‘liberal malaise’. While Moyn is no doubt right that Cold War liberalism has played *some* role in shaping contemporary liberal theory and practice, he seems to have overstated its influence here. Is Cold War liberalism the dominant tradition in academic political theory, for instance? It certainly is not. The philosophy of John Rawls is far more dominant. Robert Nozick claimed that, within academic political philosophy, one must either work within Rawlsian theory, or explain why not (Nozick, 1974, p. 183).

Nothing significant has changed since Nozick wrote this. I am not even convinced that Cold War liberalism is the main alternative to Rawlsianism among academics. Liberal perfectionism—a form of liberal theory that emphasizes human autonomy and flourishing—appears to be at least as popular as the Cold War liberalism of Karl Popper, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Judith Shklar. This, of course, might reflect differences between disciplines. Perhaps Cold War liberalism is very prominent among academic historians. On the whole, though, it is fair to say that Moyn is overstating the influence of Cold War liberalism within academia.

Moyn might reply that Cold War liberalism has often been the dominant school of thought among politicians and policymakers (even if it is not among historians and political theorists), and therefore that it still has a disproportionate impact on existing liberalism. But this claim also seems like a stretch. The pessimistic liberalism that was put forward by many Cold War liberals is a far cry from the ‘liberalism’ followed by politicians such as Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Tony Blair, for instance. Most of the time, these figures were more wedded



to optimistic neoliberalism, and shared little of the fearful, cautious survivalism of Berlin or Shklar. On what basis, then, can Moyn claim that Cold War liberalism has had such a strong (and disastrous) influence on present-day politics? No doubt he is correct that it remains influential in many circles—some prominent intellectuals such as Timothy Garton Ash and John Gray are directly influenced by Cold War liberalism—but it is slightly jarring that Moyn never really defends his assertion that Cold War liberal thought enjoys dominance within contemporary liberalism.

It is interesting that John Rawls is mentioned only a few times throughout the book, and mostly in the final chapter. Rawls's relationship to the Cold War liberals is left somewhat unclear, although it is suggested that Rawls too suffers from some of the defects of Cold War liberalism: 'John Rawls's next-generation *A Theory of Justice*...For all its powerful and telling incorporation of Cold War liberalism (notably what Rawls called the priority of liberty over other ends), the book was most remarkable in its defense of some modicum of distributional egalitarianism' (p. 169). Moyn here seems to be suggesting that Rawls's work shares some of the unfortunate (socially unambitious and inegalitarian) features of Cold War liberalism, and this stands in contrast to Rawls's supporters, who often consider him to have been a radically progressive egalitarian liberal (see Freeman, 2013). If Moyn had pursued this line of thought further, he could have made a better case that Cold War liberalism still has a powerful impact on present-day political theory. It is understandable that Moyn did not want to write another book about Rawls, or even to include a chapter on him. However, considering the claims that Moyn makes about how influential Cold War liberalism is, and given the tremendous influence of Rawlsianism, it would seem that this issue needs more attention.

The other issue that stood out was Moyn's suggestion that Cold War liberals, by and large, abandoned the Enlightenment and 'dug the grave of reason in history' (p. 89). But what is the Enlightenment? What is it that Cold War liberals supposedly left behind? Moyn never gives his reader much of an idea. The issue of how to understand the Enlightenment has long been a matter of contention among historians, and there are even doubts about whether it makes sense to talk of one 'Enlightenment' in the first place (see, for example, Schmidt, 2000, p. 737). Moyn argues that the Cold War liberals were wrong to let go of the Enlightenment's egalitarian, progressive, and perfectionist spirit in favor of a more conservative and pessimistic brand of liberalism. Isaiah Berlin in particular is criticized for blaming the Enlightenment for many of the atrocities that scarred the twentieth century. How are we supposed to assess such claims? It is surprising that Moyn does not give a general sketch of how *he* thinks the Enlightenment should be understood, and why it makes sense to talk of one unified 'Enlightenment' movement that was egalitarian, progressive, and perfectionist. As it stands, the reader is left unsure why we should repudiate the Cold War liberal scepticism towards the Enlightenment.

This book addresses an important issue, and it provides, at times, a powerful critique of Cold War liberalism. The reservations above suggest the need for more work in the area, and a more balanced analysis of why liberalism has taken the path that it has.



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