

Liberal Read

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Liberalism in Dark Times

BOOK REVIEW

Joshua Cherniss

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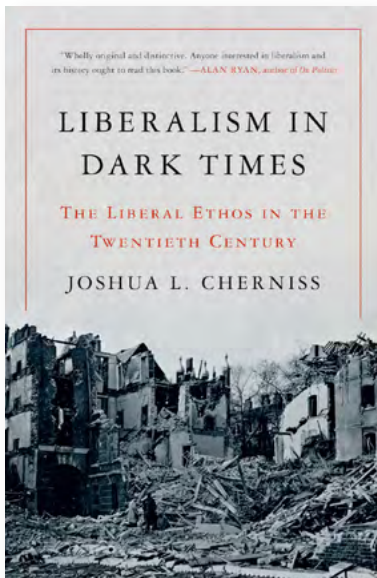
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By Tirso Virgos

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

Liberalism in Dark Times



On the first page of *Liberalism in Dark Times*, the latest book of Joshua Cherniss, we find a quote from Isaiah Berlin. This is unsurprising, because it is one of the most widely cited liberal thinkers of the 20th century. However, the second quote belongs to Indalecio Prieto, one of the most famous members of the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) during the Second Republic and the Civil War. It is an appeal to the soldiers and militias of the Republican side of the war during the first weeks of combat:

Do not imitate them! Do not imitate them! Surpass them in moral conduct; surpass them by being generous. I do not ask you, however, that you should lose either strength in battle or zeal in the fight. I ask for brave, hard, and steely breasts for the combat... but with sensitive hearts, capable of shaking when faced with human sorrow and being able to harbour mercy and tender feelings, without which the most essential part of human greatness is lost

It is, Cherniss argues, as he quotes Prieto at the end of the book again, a very liberal speech, because this book is an attempt to define a “tempered liberalism” that is not focused on high principles and institutions, such as the one preached by, for instance, John Rawls. Instead, it places emphasis on a liberal disposition, a liberal ethos that aims to combat cruelty, ruthlessness, and all of the common vices of humankind. For this reason, Prieto, a socialist, can also be a tempered liberal, such as Albert Camus, Raymond Aron, or Max Weber. The book focuses on certain key thinkers and their ideological evolution and actions to provide a solid description of the nature of tempered liberalism.

Why does he focus on individuals and history? In the words of Adam Michnik, who was also quoted at the beginning of the book, he returns to past political and moral thinking “not so that the language of that reign of terror may never repeat itself, but because I’m convinced it will inevitably do so.” For him, a very few of individuals that we now consider monsters, such as Stalin, Hitler, or the French Revolutionary terrorists, who are all deeply anti-liberal and ruthless, started as such. Thus, the potential always exists for cruelty, envy, jealousy, and all types of illiberal sentiments in the hearts of man, and he considers that this scenario is the real problem that needs to be tackled from the illiberal perspective.

This is a big change of pace regarding a few of the major liberal works of the second half of the 20th century. He does not put focus on the fair allocation of primary goods, resources, or any other measures of welfare or utility (as Rawls, Dworkin, or Nozick would do). He does not promote the idea of civic virtue, such as the critics of liberalism of the Republicans or even the “moral liberalism” of authors such as Helena Rossenblatt.

He is closer, as he acknowledges, to the idea of the “liberalism of fear” of Judith Shklar, although he argues that his liberalism is not purely defensive, as his critics would argue. Instead, it is a “vigilant openness” to avoid barbarism.¹

From Weber to Berlin: In search of liberal ethos

By the end of the first chapter, Cherniss quotes a conversation between Schumpeter and Max Weber regarding the Soviet Union and the development of socialism there. Although the former sees this as an opportunity for testing the advantages and pitfalls of a socialist system, the latter is concerned with the toll on human lives that would be brought about by the Revolution and its aftermath. Against this argument, Schumpeter states that this is no more than a laboratory for human progress, and Weber answers that the laboratory is built upon piles of human corpses. The cold rationality of abstraction and high principles, that is, caring about the end and not the means, versus the idea defined by Cherniss as a certain sense of heroism: the adhesion to ethical standards and following the very ideas of Weber,² drawing a line on the sand that we would not cross, not even in the face of enormous benefits.

This theme is a recurring one in this book, from Max Weber to the defiance of Camus against former colleagues who were purposefully blind on the face of the atrocities of communism or the warnings of Aron against the danger of all forms of fanaticism regardless of the ideals that inspired them. The sacred value of human life and the need to balance political idealism, as a means of improving our world and denouncing the injustices that continue existing, with political realism and a disposition toward tolerance and kindness. However, one could argue that the book, despite its wide scholarship and in-depth analysis of each thinker, does not confront these ideas with those of the anti-liberals that opposed Weber, Camus, or Aron. Cherniss only presents Lukacs and, to a lesser extent, Sartre as examples of unfettered idealism following the “with my party right or wrong” adagio to a point where all excesses are justified.

This aspect has been one of the main criticisms of Talisse,³ and it is a fair point, although it is true that the book attempts to present the ideological tradition of “tempered liberalism” as an ethos and not the criticisms posed against it (except for a few sketches of possible answers to these criticisms in the final chapter). However, another line of attack is sketched but not fully developed by Talisse, that is, Cherniss presents, at the very beginning of this work, in which he quotes the proposal of H.G. Wells of creating a “liberal phalanx.” Liberalism, defenders, and critics alike say but does not inspire and does not compel people to be heroic. At least, not since the early revolutions across Europe, when the beaches of Málaga, the coasts of France, or the fields of Germany were the tomb of many liberal revolutionaries who rose against despotism and tradition.

None of the authors cited in this book can craft a liberalism that “inspires” in the sense that other ideologies could do. For instance, Cherniss speaks about the difficulties of liberalism in addressing communism, which is the “bastard child” of the Enlightenment and inspired

1 Cherniss, J. L. (2021). *Liberalism in dark times: The liberal ethos in the twentieth century*. Princeton University Press. Pp. 197-221

2 Weber, M. (2004). *The vocation lectures*. Hackett Publishing.

3 Talisse, Robert B. “Joshua L. Cherniss: *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. xvii, 306.)” *The Review of Politics* 85.1 (2023): 139-141.

The recurring theme of the book is the sacred value of human life and the need to balance political idealism, as a means of improving our world and denouncing the injustices that continue existing, with political realism and a disposition toward tolerance and kindness. However, one could argue that the book, despite its wide scholarship and in-depth analysis of each thinker, does not confront these ideas with those of the anti-liberals that opposed Weber, Camus, or Aron. Cherniss only presents Lukacs and, to a lesser extent, Sartre as examples of unfettered idealism following the “with my party right or wrong” adagio to a point where all excesses are justified.

by the ideas of equality of all citizens, a harmonious society, and the perfectibility of humans. Years after the fall of the Soviet Union, these promises were evidently betrayed, and these communist systems were built upon repression, repression of dissidence, and maximalism in which Sartre famously quotes that “the proletariat must not compromise with the swine.”⁴ However, it seemingly continues to inspire movements around the world, although liberalism is considered to be on the defensive and typically wins only as an alternative to something worse.⁵

A part of this is, indeed, due to the perception of liberal democracies as the system of the establishment⁶. However, none of the assertions of the authors chosen by Cherniss could serve as the basis of a thicker liberalism, which aims to provide a certain idea of the nature of the good life or to which political ideal, in institutional and systematic terms, we should aspire. Doing so would defeat the very purpose of his approach to liberalism as a tempered way of acting, thus, granting a greater possible freedom to everyone to pursue their plan of life. A maximalist approach, which focuses on a chosen number of ideas of the good life, would run contrary to the attempt of Cherniss.

From Weber, he takes the idea of the ethics of conviction and of responsibility, which are applied not only to politicians but also to citizens, who should never overstep certain limits regardless of how worthy

the ideal they chase is. Camus provides him with a description of heroism as the “non-emulation” of people who want to destroy others, who feel indignation in the face of the unfair state of the world but do not sacrifice liberty and the life of others for the sake of any ideal. From Aron and Berlin, he extracts the ideas of pluralism, progressivism, and political courage and assesses the efficacy and justice of every action. Lastly, from Niebuhr, he learns of the value of forgiveness, changing opinions, and the opposition to a “purism that fosters withdrawal and an extremism that fosters folly.”⁷

Finally, he further develops the idea of tempered liberalism and argues that it is not one to go on crusades against totalitarianism or preserve the status quo against all odds.

4 Cherniss, J. I. (2021) *Ibidem*. Pp. 1

5 See Rosenblatt, H. (2018). The lost history of liberalism. In *The Lost History of Liberalism*. Princeton University Press, as well as the criticism faced by Emmanuel Macron regarding his legitimacy as a president for being the sole alternative to Le Pen. Or early criticisms of Biden, for being the sole alternative to Donald Trump. Moreover, branding Rosenblatt, Macron, and Biden as “liberals” shows the difficulties in finding a common definition for all branches of liberal thought

6 Ikenberry, G. J. (2011). *Liberal Leviathan*. Princeton University Press.

7 Cherniss, J. I. (2021) *Ibidem*. Pp.137–165. The whole book can be interpreted as a vindication of the idea of “intellectuals as foxes” instead of “hedgehogs”, less prone to sticking to one idea and engaging problems with intellectual humility, compassion, and taking into account different perspectives. See Dworkin, R. (2011). *Justice for hedgehogs*. Harvard University Press or Tetlock, P. E. (2017). *Expert political judgment*. In *Expert Political Judgment*. Princeton University Press.

Instead, it is “prophylactic and therapeutic,” offers a type of heroism for the common people (based on that defined by Camus), and combines integrity with political responsibility. He finally claims that even if a person could mock him for caring about the tone, disposition, and attitude in politics, even an improvement in the manner in which politicians deal with each other would be, effectively, a way of conducting politics and a way of turning them more liberal⁸. His statement against the growing influence of the political in all realms of human action is a powerful testament to his liberal ideals, as he argues that we cannot see politics in every interaction or wish for it to be more present in our private sphere. Against the growing danger of moralization sponsored by the state, he presents a reasoned argument not to detach ourselves from the political but to learn to limit its effects and its influence only to areas where politics should have a say.

Can this noble intention of generating a new liberal ethos and combating excessive affective polarization, ruthlessness, cruelty, and the many other vices that burden political debates today be realized without institutions? That is the big question that Cherniss needs to answer. He barely touches on a subject that is, in my view, crucial to the development of his idea.

The necessary balance

I agree that, for the past decades, liberals have mainly focused on the abstract and on the big questions about liberty, equality, justice, or fairness, have developed different theories of justice, social contracts, or ideal institutions that would lead to a truly liberal society. Similarly, their communitarian,⁹ Republican,¹⁰ or feminist¹¹ critics have played the same game and engaged with the great principles of our life in common, although a few of them, especially the Neo-Romans among the Republicans, have also endeavored to develop alternative ethical systems and civic virtues.

However, the fact that liberalism has extremely focused on institutions does not mean that we should neglect them outright. Instead, we must strike a balance between the approach centered on ethos and liberal disposition and that which is concerned about the fair allocation of freedom, rights, and opportunities. A third way that understands the need for a more humane type of interaction in the political and personal domains, but also that institutions are key to the development of these dispositions.

However, this could be problematic. Arguing in favor of skepticism and against maximalist, monist, and ruthless ethics should not be problematic for a liberal. Nevertheless, it can be. We could argue that, if we do not infringe on the rights and liberties of others, then no problem would exist in holding views that others would consider abhorrent. To a certain extent, this is the basis of non-militant democracies,¹² in which only attacks against the freedom and rights set in democratic rules are forbidden but not the expression of, for instance, views against that very democratic system. A politician could call for the end

8 Cherniss, J. I. (2021) *Ibidem*, Pp. 215-216

9 Sandel, M. J., & Anne, T. (1998). *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge University Press.

10 Pettit, P. (2017). *Liberalism and Republicanism*. In *Cicero and Modern Law* (pp. 543-570). Routledge.

11 For a liberal feminist criticism see Okin, S. M. (1994). Political liberalism, justice, and gender. *Ethics*, 105(1), 23-43.

12 As opposed to “Militant” or “defensive” democracies. See Loewenstein, K. (1937). Militant democracy and fundamental rights, I. *American Political Science Review*, 31(3), 417-432.

of the parliament and the abolition of universal suffrage if it does not violate the rights of other citizens such as in the case of terrorist attacks or hate speech.

One camp would argue that this type of ethical disposition cannot be allowed in the public sphere. The other would say that no commitment exists to the principles of justice that we have agreed on for our society. What should the third way say? In my view, even

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if such a person possesses the right to have an idea of what a good political system is, we should aim for a certain "thickening" of liberalism, as Cherniss would say, with institutions promoting a certain idea of virtue. An example is one defined in the previous paragraphs, which is not based on patriotism, honor, or heroism praised in ancient times. The fact that institutions sponsor this disposition does not mean that they should promote a certain way of life or a political model but a way of conducting ourselves that leads to less desire for the subversion of democratic systems and the erosion of rights.




One could argue that this is extreme "perfectionism" for liberalism and that the best one can do is to hope for liberal parties and leaders to convince with institutions taking a neutral role. This is a possibility that should not be excluded; however, we must wonder if, in the face of growing authoritarian attitudes, illiberalism, and cruel treatment of citizens of all kinds (Especially minorities), we do not need to take that step toward the "vigilant openness" praised by Cherniss. Institutions that respect all conceptions of the good life that do not violate the rights of others but that are also open to promoting the necessary disposition for our systems to survive.

The reason is that, in the end, the ethics that Cherniss proposes connects with the tenets defended by liberalism since the very beginning: the fallibility of humankind, the possibility of failing and standing up again, the constant threat of tyranny even in the heart of the humblest human, and, especially, the possibility of change. We are neither bound to become what is expected of us nor belong to the same group, religion, or any other affiliation into which we were born. Our institutions must relate to this idea in their treatment of the citizens of liberal democracies and in their actions to promote

this humble virtue. No more and no less. Only the combination of liberal ethos and liberal theory of justice can help us in navigating these times of trouble not only without prejudice or ruthlessness but also without fear of embracing a modest approach to a liberal civic virtue.

ABOUT ELF

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 51 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different EU stakeholders.

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