

*Hi all*

*Kind of on the box-of-chocolates principle, I have included a few short pieces on this seminar's theme (liberalism, its history, its future), since after my recent book on the topic I have not had anything more significant to say. Please read the first, and/or whatever seems worth trying.*

*Sam*

# Samuel Moyn

## From One Crisis of Liberalism to Another

**ABSTRACT.** Are crises of liberalism always the same, or are they always different? Or, if it is a little of both, what is to be learned by stepping back to compare the contemporary prosecution of liberals, and their strategies of self-defense, with the configurations of prior rounds? To answer this question, this essay looks at our own time in comparison to the most recent era when political theorists clashed over whether to ditch liberalism—that of the later Cold War and shortly after. Ultimately, it is the differences among crises that stand out and help inform proposals about how to rescue liberalism from crisis one more time.

IF LIBERALISM IS UNDER SIEGE TODAY, IT IS NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME. Are crises of liberalism always the same, or always different? Or, if it is a little of both, what is to be learned by stepping back to compare the contemporary prosecution of liberals, and their strategies of self-defense, with the configurations of prior rounds?

To the best of my limited knowledge, the pioneer of such comparative inquiry is the French liberal Marcel Gauchet. A philosopher of history, Gauchet went beyond comparison. He investigated how the first great crisis of liberalism before World War I was ultimately overcome in the early Cold War, before giving way to a new crisis of liberalism, which has arisen since the 1970s thanks to the inception of neoliberalism (Gauchet 2007–17).

In this essay, my agenda of comparing liberal crises has to be much narrower. I focus on a comparison of crises of liberalism in political theory, only raising from time to time whether they have corresponded to crises of liberalism as political regimes. And I stick to looking at our own time in comparison to the most recent era when

political theorists clashed over whether to ditch liberalism—the crisis of the later Cold War and shortly after.

That crisis has been nearly forgotten. Since the current era of contention about something called “liberalism” became palpable in the summer and fall of 2016 with the Brexit vote and the (first) election of Donald J. Trump as US president, the 1930s have been the preferred reference point. In the face of antiliberalism or “postliberalism,” indeed, it is striking how many liberals have imagined themselves living in January 1933 in response to November 2016 or, later on, in the World War II resistance in the face of the first Trump presidency or fearing the prospect of his return. They might turn out to be right, but for now I wonder if the forgotten last crisis of liberalism is a more useful era for them to think about.

The controversy today around liberalism has already settled into a familiar standoff between those who excoriate and those who extenuate. Against political theorist Patrick Deneen’s breakthrough prosecution, a slew of defenders have offered eloquent cases that the accused is innocent (Deneen 2018; Fukuyama 2022; Gopnik 2019; Sunstein, forthcoming; Traub 2019).

In my own work, I’ve sought another way, calling for a reinvention of liberalism, rather than excoriation or extenuation (Moyn 2023). It can’t be said that I’ve been all that successful. While I hope it is of value for its own sake, a comparative intellectual history of crises of liberalism is also worthwhile because it might reach my earlier conclusions through a different route. As I will conduct it, the comparative exercise confirms that liberalism’s primary task today is to redeem itself from its mistakes.

In my view, those mistakes in and after the Cold War foreclosed the emancipatory possibilities of liberalism in its nineteenth-century inception. I see a future for liberalism different than its recent past, which capitalizes on at least some impulses in its origins, notably its commitment to a perfectionist ethical outlook and a progressivist philosophy of history. And my main conclusion in this essay is that, after the second election of Trump, it is worth taking a harder look

at the more defensive and self-defensive liberalism that has prevailed lately. Its failures are at least partial warrant for trying a new kind of liberalism.

### **BLAST FROM THE PAST: A LIBERAL POLEMIC AGAINST ANTILIBERALISM**

The guide I am going to take to look at the crisis of liberalism of the later Cold War and its immediate aftermath, as well as a target, is the political theorist Stephen Holmes. His work is an opportunity to review just how numerous critics of liberalism there once were in a bygone—if recent—age and how liberals strategized a response to them.

Holmes was born in 1948. He did a doctorate at Yale University but abandoned the revision of his dissertation (Holmes 1976). Instead, he wrote a book about French liberal Benjamin Constant (Holmes 1984)—to which I'll return at the end of this essay—before becoming a junior faculty member in political science at Harvard University. There, he became a follower of the renowned Cold War liberal Judith Shklar (among others), though he was never technically her student. A gifted polemicist and talented writer, he became an enfant terrible of one liberal tendency in political theory—and a take-no-prisoners pugilist on its behalf.<sup>1</sup> Later on he taught at the University of Chicago, Princeton, and New York University, where he remains today.

Holmes's *Anatomy of Antiliberalism* (1993) compiled once-famed prior takedowns in the American liberal magazine *The New Republic* in the 1980s and early 1990s. In anatomizing antiliberalism, Holmes helpfully left behind a compendium of just how many critics of liberalism there were in debate, before the 1990s marginalized most such voices for a time.

Holmes had a number of contemporary targets right and left. There was Alasdair MacIntyre, from the neo-Aristotelian or neo-Thomist and Roman Catholic right. There was Roberto Unger, from the radical left—even though, on Holmes's own account, Unger had dropped the fundamental opposition to liberalism of his early work and presented himself as a “superliberal,” on analogy with surrealism

that promised to do better than realism by being more realistic (Unger 1975; 1987, 588). And there were communitarians such as Christopher Lasch and Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor, none of them clearly illiberal, but sharing enough features, according to Holmes, that it was justifiable to group critics of some features or some versions of liberalism with its more openly and pitilessly hostile enemies.

Holmes treated all of them as “soft antiliberals”—in some sense, like MacIntyre and Unger, as knockoffs of earlier “hard” antiliberals (Joseph de Maistre, Carl Schmitt, and Leo Strauss) whom Holmes also took up. You will notice that Karl Marx and the entire Marxist tradition are absent from the list—a revealing fact I’ll come back to (compare later Holmes 1998). In relation to all comers, Holmes defended liberalism.

In a companion book, *Passions and Constraint* (1995), Holmes followed Shklar in looking back to the early modern period for the source of a muscular, postreligious, statist liberalism, which took the disorderly passions most seriously as a fearful threat to liberty or even survival, and in the name of which he set out to defend its record against its cultured and communitarian despisers.

While acknowledging serious differences between prior hard antiliberals and soft ones, Holmes’s whole strategy was to delegitimize the current critics as descendants of the reactionary past. He was ambivalent and self-contradictory on this point: “I am not saying that [the recent critics] are quasi-fascists or fascist-sympathizers or fascists-with-a-human-face” (1993, xiii). But the entire structure of his criticism indulged in guilt by association, and, like defenders of liberalism today, Holmes was never above going back to the 1930s himself, for example in the closing riposte to Unger, blamed for longing for an interwar politics that was “up for grabs” (175).

### **A FIRST COMPARISON: THEORY AND EVENT**

There are always a lot of commonalities and differences between past and present. Without exhausting the comparison between the crisis of liberalism in the 1970s–1990s—in which Holmes intervened—and

our own, I will offer three perspectives. The first focuses on the relationship between crises in theory and events in politics.

One of the appealing features of the 1930s comparison for current liberals is that it captures how disruptive and shocking recent political events have felt. In the makings of liberalism's greatest challenge culminating in its World War II victory against fascism (with communist help), the list of events is long: World War I, the rise of Benito Mussolini to power in Italy in 1922, the Wall Street stock market crash in 1929, the coming to power of Adolf Hitler in Germany in 1933, the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan in 1941, and many lesser ones. With this series of disasters ending the *belle époque* and "world of yesterday," it might well seem that a useful comparison can be made to our experience of reversal between the "end of history" of the 1990s and the 2016 events that have driven the widespread perception that liberalism faces a time of trials (Fukuyama 1989; Zweig 1943).

The crisis of liberalism that Holmes engaged shared none of these characteristics. It was unleashed by no events. For that matter, it remained live even as world history was passing a seeming verdict on the viability of liberalism with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989–1991.

What is fascinating about the slow-grind crisis of liberalism in political theory in the 1970s through 1990s—when the antiliberal tradition Holmes anatomized became prominent—is that it was free-standing. Perhaps, absent the end of the Cold War and the liberal triumphalism that followed, it would have led to something politically strong. But the hallmark of the writings of MacIntyre, Unger, and others is that they were almost entirely disconnected from catalytic or symbolic political events. They were especially separate from political movements responding to upheaval. There were boring recessions, of course, but nothing like 1929 (or even 2008). And this whole body of theory grew up in the era of the "third wave" of democratization around the world. It was, indeed, these facts that led Holmes to deem his targets "politically harmless" thanks to the "historical circumstance" that made them practically irrelevant (Holmes 1993, xiii).

Does this mean that the last crisis of liberalism is uninteresting amid our current one? Possibly, but perhaps it is even more germane than more eventful contenders. Gauchet showed how the first “crisis of liberalism” set in after the 1880s, when little seemed to be going on, preparing the upheavals of the decades starting with World War I. It might be that such politically somnolent eras are more helpful in their theoretical ferment about basic issues and first principles than ages of frantic response to the latest catastrophe or outrage.

Part of what has been at stake in current debate about the fortunes of liberalism is how far events like Brexit or Trump’s first win prove that the end-times for liberalism are nigh—with fascism and tyranny on the make. In short, an initial reason for care about the crisis of liberalism in yesteryear is that it encourages a potentially more elemental confrontation with what liberalism is and what its limits are than a belief in immediate political crisis might otherwise allow.

## **A SECOND COMPARISON: GROUNDHOG DAY**

In the year Holmes’s book appeared, 1993, Hollywood came out with the great film that inadvertently dramatizes the perennial contest of liberals and their critics. In *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray’s character is caught in a time loop, waking up morning after morning to experience the same day until he can figure out how to exit the trap. The crisis of liberalism today already feels repetitious on its own; when you compare it to the last one, the feeling of having done it all before becomes overwhelming. A second parallel to explore between the current and recent crises of liberalism, therefore, is that they involve the eternal return of the same arguments and counterarguments.

In a recent essay, returning to antiliberalism after a quarter-century, Holmes reflected on this evergreen quality. Antiliberalism has a “permanent structure,” he wrote. It is only given occasional importance by “contingent historical circumstance” (2021, 3). As he now lists them, crises of liberalism foreground a number of familiar reservations about the liberal idea or liberal society: They are indi-

vidualistic, or too much so; they are universalistic, or too much so; they are based on “secular reason,” or too much so.

After his rogue’s gallery of antiliberals, Holmes proceeded in *Anatomy* to a digest of what he took to be their main claims and criticized them remorselessly. Holmes certainly thinks he is caught up in Groundhog Day, forced to return late in his career to his role earlier, which calls on him to repeat himself. And it is absolutely true that many of his criticisms of perennial forms of antiliberalism in *Anatomy* were not only credible and powerful, but directly applicable to many of today’s antiliberals.

Deneen’s famed *Why Liberalism Failed*, in particular, is a compilation of memes familiar to anyone who has done the now forgotten reading of the 1970s through 1990s. Indeed, when I piloted this essay as a talk in his presence in Germany in the fall of 2024, Deneen said it was his entire point that argument about liberalism, not just liberalism itself, is caught in a (doom) loop. Far from taking it as a criticism, Deneen embraced the reality of illiberal repetition. He was not even trying to be original, only to revive the critiques that Lasch, MacIntyre, and others had made further back.

But it is still surprising that antiliberals or “postliberals” today have not even bothered to guard themselves against some of the more basic and plausible criticisms Holmes assembled. If liberalism is on endless trial, does it have to be so boringly identical in each phase?

In the second half of *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, Holmes offered a checklist of antiliberal tropes and rejected them. He began with how the history of liberalism was bowdlerized or misrepresented (1993, 187–89). That is certainly routine today in what postliberals say about where liberalism came from and how it evolved. Then there are the stock criticisms on the playlist that critics of liberalism have set on repeat. Was the atomization of society a liberal goal, as antiliberals of yore charged and new antiliberals repeat? That wasn’t true of John Locke, Holmes maintained, and it was a good thing to pulverize some social institutions to bits (190–97). Notwithstanding historic



and recent complaints, liberals could “maintain an emphatic conception of the common good” (200), and so on, as Holmes descended a familiar list of implausible objections to liberalism, rebutting them all. It does not appear to me that antiliberals and postliberals have answered such rebuttals.

The “leap” of antiliberalism “into deadly political prominence” across the world these days “cannot be traced to any internal evolution of antiliberal thinking,” Holmes sniffed in 2021, at first sight plausibly (3). Even the character played by Bill Murray in the film *Groundhog Day* changed something every day in hopes it would blow a hole in his cyclical fate (it eventually worked). Antiliberals have not always done so. But then, it would not seem that liberal responses to their ancient enemies have evolved either.

### **A THIRD COMPARISON: MISSED OPPORTUNITY**

Even so, with apologies to Heraclitus, you never step into the same crisis of liberalism twice. The differences among and between crises are always there, and they may prove far more important than the repetitious similarities when the late Cold War theoretical attack on and defense of liberalism are put beside our own.

For all that Deneen might be trying to echo Lasch or MacIntyre this time around, and for all my potential replay today of Unger’s earlier proposal of a “superliberalism” that could redeem liberalism from its own self-imposed mistakes, there is no pure repetition in history. As another critic of liberalism once remarked, it is tempting to “anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language” (Marx 1963, 15). But even when people give in to temptation to don old costumes, what really matters is that the scene is new. The players are doing original things even when they purport to be repeating old saws.

If this is true, then for all the value of repeating their self-defenses, liberals today might shirk the intellectual opportunity in

grasping change over time more self-consciously—even how their beleaguered current situation is owing to how they weathered their last crisis, precisely because of differences between then and now. Even Holmes’s anti-antiliberal attire, retrieved from the attic trunk after 30 years, is not exactly the same on close inspection. It repeats many elements of his former case, but not in precisely the same way. And there are new elements: He engages what he says is the illiberalism of identity politics and defends “liberal meritocracy” against critics it lacked before.

By far the biggest change is that Holmes is sensitive to how serious the current crisis of liberalism is. The last one unfolded as farce, you might say, but this one might end in tragedy. Of course, Holmes could still be right that, fundamentally, the intellectual terms of the crises then and now are the same even when ours is lent gravity by circumstance. But it is also possible that the distinctive features of one crisis might throw into relief a missed opportunity that, had it been seized, could have averted our own crisis.

Even as Holmes rose as the scourge of harmless intellectuals, he ignored what now look like substantially harmful choices by liberals themselves in the era. What is most different about the two crises of liberalism is that critics have gained another hearing in response to decades of liberal constitutional failure, military blunders, and neoliberal economics. Apologizing for liberalism while missing the authentic criticisms of liberalism that needed to be made, Holmes was forced to spend the remainder of his career amid the rubble of the breakdown of liberal hegemony. Was there nothing to be learned from the last crisis of liberalism that could have saved liberalism from the dire straits into which its own representatives helped steer it?

Ironically, Holmes’s own evolution lends credence to this possibility. Before the ink on his barrage against critics of liberalism was dry, Holmes threw himself into spreading liberal constitutionalism to Eastern Europe and elsewhere (Appadurai 2020). As he came to acknowledge, it did not generally work out well (Holmes and Krastev 2020). Later he became one of the most insightful critics not of illiber-

alism but of neoconservatism and of George W. Bush's counterterrorist policies after September 11, 2001 (Holmes 2007b). But Holmes's earlier defense of a muscular liberalism had arisen in the era of the reactivation of American bellicosity, including among liberals, without which the fallout from 9/11 would have been unimaginable. Worst of all, Holmes had missed the coming of the neoliberal era, which shadowed the liberal revival and eventually arrested and reversed it. All of these are central features of the current rendition of the crisis of liberalism, which have defined it profoundly.

Let me raise the possibility to which this last juxtaposition leads bluntly. Does the comparison of the crises suggest that, back in the day, Holmes fiddled with antiliberals who were "harmless" on his own account, while the world began to burn thanks to the mistakes of liberals themselves? Where would that recognition lead?

## **OF LIBERALISM AND LAISSEZ-FAIRE**

I will explore just two of the differences between then and now. First, and probably most important, it's worth getting clearer on how economics figured so differently in the two crises—and how the resolution of the first was a missed opportunity setting up the second.

Nowadays it is particularly striking that, from what one can derive from stray comments in *Anatomy of Antiliberalism*, Holmes showed no interest in the relationship between liberalism and capitalism as a structuring reality of social organization, either in the liberal era of laissez-faire in the past or that of neoliberalism in his own (and our own) present.

The glaring omission of Karl Marx and Marxism in *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism* is the clearest evidence of this negligence. It wasn't just that it skewed Holmes's presentation of the only left-wing figure in his rogue's gallery, as if Unger were communitarian essentially, like all the rightists in the book; only in passing does he mention the "residual Marxism" of Unger's "leftism" (1993, 173, 166). Rather, the omission marked the era's crisis as a distinctive one in which liberals simply did not consider it necessary to think about class. The

Frankfurt School founder Max Horkheimer famously declared that whoever does not want to talk about capitalism should not talk about fascism. Holmes felt free to ignore class as if it were irrelevant in framing his response to antiliberalism.

Perhaps the most revealing example in this regard is Holmes's scornful treatment of Lasch's call on liberals to take care not to lose the White working class—a call that has felt prophetic to many since 2016 (see Mattson 2017 for a nuanced version of Lasch's pertinence after Trump was elected the first time). Strikingly, Holmes's encounter with this “antiliberal” consideration was the only passage in his book that addressed the situation of liberalism in his own times, since his defense of liberal precept was otherwise abstract and ahistorical, answering the equally abstract and ahistorical onslaughts of his chosen foes.

Lasch, Holmes wrote, “poses as the voice of a neglected, scored, and humiliated social class” (1993, 131). (“He does not explain why they would care to read his books, however,” Holmes added snarkily [1993, 290n21].) Holmes registered that Lasch himself attacked communitarians, who had no account of the foundations in political economy of the communal bonds they prized (134). No doubt Holmes scores many points against Lasch, and it is anything but my purpose to exempt Lasch from criticism for his brief against progress and science. But given that the voters on whose behalf Lasch asked for some love eventually put Trump in office (twice!), today Holmes's barrage has the bigger effect of showing that his own liberal side had no account of the economic foundations of the liberalism he defended. The deindustrializing and destabilizing neoliberalism that was casting the die for the Trump era was missed, even as Holmes trained his fire at a few frustrating malcontents who were politically irrelevant in Holmes's own view.

MacIntyre had a Marxist past, and Unger was constantly in dialogue with Marxist social theory—both facts that Holmes omitted. In fairness, however, neither “antiliberal” perceived the breakthrough of neoliberalism of the 1970s and 1980s either. (Unger did within a few years of 1989.) A lot changed precisely in this regard between

the last crisis of liberalism and now. After 2008, it finally became acceptable to use the word “neoliberal” to refer to the revival of economic libertarianism under the auspices of state power at every level of government. There is no way to reckon with the current crisis without recognizing the intellectual renaissance of Marxism among the youth today and the pertinence of class-based critiques of inequality after Thomas Piketty made the existence of the phenomenon undeniable. There is a Marxist left—and even a class-sensitive left liberalism. (Deneen, who loves democratic socialist Bernie Sanders, also denounces neoliberalism routinely in his neo-Laschian moments.) Holmes, however, ignored neoliberalism in the earlier crisis in spite of its anything but “harmless” effects.

In the first crisis, the closest Holmes came to acknowledging potential leftist critiques of the elective affinity between liberalism and laissez-faire was to change the subject, as is his wont, to the early modern period, opposing Harold Laski’s or C. B. Macpherson’s misrepresentations of it. But saving John Locke from their criticisms could never exempt nineteenth-century liberalism from its commitment to laissez-faire—or the liberalism of the very time Holmes was writing from its entanglements with neoliberalism. “When they identified the sole purpose of government with the protection of property in the narrow sense,” Holmes wrote apologetically of his early modern touchstones in a representative passage, “liberals were speaking strategically and hyperbolically” (1993, 214). For sure, liberalism isn’t economism, but that does not mean its associations with economic libertarianism are irrelevant.

Holmes, a liberal statist primarily interested in the capacity and strength of a government that needs to keep anarchy and civil war at bay, also defended a kind of welfare state in the era. A close reading suggests that he operated with a theory of welfare centered on the provision for basic human needs, such as the prevention of starving. (For example, defending liberalism involved citing David Hume’s point that the extremity of hunger trumped otherwise ap-

plicable property rights [1993, 216; cf. 1995, chap. 8]). But that is not a reckoning with neoliberalism—not by a long shot.

Holmes’s excellent 1999 book with Cass Sunstein, *The Cost of Rights*, emphasized that all entitlements cost money, which is why libertarians erred in equating free choice with a minimal state. The practical upshot of this argument, in tune with Sunstein’s defenses in the same era of economic and social rights in constitutions, was a concession to welfare to address the scandal of poverty and precarity—but not class and inequality (Moyn 2018). Yet it is precisely these latter realities that are the center of the crisis of liberalism today. That Holmes’s current reboot of antiliberalism studies (2021) continues to scant capitalism and class—living Groundhog Day for the worse—is hardly an excuse for his negligence of both in the past.

### **“THE WAR OF THE LIBERALS”**

Another difference between the last crisis and our own is the liberal militarism that reared its American head in a globally neoliberal age. And unlike on the economic front, the acutest critic, on the foreign policy front, of how liberals missed a chance in the first instance of crisis and set up the second is Holmes himself—at least if he is properly read.

After September 11, 2001, and even more after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Holmes shifted. He became more critical of liberalism than ever before (or since). Boldly, Holmes concluded that liberalism, or at least liberals, could be led astray or worse. Dropping antiliberal targets before and since, Holmes targeted liberals themselves and “the war of the liberals” (2007b, 178). It brought him into the greatest proximity in his career with critics of liberalism, who routinely denounce America’s wars.

In particular, Holmes made himself a scourge of foreign policy neoconservatism, with delightfully vicious essays devoted to pro-Iraq War writers, such as Francis Fukuyama, author and journalist Robert Kagan, and Bush lawyer and law professor John Yoo, defenders of the

policies of sundry others in power. Holmes was not above recognizing how this stance committed him to calling out many liberals too, for their proximity (sometimes unintended) to neoconservatism. This included Paul Berman, John Ikenberry, and even Samantha Power.

Neoconservatism can be seen as a form of liberalism, especially as liberals have been unsure over the decades about whether to back its acts or devise their own bespoke liberal rationales for doing so. Holmes's anatomy of America's neoconservative warmongering of the early millennium registered both facts. Of course, Holmes was forthright in dismissing the fashionable pieties of leftists who had a more consistent record of attacking crime and folly abroad. It was exasperating to see them "filling the bookstores with volumes devoted to the American 'empire'" (2007b, 108). Yet American military power and the temptation that Bush and his liberals indulged for warmongering were very real.

Holmes didn't think spreading democracy a credible explanation of what motivated neoconservative war. "Bush may fantasize that the Almighty has assigned him the personal task of bringing 'freedom' to mankind," Holmes wrote. "[Paul] Wolfowitz and [Douglas] Feith presumably had more secular dreams," and were "merely invok[ing] . . . a pretext" (2007b, 124). But it was precisely a pretext for war, and Holmes refused to decry "the passing sins of the Bush administration" alone, since "deeply entrenched patterns of US behavior . . . will change little even if a Democrat is elected to the White House." Anyway, "plenty of Democrats voted for the war, and many liberal newspapers supported the military overthrow of Saddam" (119).

Holmes defenestrated such liberal hawks. He reserved special finesse, however, for his diagnosis of how they and the neoconservatives succeeded in "pitting the anticruelty sentiments of liberals against their antiwar sentiments" and enrolling liberal humanitarians as supporters (2007b, 159). Followers of Shklar, interpreting liberalism as oriented first and foremost against suffering at home and abroad, could become useful idiots if they were fooled into believing that war could stop that suffering. Holmes downplayed the

causal effect of advocates of humanitarian intervention on the Iraq invasion, but this “does not mean their way of thinking has been inconsequential” (170). Discussing Samatha Power’s frustration with legalism and multilateralism as various genocides unfolded while Americans stood idly by, Holmes commented that humanitarians “have, on the contrary, unwittingly muffled the voices of Bush’s critics” (170; cf. 190–96).

Around 2005 and in the midst of his excoriation of liberal hawks and humanitarians, Holmes stopped publishing his takedowns in the bellicose outlet *The New Republic* and shifted his flag to the decidedly more leftish *London Review of Books* and even the American progressive magazine *The Nation*. There were complex continuities and changes along the way in Holmes’s writing. But there is no doubt he achieved his most censorious posture toward fellow liberals in this era, and for their moment of militarist temptation.

However, on Holmes’s own account, it wasn’t just a moment. The contexts for the 9/11 attacks, to begin with, were American foreign policy in the Cold War against the backdrop of Western imperialism in Muslim lands. Holmes argued against the idea that Islam as a religion, or even “Islamist extremism,” was a causal factor. Osama bin Laden’s “decision to declare war on the United States was provoked by concrete historical circumstances,” Holmes commented, “not foreordained by religious doctrine” (2007b, 60). Like Samuel Huntington’s myth of a clash of civilizations, bin Laden certainly leaned into the ideology of interreligious enmity himself. But for Holmes, the real motivations were anxiety about “another case of a Western power occupying Muslim lands” and retaliation for American policies over many years (64). In the spirit of the (American-funded and -organized) holy war in Afghanistan against the communist superpower in the Cold War, jihadis targeted the US because of its policies regarding Israel/Palestine across decades or its comparably long-term support of Saudi Arabia’s regime. (Or even further back, Holmes noted, the bombing of Hiroshima.) The terrorist violence in response was desperately immoral, but there were “specific grievances, both real and imagined,” Holmes states (67).



In a foreign policy that helped unleash war and then in a cycle of vengeful war they elected in response, Holmes concluded, liberals could betray liberalism. In such analyses, the abstractions of his prior campaign against antiliberals are gone. Antiliberalism didn't account for the attacks that provoked the war on terror. Holmes did, however, generalize about how militarism can work in history—including among liberals themselves. Indeed, liberals could help set liberalism back at home as well as abroad. This was not new in their tradition.

In general, Holmes worked with the notion of a morally simple Cold War, indicting failures after 1989 to update liberalism for a unipolar age. America's Cold War role was "honorable," Holmes affirmed (2007b, 145). "Why make any profound readjustments if we are still fighting totalitarianism?" Holmes asked, explaining what went wrong when honorable antagonism was transferred to lesser foes after the Cold War ended (188).

Many other comments, however, cut across any simpleminded binary between past and present. Cold War legacies were everywhere afterward. America's enormous military capacity that "breeds illusions" came from somewhere long before 9/11 and even before 1989 (2007b, 71). America's Israel policy, which Holmes treated very interestingly, did too (121–22). It was not just neoconservatives who, still "fighting the Cold War," were led to "mimic the enemy to some extent, making them shockingly at ease with lying publicly for a higher cause" (96). Holmes reviewed journalist James Mann's 2004 history of the neocons, but Mann wrote a sequel on Barack Obama documenting that the history of liberals who once learned lessons from Cold War mistakes embraced war again in the 1970s in response to George McGovern's defeats (93–106; cf. Mann 2012 and Moyn 2021, chap. 6). And there were alarming domestic effects of war. Holmes observed that the "much more thorough and pernicious blurring of the home front and the foreign front" during the Cold War was a precedent for what has gone on more recently (Holmes 2007, 227). Liberal mistakes after 9/11 did not come out of nowhere.

If all this is true, then the record of liberal empire in the nineteenth century, and liberal geopolitics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries too, is one of an endemic pattern or even an explicable syndrome (but choose some other word than “empire” if you like for its more recent versions). That it is pivotal to salvage liberalism from that syndrome was Holmes’s own conclusion in between the two crises of liberalism. It is just that he did not reach that conclusion in time to rethink his stance in the first crisis, failed to extend it beyond the case of one egregious liberal war, and did not think it relevant to intervening in the second crisis.

### **LIBERAL RESOURCES FOR A CRISIS-RIDDEN LIBERALISM**

What could liberalism have done in its last crisis to forestall and overcome its current one? That is the proper question to ask when both are in view. But before proposing an answer, it is worth dwelling a little more specifically on the version of liberalism Holmes championed in the last era of crisis management, even as he missed neoliberalism and responded to the Iraq war by dramatizing militarism.

Holmes anticipated the current renaissance in the historiography of liberalism in his initial appraisal and portrait of Benjamin Constant, who has subsequently been treated as the pivotal voice in the emergence of liberals by a variety of other writers (Rosenblatt 2018). But, as I argued a couple of decades ago, comparing Gauchet’s more or less simultaneous revival of Constant in France to Holmes’s confirms how distinctively anticommunitarian (rather than anti-Marxist) the circumstances were in the 1980s for saying what the origins and indeed the point of liberalism were (Moyn 2005).

The consequences for Holmes’s career were enormous, far beyond the evasion of political economy as the testing ground for a credible liberalism. They affected Holmes’s development of a theory of liberalism as a doctrine of anxious mutual protection from harm rather than cooperative emancipation and experimentation in freedom. In Shklar’s spirit, and in spite of his choice to start with Constant, Holmes backdated the origins of liberalism to a time before the French

Revolution, as if the main task of the liberal movement were the construction of a powerful enough state to keep people from killing each other, not liberating human powers for the sake of self-rule. (Most of the chapters in *Passions and Constraint* concern premodern thought.)

Ironically, nowhere is Holmes closer to his chosen enemies—MacIntyre, Schmitt, Strauss, and the early Unger—than in his choices of canonical liberal authors and an early modern chronology of liberalism’s origins. This matters because, though far more brilliant and knowledgeable than authors of current installments in the defense of liberalism, Holmes’s concern for Thomas Hobbes and the early modern tradition of state empowerment reflects how the history of liberalism has been told since the early twentieth century and continues to be told—as if one more patient or stern explanation that liberalism is the sole alternative to the “bellum omnium contra omnes” (war of all against all) could convince populism’s wayward voters.

Holmes always cared most about the enabling constitutionalism that liberal states need in order to build capacity. Yet his decision to make basic security the fundamental problem the liberal tradition ostensibly set out to solve cut that tradition off from its nineteenth-century origins and much of its subsequent history. That the inextirpable passions always threaten to break out into open war, if self-interested pacification under the aegis of a strong state is not allowed to prevail, is the fundamental liberal insight on Holmes’s account. This hardly acknowledges how liberals themselves reckoned with liberalism’s own entanglements in *laissez-faire* (and imperial rule, on which Holmes barely commented, unless his critique of liberal-neoconservative war counts). There is an excellent chapter on John Stuart Mill in *Passions and Constraint*, but it doesn’t treat his evolution from libertarian to socialist (cf. Holmes 2007a). Neither Thomas Hill Green, nor the British new liberals, nor the American progressives, who all at least attempted to reclaim liberalism from *laissez-faire* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, figure in Holmes’s histories over decades.

The same is true of liberalism's eventual struggle—far from concluded—to avoid elitist solutions to the problem of political order in favor of democratic ones. Holmes defended Constant (and James Madison) against the charge that liberals, along with their history of providing excessive cover for market hierarches, have an equally substantial tradition of fear of and restrictions on democracy (1993; 1995, chap. 5). (Subsequent research has confirmed Constant's skepticism of universal suffrage, far beyond his concerns about the pretexts for tyranny that idealization of ancient participatory democracy can supply [Englert 2024, chap. 1]). Arguably, however, neither the early modern tradition, nor the American founders, nor Constant are terribly useful guides to democratizing liberalism. Nor do they provide an excuse for skipping over liberalism's modern history and the drama of how (whether?) it abandoned skepticism of democratic arrangements. Yet like Green, John Dewey—who set out to save liberalism from itself in a democratic spirit—is silenced in Holmes's construction of the liberal tradition.

At risk of loss in Holmes's presentation of the history of liberalism, then, were the principal resources that other renditions of the meaning (and timing) of the liberal phenomenon might have allowed in the face of crisis—and might still. Like Marxists, a lot of liberals were absent: Holmes's narrative of liberalism, with its early modern roots, was strong through the early nineteenth century, but weak in the century between approximately 1850 and 1950, or even later.

Of the unholy alliance of liberalism with economic neoliberalism, burgeoning at the moment of the last crisis and producing our own, I worried earlier, Holmes had nothing to say. Of entanglements with endless war, he had a lot, except that no lessons were drawn about how to rescue liberalism from militarism. Could a different history of liberalism—one less concerned with “harmless” threats and more with the risks of liberalism's own misalliances and mistakes—have been an antidote to the harmful forces besetting liberalism today? Could another story of its modern resources help mobilize against these agonizing failures? No one knows, but surely the

questions are pertinent as liberals consider how to respond to their fall back into crisis today.

## CONCLUSIONS

What was missing from the last crisis of liberalism was much interest in learning how liberals could face blowback and reversal for their own mistakes, just as some of the antiliberals warned they might. Holmes occasionally noted there might be something to learn from critics of liberalism. “Liberal societies display numerous failings, to be sure,” he wrote in *Anatomy of Antiliberalism*. “Works by liberal writers are also flawed” (1993, xiv). Holmes nonetheless trained his fire outward and, like liberals generally, is playing defense now. Was there an alternative? I hope so, not because it is of overriding importance to determine whether other choices were in fact feasible in the past, but because Holmes is absolutely right that it matters whether liberalism prospers in the future.

Even if it turned out that liberals never had alternatives in their history, it would not lift the onus on them now to save the worthwhile part of their creed. And if they did in fact blow through crossroads where they might once have gone in a new direction, it would make it easier to believe they could reactivate such lost possibilities now in the name of a more durable and successful movement. I suspect these would involve a liberalism more like Mill’s and Alexis de Tocqueville’s—emancipatory and futuristic, and focused on how the right mix of public and private institutions could save people from the past in order to live their own lives in the present—but the broader point is that the only chance for liberals now is to face their failures and not just blame their enemies for their faults.

As I write in late 2024, it could turn out that the current crisis of liberalism is evanescent—that it will fade away, just like the last one did. The far right could lose in Europe, and Narendra Modi could fall from power in India, just like it was anything but inevitable that Trump would win a second time in November 2024. Yet Trump’s victory could signal a broader global shift, bringing back the “crisis of

liberalism” of 2016 in full force or even intensifying it—unless Trump’s victory does so on its own. For liberals, understandably enough, the crisis debate after 2016 generally framed Trump as alien force, fascist politician, or Russian stooge, where initial responses to his 2024 victory finally granted the premise that he is above all symptomatic of endemic problems. The question is whether these are, at least in part, endemic problems of or with liberalism.

While antiliberalism has to be opposed, as they do so liberals should engage in constant self-reexamination, in order to stave off the exacerbation of present or repetition of future crises of liberalism. Even if this one is weathered, there is a lot to learn from comparing them. And the overridingly significant lesson is that liberalism is a work in progress, its past does not leave it immune to its critics, and it has to be rescued from its mistakes to survive and thrive.

## NOTE

1. In fact, he wrote a deeply critical review of my last book (see Holmes 2024); but I’m not bitter, and this essay isn’t a response to it, not even an indirect one. As this issue’s editors can testify, I signed up for the present topic long before that review appeared. And I have a lot of respect for Holmes, even if your reading of his review is that the reverse isn’t necessarily true. Anyway, while I can attest to being influenced by Holmes’s style in some of my own earlier take-no-prisoners reviews, I have come around to his sometime coauthor’s (and this issue’s editor’s) point that polemics can leave people “confused and exhausted,” rather than collaborative and enlightened (Sunstein 2024). I am grateful to both Holmes and Sunstein, along with Oz Frankel, for comments on this essay.

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John Stuart Mill and Judith Shklar

Samuel Moyn

Judith Shklar loved Montaigne and Montesquieu—not Mill. Every theorist is entitled to her taste, of course, in authors to exult in as much as in ice cream flavors to eat. But the exclusion of the John Stuart Mill and what he stood for from Shklar’s work went incredibly far, misrepresenting the chronological origins and moral core of liberalism. The consequences have been high for mainstream portrayals of the history and significance of political liberalism. In particular, Shklar’s priorities revealed an insensitivity to Romanticism and how it shaped modern liberalism — indeed, at its point of origin.

This short piece builds on my recent digest of Shklar’s unacceptable views about liberalism and Romanticism, highlighting now what she had to say about Mill and Mill’s liberalism from one end of her career to another.<sup>1</sup> I tried to show how deep Shklar’s allergy for “antipolitical” Romanticism went, as if it were defined exclusively as a abstentionist withdrawal of *l’art pour l’art*. A bit better than other Cold War portrayals of Romanticism as profascist, Shklar’s depiction nonetheless left a lot out. Mill’s case is perhaps the most potent reminder of how Romanticism made liberalism what it was in the beginning.

It is useful to think of Shklar’s career in two stages, and her treatment of Mill helps revisit their relationship. Ironically, it was *before* the transformation in her attitudes and focus that Shklar was closest to the currently ascendant chronology of liberalism — dating it, like Helena Rosenblatt, to the early nineteenth century. Slowly, from that point on, Shklar backdated its origins to the early modern period and characterized it as a negative project of damage control.

Mill became a casualty of this transformation. Starting in the 1970s, Shklar was more drawn to the early modern tradition that offered a more cynical moral psychology — as Shklar showed, an immensely powerful one for grounding a dystopian and dyspeptic liberalism. Her retrieval of this sort of outlook from premodern and indeed preliberal voices from Thomas Hobbes on led to extraordinary work. It also left a hole in her accounts of the inception and meaning of liberalism where Mill could have been.

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Examining her comments on Mill provides a better sense how close the precipice of her mature views Shklar was from the start. The distance she would have to travel was nevertheless undeniable.

Shklar’s engagement with Mill in her dissertation-turned-first-book are, I believe, her most extensive. They occur as part of her case that, congenitally, the liberal movement feared

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (2023).

disaster and lacked “self-confidence.” She cast Mill as an outlier in relation to other founding liberals such as Lord Acton, Benjamin Constant, and Alexis de Tocqueville in his “indifferent” attitude towards religion in general and Christianity in particular.<sup>2</sup> But, she adds, he was like other early liberals in his conservative response to the shock of the French Revolution, which encouraged them all to embrace caution in the face of the obduracy of ordinary people to being emancipated. Earlier optimism, she cited Mill saying in his *Autobiography* (including of his father), had been revealed by the French Revolution and its aftermath as little more than “sonorous phrases.”<sup>3</sup> Liberalism, even Mill’s, was defined from the start by its doubts about the Enlightenment project, though “no liberal was ready to follow [Edmund] Burke all the way.”<sup>4</sup>

That there is not nothing to this presentation hardly means it does not sweep a great many alternative facts under the rug. John Stuart Mill, a pessimist? Recognizing that this interpretation flew in the face of much his writing, Shklar nonetheless conceded some other evidence but insisted that Mill remained “harassed by doubts.”<sup>5</sup> True, Mill “made a powerful argument in favor of the educational values of representative government,” but principally to produce a case for disproportionate roles (and votes) for the already educated, in case the common man rejected liberal change.<sup>6</sup> (She didn’t mention Mill’s feminism.)

Needless to say, such criticism of liberal pessimism, right or wrong, would recede in Shklar’s thinking, as she became the most famous liberal pessimist and turned in her subsequent writings to seek the forebears of such a position in the eighteenth century or even before. Even so, the continuation of her comments about Mill in *After Utopia* suggests some of the reasons she would end up missing not just the emancipatory stance of the earliest liberals, but the very content of their philosophy.

Mill, a liberal, was also a Romantic (Constant and Tocqueville were too). It is crucial that Shklar did not know what to make of this fact, and so she downplayed it. “The two can appear together at times,” she remarks of liberalism and Romanticism, “but the differences between romantic and liberal thinking remain clear enough.”<sup>7</sup> She did not discuss liberalism in her earlier chapters on Romanticism in *After Utopia*, and her treatment in the chapter on liberals indicates that she held their relationship (once she finally turned to its occurrence) to be almost accidental. Their collocation in the same thinker(s) is treated as almost like the intrusion of a foreign element into a matrix: “That the state may not interfere with society,” the liberal precept, “is of an entirely different order

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<sup>2</sup> Judith N. Shklar, *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* (1957), 227.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 228.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

than the idea that a man's first duty is to develop an original personality," the Romantic credo.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, even a casual familiarity with Mill's *On Liberty* (or the texts of Constant or Tocqueville) suggests the implausibility of this scheme. For Mill, individuality is the *end* of liberalism, and restrictions on institutions (including most obviously the state) the *means* to that end. The point isn't that originality and non-interference are identical. It is that, for Mill, the means of institutionalizing limits on state action could not fully define his liberalism. Rather, Romanticism and liberalism were inextricable in defining the ends of life and therefore political life. Had Shklar pondered this obvious flaw in her portrait of Mill, it might have led her to correct her critique of Romanticism, which she presented as antipolitical and antisocial.<sup>9</sup> For Mill, Romanticism provided the goals of politics and society. Indeed, it was for this reason, as he reports in his *Autobiography*, that he broke with his father and his hedonistic account of the good, not merely with the belief in the imminent arrival of a reformed society.

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Shklar didn't return to Mill until late in life, and glancingly at that. When she did so, she judged the intersection of his liberalism with his Romanticism more clearly, but from the secure position of the "liberalism of fear" that she had spent her intervening life developing.

In her lovely Storrs lectures for 1988 at Yale Law School, published two years later as *The Faces of Injustice*, Shklar specified that, among the many philosophers who had privileged the investigation of justice over that of injustice, Mill was exemplary. "No serious theory of justice is simply indifferent to injustice of course," Shklar wrote. The trouble was that such frameworks considered injustice to be the mere absence of justice. "Normal accounts do begin, as John Stuart Mill's typically does, with the thought that justice, like many other moral notions, is best defined by its opposite. He then goes on in very few sentences to tell us what injustice involves. ... With that he leaves the subject, having, in fact, shown only that it is unjust to break the rules of normal justice."<sup>10</sup>

Shklar's dissatisfaction stemmed from her view of the rewards to be reaped theoretically from "putting cruelty first" (in her famed slogan of the same era).<sup>11</sup> Now, Mill hadn't been pessimistic enough, in his refusal to take seriously the liability of politics to abuse and injury. "He was intellectually averse to contemplating the worst historical situations," she wrote. "It was not surprising that, like so many of his successors, he treated injustice

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., chaps. 2-4 and Moyn, *Liberalism*, chap. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Judith N. Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (1990), 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (1984), chap. 1.

merely as the take-off point for a wholesome and upbeat theory of justice.”<sup>12</sup> He was not “overwhelmed by the evil of the times.”<sup>13</sup>

Of course, Shklar’s comments on Mill capture in miniature the overall reversal in her thought. It doesn’t settle whether her earlier or later views were more credible.<sup>14</sup> But it is notable — a challenge to those who find more continuity than change in her career — that the reversal on Mill was so stark. She began by indicting how haunted he was by the obstacles and threats to progress, and she ended by tasking him for insufficient concern for cruelty and injustice.

At the same time, Shklar was far more open to the Romantic legacy in Mill’s liberalism — because now she much more clearly identified it in order to reject it. In her classic paper from the next year, “The Liberalism of Fear,” she distinguished her approach from the “liberalism of personal development” for which Mill stood. “Freedom,” she reported in perfectly capturing now the ends/means structure of Mill’s *On Liberty*, “is necessary for personal as well as social progress.”<sup>15</sup> Mill’s was, she acknowledged, a “perfectly genuine” liberalism, just not one that, like hers, “had a strongly developed historical memory.”<sup>16</sup>

I don’t know of a direct statement in Shklar’s later writing on the congenital relationship between Romanticism and liberalism, or even how the Romanticism she still regularly derided informed the perfectionist brand she distinguished from the liberalism of fear. She certainly continued, just as she had in her earlier work, to denounce Romanticism, if always in its illiberal versions. Thus, even as she read Mill more properly, it does not seem Shklar ever pondered the meaning of the historical intersection of liberalism and Romanticism.

That Shklar, by the time of her final writings, was far more profligate in calling premodern writers like John Locke and the American Founders “liberals” made this avoidance easier: Mill’s Romantic version of liberalism was just one — and a rather latecome — version on the list of liberal frameworks.

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The consequences of Shklar’s disdain for Mill, and inability to accord him his place in the liberal tradition he actually helped found, were grave. Most of those she influenced adopted her zeal to make Romanticism a dirty word. Another, Nancy Rosenblum, was a bit more conciliatory. But it is worth revisiting her excellent and neglected study *Another*

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<sup>12</sup> Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Edward Hall, “Complacent and Conservative?: Redeeming the Liberalism of Fear,” *Journal of Politics* 85 (2023): 1064-78.

<sup>15</sup> Judith N. Shklar, “The Liberalism of Fear,” in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann (1998), 8-9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

*Liberalism* on this score, with an eye to how the very corrective she offered continued to operate within the terms of a false problem.<sup>17</sup>

That problem, again, is that Romanticism and liberalism were separate in the first place. Rosenblum emphasized their divergence, before wondering if the one could “be brought home” to the other.<sup>18</sup> It was edgy indeed in her school of thought to suggest that “romantic responses to liberalism offer powerful resources for the reconstruction of liberal thought.”<sup>19</sup> And helpfully, amid her pioneering reconsideration of American Romantics such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (whom Shklar herself later wrote about), Rosenblum did give Mill some love in this regard.<sup>20</sup>

Yet Rosenblum’s general approach was a corrective premised, not merely on Shklar’s original separation of Romanticism and liberalism, but also on her later mistake of regarding Romantic liberalism as belated deviation in the tradition. On Rosenblum’s account, Romanticism had emerged as a critique from outside the liberal tradition, as Shklar had always contended, rather than participating in its founding. “Conventional liberalism” had emerged in the early modern period, Rosenblum reported, emphasizing legalism, rights, and stability. For Rosenblum, one might therefore say, Romanticism was a corrective to *Shklar’s* (conventional) liberalism. Rosenblum’s innovation was to ask what Shklar never had: could Romanticism be both safe and useful to those within the liberal tradition nonetheless?

The results of Rosenblum’s inquiry into how “romanticism can become liberal” and how “it is also possible for liberalism to be romanticized” were enlightening and even moving. In particular, she claimed, liberalism’s individualist foundations did not prohibit acceptance of communitarian objections, just as accommodating Romantic “heroism” could make liberalism more morally uplifting. Shklar had charged from the start that Romanticism was antipolitical; Rosenblum suggested that its bent for private self-creation abetted liberalism’s own public/private distinction, and could promote shifting involvements of people as they lived divided lives as citizens and humans.

The assumption that liberalism and Romanticism are a duality reflected Shklar’s framework, of course, even if lessening the tension between its poles permitted Rosenblum an original intervention. I wouldn’t deny, of course, that some versions of Romanticism — perhaps even most — were illiberal or non-liberal in conception or consequences. But the costs of Shklar’s failure to reckon with the fact that the very origins of liberalism were in the Romantic commitment to privilege self-creation and self-making as the highest life nonetheless strike me as exceptionally high.

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<sup>17</sup> Nancy Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism: Romanticism and the Reconstruction of Liberal Thought* (1982).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Part III.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1

<sup>20</sup> See Judith N. Shklar, *Redeeming American Political Thought*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann and Dennis F. Thompson (1998) and Judith N. Shklar, *On Political Obligation*, eds. Samantha Ashenden and Andreas Hess (2019).

Mill, for one, didn't accept the public/private distinction; individuality was the highest ideal of collective life, and the principle of justification of policies (including, he believed, fairly strict limits to state action, certainly when it came to the regulation of opinion and speech).<sup>21</sup> Yet even in bringing her general corrective in Romanticism's name, Rosenblum's discussion of Mill in particular epitomized Shklar's own negligence of the Romantic sources of his deepest commitments, the very ones that grounded his libertarian policies.

In her passages on Mill, Rosenblum highlighted his concern with "all-consuming private life," and the risks that privatization poses to public life.<sup>22</sup> That is an apt description of some of the republican concerns of some early liberals, most notably Constant at the end of his Atheneum lecture — which assessed the characteristic drawbacks of a regime of modern liberty. As Rosenblum explains Mill's version of such concerns, however, it is almost as if his core ideal of individuality and self-development are no more than a means to the end of staving off the syndrome of a fully privatized citizenry. "What can encourage men and women to constrain themselves to attend to the general interest?" she asks.<sup>23</sup>

Insightfully, she answers, Mill thought individuality could take the form of self-cultivation as a public actor, not merely as a private actor. More deeply, she adds, Romantic commitments might provide the *motivation* for reckoning the aggregate good of policies. If "the rational capacity to calculate the greatest happiness of the greatest number" was presupposed in Mill's utilitarian outlook, the "more important cultivation of the emotional impetus to perform the calculus in the first place" had to come from a Romantic source.<sup>24</sup>

Oddly, this approach omits by far the most momentous fact: that Mill altered classical utilitarianism in a eudaemonistic direction that prioritized individuality as a criterion of assessing good and evil, refusing to treat all pleasure as equivalent. His "idea of self-cultivation" may have been "modest" in comparison to other Romantics, as Rosenblum puts it.<sup>25</sup> But he nonetheless considered that self-making the aim and end of life.

As her discussion continues, Rosenblum was surely right to stress that Mill called for limits to state power in order to create the conditions for the possibility of individuality. But one cannot understate Mill's fears, clearly drawn from Tocqueville, of the threats modern society, as distinct from the state, poses to individuality. These fears account for Mill's extraordinary investment in public education — not the limitation of the state — for equipping citizens to hew to the public ideal of self-creation.

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<sup>21</sup> As Rosenblum herself later remarks, Mill "does not call on the classical dualism between man and citizen, even to reject it." Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism*, 133.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

All told, Rosenblum's conciliatory treatment of Mill's concern for self-cultivation certainly did reflect a sympathy for the idea of Romantic individuality that Shklar never found in herself. Yet it also inherited Shklar's framing that liberalism and Romanticism were different to begin with, and could never achieve more than beneficial foreign relations. Mill didn't think either thing.

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All told, investigating Mill's place in Shklar's liberalism confirms the intellectual costs of two moves in her career, one early and one late. She treated Romanticism from the first as an alien and antipolitical force, and — while acknowledging the existence of a perfectionist liberalism — adopted the very pessimism she had once denounced. Perhaps there is no better illustration of these moves than her treatment of Mill over the years, and the legacy she left in doing so.

That the intellectual costs entail political ones is a more debatable proposition. But I believe they do. Liberals are in dire straits today, around the world and in the adopted country of Shklar herself. A bleak liberalism has led to bleak times.

There is a possibility, therefore, that it is long past time to rediscover perfectionist liberalism and reject the misanthropic pessimism that has ruled it out. No one could guarantee, of course that it would succeed practically, and Mill's liberalism of hope would require its own defense either way. But it is worth another look, beyond the constraints and foreclosures of the classic liberalism of fear.

On Quentin Skinner's Neo-Republicanism (*The Nation*, forthcoming)

By Samuel Moyn

“Free from what?” Friedrich Nietzsche has his counterprophet ask rhetorically. He isn't interested in the answer. “What does it matter to Zarathustra! Your fiery eyes should tell me: free for what?”

Now in his 80s, the British historian Quentin Skinner has spent the last half of his career insisting on an agonizing loss in the last few centuries of Western politics and philosophy: a republican vision of freedom from domination as opposed to a more modern and libertarian one of freedom from interference. And yet he hasn't ever shown much interest in what freedom is for.

Skinner is one of our leading historians. His works of intellectual history are awe-inspiring. From early on, he crossed over into other disciplines, won a broader than usual audience, and helped revolutionize political theory. Beginning in the 1990s, he also pivoted away from the antiquarianism of his earlier scholarship champion the relevance of his histories in our own day. And yet even in doing so, Skinner remained too enamored of an ancient vision of that freedom in the republican tradition.

Freedom is once again the central theme of Skinner's new book, *Liberty as Independence*. A work of history that seeks to pinpoint exactly how long the older notion of republican liberty remained dominant before being displaced by a more modern and liberal one, it also helps reassess the current importance of the campaign against domination for the left. In focusing primarily on freedom from domination, it is blind to how modernity redefined the terms of emancipation.

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Born in Manchester in 1940, Quentin Skinner grew up in a family with Scottish origins. His [father](#) served in the navy before becoming a colonial officer in West Africa. Skinner's mother soon followed his father. Left behind by his parents, Skinner went to boarding schools and established himself as a star from his earliest days as an undergraduate at the University of Cambridge. Unlike today's students, who write dissertations but don't get jobs, Skinner never even had to earn a doctorate: his promise was so self-evident that he was quickly made a don at the age of 21.

Skinner owed much his subsequent academic fame to an astonishing [broadside](#), published in 1969, against historians of political thought who either failed to



consider the intellectual context of classic texts or reduced them to their material circumstances. Allergic to what he viewed as the reductive materialism of Marxist historians, Skinner forbade relating the study of ideas to material reality and thus refused to contemplate a general social theory; even more, he insisted on stringent strictures against “presentism” when it came to the history of ideas. “Crudely,” he argued, “we must learn to do our own thinking for ourselves.”

The broadside marked him as a leader of the “Cambridge school of the history of political thought,” which was dedicated to Skinner’s methodological precepts. And he soon rose up the ranks of academia, broadening his early concern with seventeenth-century England to encompass the entire early modern era, most notably in his classic 1978 *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*.

Skinner had written the book during his half a decade at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, before returning to Cambridge to serve as a professor there for decades. After his mandatory retirement from the highest position in his field – the Regius Professorship of History, appointed by the monarch – Skinner moved to Queen Mary, where he continued to teach and write, before retiring again in 2022.

If the early portions of his career were defined by an opposition to both materialism and presentism, then by the middle years of his career, Skinner began to relax some of his early prohibitions. Ideas mattered, he explained, because they either helped legitimate political order or served as proposals to change it. They were related to the world around them one way or another. Skinner also abandoned his hostility to presentism. Ideas from the past matter now, he concluded, at least for anyone who would like to think beyond their preconceptions and imagine an alternative future.

Of such old ideas, Skinner was most attached to the historic politics of “republicanism” and its ideal of liberty— a tradition, both ancient and modern, that makes freedom from dependence and domination its highest goal and that he revived for his contemporaries to reconsider. The aspiration for that form of freedom began among Roman thinkers nostalgic for the republic and jurists staking everything on what it means to be a free man, rather than a slave. *Liberty as Independence* serves as a culmination of this work on republicanism, by charting its final downfall.

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Skinner’s earlier books on the subject, such as his 2008 *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, had focused on his cherished seventeenth century, seeking to show how

Thomas Hobbes had laid siege to the ideal of republican liberty first propounded in the ancient world and then revived in the Renaissance. But with *Liberty as Independence* Skinner wants to expand the scope of his arguments in order to demonstrate how, in the centuries that followed, republicanism survived the onslaught only to then be cast aside replaced by the ideal of freedom from interference and restraint.

To make his case, Skinner examines an extraordinary and wide-ranging set of English-language sources. His goal is to probe how long liberty as independence lasted as an ideal. But he also hopes to document how liberty as non-interference emerged to replace it, though with no “sudden breakthrough” that left it hegemonic.

One figure who still maintained a fidelity to the republican tradition of freedom was John Locke. So often treated as a libertarian founder of liberalism, Locke, Skinner contends, actually cared most about the political conditions that would allow free men to immunize themselves from the arbitrary might of the state. Far from anticipating what Isaiah Berlin later called the “negative” liberty of freedom from interference alone, Locke laid the groundwork for the eighteenth-century idea of a free state — an ideal transplanted to American soil and central to the cause of the American Revolution in 1776.

A free state doesn't accept despotism even when beneficent or because it leaves people alone. Deprivation of access to the power to rule, even if that just meant consent to the identity of the monarch from time to time, reduces the people to the kind of thralldom that republicans denounce as the very opposite of freedom. Locke put his argument in terms of natural rights and a social contract. But in defending the right to revolution, he wanted people to reclaim their status as free people who controlled the form of their government.

As Skinner shows, Locke was not the only one making republican arguments as the eighteenth century went on. The Whigs were too; like Locke, they also framed their visions of freedom much more in the terms of rights and the regularity of law than their Roman and Renaissance forebears had. If rights are observed and the law is followed, they argued, then the arbitrary might of one king or another could remain in check.

Very different were the pioneers of liberalism, Skinner says, for whom rights and law had no necessary connection to retaining power for free people. They argued that an enlightened despot might interfere less with his subjects, even if he had the power to impose his will more. Following some of his students, Skinner goes on to show

how American revolutionaries set out to rescue independence from the “counter-revolutionary” and “pro-imperial” ideal of freedom as non-interference.

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In part, Skinner is revisiting in *Liberty as Independence* a decades-old quarrel among historians of colonial America and the early United States. During the 1960s and 1970s, historians like J.G.A. Pocock in *The Machiavellian Moment* and Gordon Wood in *The Creation of the American Republic* argued that the origins of this country were not found in “liberalism”—as previous historians had argued—but instead in republicanism.

Skinner’s history attempts to make a similar argument for England, not only citing Locke and the Whigs but also others spokespeople for republican freedom such as Richard Price and Mary Wollstonecraft. But he also wants to ask the question of why this republicanism disappeared. If Pocock and Wood were right, then what when wrong—and when? Why, after the eighteenth century, did English liberals embrace non-interference and abandon freedom from domination?

Skinner acknowledges, of course, that republicanism never entirely died. He registers the band of radicals who excitingly turned to republican ideology in order to contest the oppressions of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century—such as the working class agitators and labor organizers found in Alex [Gourevitch](#)’s study of the Knights of Labor and their predecessors, and even in Karl Marx’s own thinking, as Bruno [Leipold](#) and William Clare [Roberts](#) have recently illustrated in their books *Citizen Marx* and *Marx’s Inferno*.

But in relation to these more leftist works of intellectual history, Skinner is ambivalent. He is intent to show that, while there is some relationship between capitalism and liberalism (which led many workers to hope to overthrow both together), the choice of models of freedom wasn’t just about economic forms. “The new view of liberty long pre-dated the eighteenth-century rise of commercial society,” Skinner writes. Too direct a link between capitalism and liberalism, therefore, would “fail to provide an answer to the main historical puzzle that needs to be solved — why “the new view of liberty” could “ascend so suddenly to a position of ideology dominance in less than twenty years between the late 1770s and the 1790s.”

Skinner’s solution to this puzzle is to propose that a counterrevolutionary politics prevailed in two different forms in these years. One was a reactionary version

harking back to feudalism and priestcraft, but it was never as strong in the Anglophone world. The second, more prevalent across the Atlantic, was a liberalism that was hostile to the left. It vaulted Hobbes's counterrevolutionary endorsement of kings into a new world in which liberal elites would deprive masses of self-rule, offering assurances that people would be left alone in their persons and property.

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Abandoning his antiquarian stance of yesteryear, Skinner closes *Liberty as Independence* championing the current importance of freedom as independence. And understandably so. As he notes, if women or workers are dependent, they are oppressed regardless of whether they are also harmed by "overt acts of coercion or interference." That they are hypothetically free to exit their unfair employment contracts or divorce their patriarchal mates doesn't take into consideration why doing so is often "dangerous or impracticable." Comparably, the people as a whole suffer dependence without democratic representation or rights, and it is no answer to say that government is acting in their interest or forbearing from injuring them.

Skinner's is a compelling argument about both ancient and modern liberty. But in attempting to rehabilitate the predecessor to the cramped version of freedom offered by libertarianism, Skinner also does not consider that one can ask the same questions of a freedom from dependence as of freedom from interference: free for what? As a concept and ideal, "liberty as independence" is redolent of an ancient world in which proud masters (relying on the women and slaves they control) may not be subject to the arbitrary caprice of others because their freedom is secured through the domination of others. But Skinner's focus on reviving the ancient ideals of liberty against the modern ones also ends up ignoring the most inspiring form of freedom that the modern world has offered, both in liberal and socialist variants.

Having spent the latter half of his career doubting and supplementing Berlin's category of "negative liberty," Skinner doesn't register the significance of Berlin's opposed category of positive liberty, never telling its story or reconsidering its virtues. Powerful though it is, his saga of the fall of self-mastery to "liberalism" neglects the possibility of forging new personal and social meanings inspired during and in the aftermath of the French Revolution, and that sought, instead of self-mastery, an ideal of freedom as individuality rather than independence. For unlike the American Revolution's vaunted rhetoric of liberty as independence, the French Revolution's emancipatory promises inspired a demand for liberty as self-creation—what radical writer Marshall Berman dubbed "the politics of authenticity."

Liberalism championed this ideal long after the period when Skinner sees freedom from interference triumphing. Where Berman ultimately argued that positive freedom required socialism, his teacher — and one of Skinner's old friends, the Harvard political theorist Judith Shklar — correctly argued that it was only in the later nineteenth century that liberals fully embraced of freedom as the “absence of restraint.” That was precisely when Nietzsche concluded that there was no chance of having positive freedom within the framework of what became of liberal societies, in which the German saw little more than marketization and mob rule.

One reason for Skinner's neglect of the tradition of positive freedom tradition is that it is defiantly modern, and so doesn't appear on his maps of political thought from the ancient world to the Renaissance and its aftermath. Another is that its sources were Christian rather than Greco-Roman and Skinner has rarely shown much interest in religion. Yet not only can one find the templates for self-making in Hobbes's own political theory— he owed much of his framework to Christianity, transferring to humanity the creativity to make the state, much as God made the world by fiat. One can also find it in range of modern thinkers who prized freedom as creativity as the highest secular cause.

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, with its praise of “individuality,” is a classic example. When Skinner mentions Mill, it is solely as an apostle as a freedom from interference, but this ignores the deeper freedom in the name of which he declared limits to communal and state power. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* is another, idealizing creators who “undertook to embellish beauty itself” and sought “something better than nature.” And if this was a core of liberalism, Marx himself inherited the aspiration for self-making too when he argued that the “free development of each is the condition for the free development of all,” and vice versa.

To be independent, Skinner concedes, you certainly have to be free to act without impediment too. In the older view that was overthrown, he says, liberty consisted of being independent enough to be able to make use of the absence of restraint. Fair enough. But from the perspective of freedom as self-creation, the same is true. Modern self-creation is impossible with impediments in your way or under the mastery of others alike. But getting rid of impediments or subjection hardly guarantees what you will do next, or even encourages it.

Liberals, in short, were not merely votaries of cramped non-interference; and if Marx was a republican, it was not all he was. Skinner is absolutely right about the contemporary importance of the history of political thought. But if liberals and

socialists want to make a bid for relevance now, they may have to be open to the modern freedom they once introduced. The grand story of freedom is not just about the loss of the ideal of independence to liberals, it is about the invention of the ideal of free self-creation by liberals and socialists, who continue to squander their own contribution even now.

*Samuel Moyn teaches history and law at Yale University.*