

The Liberals' Cold War

by Thomas Charrayre

Cold War liberalism is hardly discussed in France, even though its theoretical importance should not be overlooked: its attacks on the welfare state have notably fostered neoconservatism.

About: Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism Against Itself: cold war intellectuals and the making of our times*. New Haven ; London: Yale University Press., 2023, 229 p.

Liberalism Against Itself presents itself as a peculiar kind of scholarly study of Cold War liberalism. This current of thought, relatively obscure in France, starts to gain colour when Raymond Aron's name is mentioned, or perhaps the intellectual opposition to totalitarian regimes after the Second World War.¹ It refers to the combination of a classic-liberal political stance with a commitment to Atlanticism, the latter imposing its strategic and ideological constraints on the former. Through vivid anecdotes and incisive judgments, the intellectual historian Samuel Moyn portrays several thinkers who serve as defendants in the trial of Cold War liberalism. The book's stated aim is to demonstrate that this kind of liberalism paved the way for intellectual currents often held responsible for the decline of the welfare state: neoliberalism and neoconservatism. This goal immediately raises the suspicion that Moyn will present a teleological reading of history, where ideas outweigh institutions. This suspicion is reinforced by the near complete absence of references to the actual events of the Cold War in the book.²

¹ At the institutional level, one might well think of the Congress for Cultural Freedom known for receiving funds from the CIA. However, the history of this institution cannot be reduced to this scandal. See: Pierre Grémion, *Intelligence de l'anticommunisme: le congrès pour la liberté de la culture à Paris 1950-1975, Pour une histoire du XXe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).

². For instance, there is only one mention of Cuba in a note: p. 122 note 27.

The book's peculiarity becomes more evident when it is viewed in the light of its polemical intent. While Moyn is a professor at Yale, he also is a public intellectual who frequently contributes to progressive left-leaning outlets such as *The Nation* and *Dissent*. Through his critique of Cold War liberal intellectuals, Moyn targets not only past figures but also, and perhaps more so, their heirs in contemporary American public discourse. The 2016 election of Donald Trump triggered a wave of conservative publications, with the 'post-liberal' movement as an academic outpost, which called for seizing the moment to finally move beyond the liberal status quo.³ In response, centre-right and centre-left intellectuals considered that saving liberalism would be the way to address America's democratic crisis. If they were to enact this salvation, then, as prescribed by Mark Lilla in *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, partisans would have to refocus liberalism on its traditional values.⁴ Moyn belongs to a third camp, which argues that the correct answer to the success of right-wing populism lies in an openly progressive liberalism.⁵

With these elements in mind, the reason why Moyn focuses primarily on the intellectual and strategic blunders committed by Cold War liberals becomes clear. Explaining and contextualizing the emergence of Cold War liberalism is only secondary to ensuring that it cannot serve as a blueprint for today's politics. Here, the tools of intellectual history assume a critical role: they help the historian to revamp the liberal canon by bulldozing some of its iconic statues. However, in order to work, this critique presupposes the existence of a set of unambiguous liberal values, against which the historian can assess that "Cold War liberalism was a disaster – for liberalism" (p. 1).

The Blunders of Cold War Liberalism

Liberalism Against Itself chronicles the blunders of Cold War intellectuals: the retreat from the Enlightenment, the rejection of Romanticism, the relinquishing of

³ This current of thought, championed in Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed?* (2018), opposes both classical liberalism and the liberalism of the New Left and proposes to reinvent the American regime around communitarian and religious values. Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed?, Politics and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

⁴ Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017). Moyn provides a list of these authors in a note (p. 175 note 12).

⁵ This position is a form of liberal socialism. For an academic presentation: Matthew McManus, *The political theory of liberal socialism* (New York: Routledge, 2025). A position that also has advocates in France: Serge Audier, *Le Socialisme libéral* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006).

progress, a pessimistic Christian anthropology, imperialist sympathies and a psychology of restraint. The chapters are organised around six intellectual figures (Judith Shklar, Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Hannah Arendt and Lionel Trilling), each of them incarnating one of these errors. Judith Shklar occupies a central place in this gallery, as she purportedly defined Cold War liberalism as “liberalism of fear” in 1989.⁶ This liberalism of fear seeks above all to protect individuals from cruelty – particularly state inflicted cruelty – as personal freedom is meaningful only for those who are freed from fear. This approach is sometimes labeled as survivalist, insofar as it focuses on the political minimum required to live. Yet, before championing survivalism, Shklar herself had strongly criticised the pessimism of post-war liberals in her first book, *After Utopia*, adapted from her dissertation in 1957. At the time, Shklar condemned the retreat from the Enlightenment ideal of emancipation and the conversion of liberals to the conservative belief that “reason itself breeds totalitarianism” (p. 27).

The subsequent chapters describe this retreat from progressive ideals driven by an exaggerated fear of totalitarianism. Among the blunders criticised by Moyn, two stand out for their sweeping scope. First, in chapter 3, Moyn shows how Karl Popper's critique of Hegelian and Marxist historicism ultimately undermines liberal representations of progress. By denying the possibility of ascertaining the laws of history, Popper allegedly ended up succumbing to the seductions of Hayek's thought, which sees any form of interventionism as a source of unforeseeable perverse effects (pp. 84-86). This critique is particularly striking, as it shows that Cold War liberals were instrumental in disrupting initiatives to bring together liberalism and the welfare state, while emphasising the intellectual proximity between Cold War liberalism and neoliberalism.

In chapter 5, Moyn focusses on the figure of Gertrude Himmelfarb, in order to denounce the conversion of Cold War liberals to a conservative anthropology. Largely unknown in France, this historian of ideas is one of the leading figures of neoconservatism, which she worked to promote in the columns of the *Weekly Standard*. But before promoting neoconservatism, Himmelfarb began her academic career researching Lord Acton, whom she sought to popularise as the paragon of a sound liberalism rooted in a pessimistic Christian anthropology. Cold War liberals were apparently persuaded by this belief that liberalism needed to be anchored in a Christian cultural background to counteract its revolutionary tendencies. Moyn shows

⁶ Judith Shklar, ‘The Liberalism of Fear’, in *Liberalism and the Morale Life*, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21-38.

that this Christian anthropology proved an essential resource for Cold War liberalism in its fight against totalitarianism conceived as a 'secular religion'.⁷ If one sees the promises of communism as a strain of millenarianism, then Christianity emerges as an ally of liberalism to fight a heresy.⁸ Obviously, this introduction of Christianity into the liberal corpus is at odds with the history of liberalism, but it dovetails perfectly with classic Cold War visions of a religious America pitted against communist atheism.

(Re)Writing the History of Liberalism

This critical overview of Cold War liberalism begs the following question: can we still label these intellectuals as liberals? The dismissal of the Enlightenment and the condemnation of the French Revolution, the emphasis on religion and the downsizing of freedom to a Western ideal to be protected rather than realised, ultimately smack of conservatism. Moyn offers a way out of this question-begging: Cold War liberals are liberals insofar as they participate in the rewriting of liberal doctrine. This rewriting entails the canonisation of new figures, but above all the displacement of canonical figures into an *anticanon*.⁹ This is exactly what Karl Popper achieved by criticising Rousseau or Hegel, and Himmelfarb by spreading the ideas of Lord Acton. In Moyn's view, the making of this *anticanon* is embedded in a wider process of relocating the roots of liberalism from 17th- and 18th-century continental Europe to 16th-century England. In this respect, Cold War liberalism allegedly erased the original link between liberalism and emancipation, in order to temper its revolutionary character.

In this row over the meaning of liberalism, Moyn blames the Cold War liberals and their heirs for rewriting history to make up for their inability to live up to liberal ideals.¹⁰ However, this criticism only stands up if we believe that there is a clear liberal doctrine to which we can return in order to judge the evolution of liberalism. This explains why *Liberalism Against Itself* is filled with references to 18th- and 19th-century

⁷ This is a concept popularised, if not invented, by Raymond Aron, which he uses to describe how communism functions as a secularised belief in the salvation of humanity. Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New-York: Routledge, [1955] 2001), chapter IX.

⁸ p. 98. This thesis may seem surprising given that the liberal intellectuals of the Cold War were often atheists and Jews (for Moyn's explanation see p. 111-112).

⁹ This methodological development, which Moyn draws in part from the legal scholar Jamal Greene, can be found in pages 17-20.

¹⁰ This explains the scathing review published by Stephen Holmes. Stephen Holmes, 'Radical Mismatch', *London Review of Books*, 4 April 2024.

liberals, to show that Constant or Tocqueville defended an upbeat and far-sighted liberalism. Nevertheless, the structure of the book hardly allows Moyn to make more than passing allusions to the lost history of this ambitious liberalism in which France would otherwise feature prominently. This is problematic, insofar as Moyn's argument hinges heavily on how we conceive of the history of liberalism. To be fully endorsed, the thesis of a liberalism that has turned against itself needs to be applied over a long period of time, in order to include the Cold War in a global history of liberalism.¹¹

Indeed, if we consider that from the outset liberalism has been shaped by an essential tension between optimism and pessimism, then Cold War liberalism appears as an interesting yet unsurprising chapter in the history of liberalism. Drawing on the example of French liberalism, Moyn could illustrate the relevance of Romanticism to 19th-century liberalism, or defend the idea that liberalism has a universalist vision of democracy. Obviously, the French Revolution must be recast in a positive light to defend the idea that liberalism requires and imposes institutional turmoil (p. 48-52).

However, by merely alluding to it, Moyn manages to sidestep the history of liberalism in France. On the basis of this history, the heirs to the Cold War liberals would do well to point out that French liberalism underwent a pessimistic turn that long preceded the Cold War. As early as the 1930s, the liberalism of French historian and philosopher Élie Halévy was marked by a fear of tyranny, a fear that led him to link socialism and Nazism and to be wary of promises of universal emancipation.¹²

Ultimately, Moyn exposes himself to succeeding and failing in the same places as the Cold War liberals did. In other words, he may succeed in distracting us from the study of Cold War liberals without proposing an alternative model, just as they had themselves succeeded in marginalising thinkers such as Rousseau or Hegel from the liberal canon – though without fully managing to incorporate Lord Acton as hoped. In Moyn's view, this is the price that must be paid to prompt 'the liberals of our time to imagine a form of liberalism that is wholly original' (p. 176). In this respect, *Liberalism Against Itself* is a salutary reminder of liberalism's progressive and emancipatory horizon. Paradoxically, the book's argument leads us to the following conclusion: the reinvention of liberalism will not be achieved through feverish excommunications.

¹¹ Moyn refers to Helena Rosenblatt. Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton (N.J.): Princeton university press, 2018).

¹² In a lecture given in 1936 that would have a lasting influence on Raymond Aron, well before the start of the Cold War. See: Elie Halévy, 'The Age of tyrannies', *Economica*, Vol. 8, No. 29, 1941, p. 77-93.

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