



Samuel Moyn

Liberalism Against Itself.
Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times

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reviewed by

Riccardo Bavaj, University of St Andrews

Much has been said about this book.¹ Reviews have been mixed, perhaps predictably so. Samuel Moyn offers a critique of what he sees as the dominant strand of liberalism in the Anglophone world, especially in the United States, from the mid-twentieth century, which paved the way to neoconservatism and neoliberalism in more recent times. Moyn calls this dominant strand »cold war liberalism«.

In some ways, Moyn's account makes for an easy target. First, for a book whose focus is squarely on cold war liberalism, it provides precious little context on the cold war itself. Equally, while the book's impetus stems from current debates and indeed attacks on liberalism, not least Patrick J. Deneen's conservative reckoning »Why Liberalism Failed«², the chain of causation created by Moyn between mid-twentieth-century redefinitions of liberalism – marked by anti-emancipatory »anticanons« and anti-progressivist truncations of Utopian horizons – and »the making of our times« (the book's subtitle) appears somewhat tenuous. Finally, Moyn's dramatis personae is debatable too. It may seem pedantic to point out the lack of a clear definition of »cold war liberalism« and the related lack of criteria behind the author's choice of case studies. It may seem even more pedantic to point out lacunae. Still, Moyn's selection, variously pitched as cold war liberalism's »principal thinkers«, »a few exemplary figures«, and a mixture of »iconic« sages (Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper), purportedly »neglected« thinkers (Gertrude Himmelfarb and Judith Shklar), and »companions« (Hannah Arendt) – each of whom is explored in a separate chapter – does not fully convince (pp. 2 and 7f.). Creating a »portrait gallery« (p. 8) of cold war liberalism without at least sketches of impactful founding fathers such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Reinhold Niebuhr comes close to writing a history of

¹ Cf. also the German translation: *Samuel Moyn, Der Liberalismus gegen sich selbst. Intellektuelle im Kalten Krieg und die Entstehung der Gegenwart*, aus dem Amerikanischen von Christine Pries, Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin 2024, 303 Seiten, Hardcover, 30,00 €, ISBN 978-3-518-58816-1.

² *Patrick J. Deneen, Why Liberalism Failed*, New Haven 2018.

Lutheranism without Luther. Some consolation can be taken, however, from the inclusion of Lionel Trilling, the famed literary critic and author of »The Liberal Imagination« (1950).

Oscillating between fine-grained analysis and a political call to arms, Moyn's book is both an exercise in future-oriented ›space-clearing‹ and a wistful gesture towards older archives of ideas. What Moyn identifies as predominant manifestations of liberalism, amounting to little more than a bland status-quo ideology fixated on preventing the worst, need to give way to a new, forward-looking kind that is reminiscent of the commitments to »creative self-making« and Enlightenment-inspired »perfectionism« (p. 175), which were a hallmark of nineteenth-century liberalism (notwithstanding its more problematic facets, and less appealing stances on race and empire). Strikingly, alternative liberalisms that have jostled with the cold war variety over the past few decades are given short shrift.³ Instead, the thrust of the message is unambiguous: Rather than dig their heels in, stalwartly defending the creed amidst a much-lamented crisis of democracy, liberals should finally face up to liberalism's own share of responsibility and engage in some overdue retrospective self-criticism. Needless to say, with liberal democracy under pressure both at home and abroad, mounting this case is no easy task. It is little surprise, then, that Moyn's book has drawn criticism from both sides of the aisle.

I will refrain from joining in, however. Whether Moyn's critique of cold war liberalism is overblown; whether it downplays the threat posed at the time by Soviet Communism; whether, in some respects, it lacks historical empathy with cold war liberals living in the aftermath of war and genocide, many of whom, of course, were Jewish émigrés terrified of totalitarian experiments of any kind – these are questions that have already been raised elsewhere. Instead, I would first like to offer some historical background to Moyn's preoccupation with »cold war liberalism«, and provide a glimpse into the history of a term that emerged from a very specific context in American history. Second, while there may be problems with the book's overarching thesis, it is worth emphasizing that the individual chapters offer wonderfully rich, thoroughly inspiring readings of mid-twentieth-century works of Anglophone political thought. The sum of the parts, in other words, seems here to be greater than the whole.

It has often been pointed out that the term »cold war liberalism« was coined in the 1960s by the American New Left with less than flattering connotations. Typically, however, not much more is said, and Moyn is no exception. The conceptual history of »cold war liberalism« still helps, however, to place his intervention within a longer historical context, beyond the present moment of postliberalism (Deneen) and right-wing populism (Trump). Crucially, »cold war liberalism« was first discussed in the context of how to deal with the radical right. This was the core concern of the New Left publication that first made use of the term. Titled »The Ultra-Right and Cold War Liberalism«, it appeared in 1962 in the Madison, Wisconsin-based journal »Studies on the Left«, and was penned by its editors, Martin Sklar, James Weinstein and others. In it, they spoke out against joining forces with the »liberal establishment« to fight off »threats to democracy«, such as they were, in the form of the John Birch Society and other right-wing groups. The editors called on radicals to challenge the »internal logic of the cold war«, part of which was a »cold war consensus« moulded by an »official«, state-sponsored anti-communism and dependent on the »military economy« of a »warfare state«. »Cold war liberals« were identified as an integral part, or at least staunch supporters, of that warfare state's key agencies (say, NATO or the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom). In this cultural cold war, apologists of an avowed »fighting faith« – notoriously outlined by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in his 1949 cold war liberal bible »The Vital Center« – were acting as the relentless »defenders of the ›Free World‹« and a NATO-compatible story of »Western civilization« that was oblivious both to that civilization's darker side and the anti-imperialist aspirations for self-determination across the Third World.⁴

³ Cf. Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress. The Left-Liberal Tradition in America*, Philadelphia 2008.

⁴ Editors, *The Ultra-Right and Cold War Liberalism*, in: *Studies on the Left* 3, 1962, Issue 1, pp. 3–8; cf. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center. The Politics of Freedom*, Boston 1949.

Over the following years and decades, discussions were framed around this term especially in times of increased geopolitical tensions – for instance, after the end of *détente* and in the early Reagan era.⁵ The mid-1980s also saw the tentative beginnings of a more scholarly engagement. In most cases, however, it was hardly less scathing, witness Anthony Arblaster's »The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism«. It continued some of the earlier themes, but also anticipated some of Moyn's critique. Bringing into the picture a few English culprits, too, such as Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, Arblaster made no bones about his view that »Cold War Liberalism [...] was not ›true‹ liberalism at all, but a betrayal of it«. ⁶

One of the peculiar aspects of »cold war liberalism« is its career following the end of the cold war. It experienced a revival after the 9/11 attacks, along the lines of an anti-totalitarian, counter-terrorist »fighting faith«. A key difference from cold war debates has been the shift in terminological dynamics and political identity markers: No longer just a term of abuse, the label »cold war liberal« has now also, and increasingly, been worn as a badge of honour. The »war on terror« produced a whole range of self-declared advocates of a »cold war liberal tradition«. ⁷ Likewise, compared to the time of Arblaster's publication, there has been a much more developed and nuanced *academic* discussion, mainly since a landmark article by Jan-Werner Müller. ⁸ Müller shared Arblaster's stronger European focus, but was rather more sympathetic to his protagonists. Crucially, he also made an influential interpretative move: He connected the term »cold war liberalism« to Shklar's now famous expression »liberalism of fear«. This was the title of a paper given by Shklar at a conference held in 1988, which had been less concerned with cold war dynamics and more with the strident attacks on liberalism launched by George H.W. Bush's presidential campaign. ⁹

As mentioned, Moyn's account is characterized by a certain aloofness from the cold war context as well. Importantly, moreover, it also takes its cue from Shklar. The Shklar that Moyn focuses on is, however, a rather different one. Shklar's PhD thesis from 1955, published under the title »After Utopia«, provided an Enlightenment-infused critique of what she called »conservative liberalism«. ¹⁰ Reframed by Moyn as a reckoning with »cold war liberalism« *avant la lettre*, it serves as his argumentative guide. It is also the subject of the first of the book's six chapters, making further appearances throughout. Bringing the young Judith Shklar into the discussion on »cold war liberalism« is the book's most original contribution. It is not the only occasion, though, where the book sparkles. Moyn's cross-chapter dissection of the cold war liberal construction of an »anticanon« – a continental European rogues' gallery stretching from Rousseau to Hegel and Marx – throws into sharp relief a central facet within the reinvention, and survivalist curtailment, of an intellectual tradition. This curtailment also had a spatial dimension: Although the theme is slightly less developed, Moyn's book offers important hints at cold war liberal reimaginings of »Western civilization«. Divested of its universal scope and ambition, »the West« now figured as a mere »refuge for liberty in a world of tyranny« (p. 4) – in glaring contrast to cold war modernization theorists, who are not considered. Moyn even points to a distinct cold war liberal »geographical morality«, with libertarianism as the preferred currency for the transatlantic West, and a »caustic scepticism about the fate of freedom [...] elsewhere«, coupled with a resounding silence on global decolonization (p. 138). Remnants of a (left-)Hegelian statism, meanwhile, were still on display in cold war liberal allegiances to

⁵ Cf. Andrew Kopkind, The Return of Cold War Liberalism, in: The Nation, 23.4.1983.

⁶ Anthony Arblaster, The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism, London 1984, p. 310.

⁷ Cf. Peter Beinart, The Good Fight. Why Liberals – and Only Liberals – Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again, New York 2006, p. xi; Joseph Stieb, The Vital Center Reborn. Redefining Liberalism between 9/11 and the Iraq War, in: Modern American History 4, 2021, pp. 285–304.

⁸ Jan-Werner Müller, Fear and Freedom. On »Cold War Liberalism«, in: European Journal of Political Theory 7, 2008, pp. 45–64.

⁹ Cf. Judith N. Shklar, The Liberalism of Fear, in: Nancy L. Rosenblum (ed.), Liberalism and the Moral Life, Cambridge, Mass./London 1989, pp. 21–38.

¹⁰ *Idem*, After Utopia. The Decline of Political Faith, Princeton 1957.

Zionism as a state-oriented emancipation project. This latter observation opens up a new perspective on the frequently-raised topic about the »Jewishness of Cold War Liberalism«.¹¹

There is, in fact, much to commend in Moyn's book, and this review hardly does justice to the many insights and perceptive analyses it offers – for instance, on Isaiah Berlin's dissenting appreciation, *pace* Jacob Talmon, of what Berlin referred to as the »Romantic revolution«; Gertrude Himmelfarb's rediscovery of Lord Acton's liberal Christianity as inoculation against historicist beliefs; and Lionel Trilling's »canonization« of Freud as advocate of a reality-attuned »emotional self-management« (though not without regret for his farewell to »youthful hope«) (pp. 155 and 158). All this is presented in elegant, finely chiselled prose. While the German translation is serviceable – despite oddities such as »Kalte-Krieg-Liberalismus« – it does not quite capture Moyn's stylistic panache. Given the density of Moyn's writing, this is certainly no easy read. But it is well worth the time.

Zitierempfehlung

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¹¹ *Malachi Haim Hacohen*, The Jewishness of Cold War Liberalism, in: *Abigail Green/Simon Levis Sullam* (eds.), *Jews, Liberalism, Antisemitism. A Global History*, Cham 2020, pp. 387–410.