

Cherniss, Joshua I. *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. xv + 291 pages.

In this very timely book, the author discusses the friction between liberal values and the ruthlessness of totalitarianism. This is not a new dilemma but a long standing, and fundamental, tension between liberalism and the utopian mindsets of both the extreme left and right.

The fundamental problem, it seems, in the clash between the liberal and the autocrat is the unwillingness and, even the inability, of the liberal to answer totalitarianism tit for tat. As the author points out, liberalism, in its essence, is an “ethos,” or a way of life, and perhaps even a state of mind. Liberalism is a discipline, not a mission in pursuit of goals. Liberalism, to the extent that it has a dogma, promotes the principle of process: the tolerance and even celebration of different ideas, customs, and cultures and, most importantly, the rule of law.

On the other hand, for fascists, communists, and religious fanatics, the ends justify the means. For liberals, the ends are the means and the outcomes should take care of themselves.

The problem is that this is not always true. This is what we call “the Liberal Predicament.” Might sometimes wins out over right, a prime example being the Spanish Civil War. Perhaps in every successful reactionary revolution there is a display of liberal helplessness. However, it would be a mistake to assume that liberalism is supine in the face of ruthlessness.

The good news to be gleaned from this book is that, contrary to the opinions of some, liberals are not weak and they are certainly not stupid. It takes tremendous inner strength and facility of mind to tolerate and to even celebrate the existence of complexity in the world. Driven by this logic, the liberal state is strengthened by its flexibility, relative meritocracy, and popular support.

On the other hand, it reflects a certain weakness of mind to think there is a simple universal truth. There are plenty of people who are looking for simple answers and can be

manipulated in pursuit thereof. Furthermore, ideologues will often stop at nothing to gain societal control. The more absolutists ignore their moral compass, the more hardened they become until they no longer resemble in any meaningful sense human beings. But liberals are tasked, indeed obligated, to listen to the opposition and seriously consider their arguments while extremists feel no compunction to do the same.

It is the political challenge of our time to counter the fecklessness of extremists. However, if one is looking for an answer to that problem of how liberals should counteract the ruthlessness of radicals, that information is not in this book. As I said, the world is a complex place. To say there is a simple answer to this problem would be to defy the tenets of logic. Rather, when liberalism confronts ruthlessness, someone is inevitably going to lose.

The author of this book explores this liberal dilemma through the writings of liberal and illiberal theorists alike. He examines the thoughts of Camus, Aron, Niebuhr, and Berlin in contrast to Marx, Lukacs, Machiavelli, and Lenin. That some extremists are fascists and others are communist does not really make that much difference in these examinations; the danger is in the absolutism of ideologues and what they will do to succeed.

I found the exposition of this tension, between liberal and illiberal thought, to be very enlightening. Reading this book allowed me to better justify my own views and to get a better sense of the motivations of others. What makes this easier in this work is that the book is enormously well written. It's too bad that this book is just not all that reassuring.

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