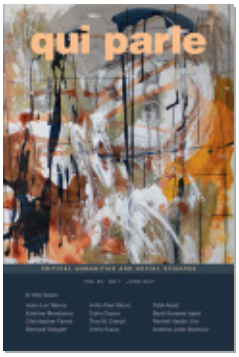
Liberalism, Disfigured

Andrew John Barbour



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A review of Amanda Anderson, Bleak Liberalism *(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Cited in the text as* BL.

It is perhaps a safe bet that at present *liberalism* and *liberal* are more often than not taken as pejoratives in academic discourse, particularly in theory cultures. As Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities and English at Brown University, Amanda Anderson is sharply aware that the affiliation *liberal* in literary studies and the humanities can today be as risky a critical investment as *humanist*: not least because of the perceived difficulty of conceiving a liberalism outside of neoliberalism, liberalism is often presumed to be a retrograde, theoretically naive, even "bankrupt mode of critical political thought" (*BL*, 45), thoroughly debunked by the last half century of deconstructive, poststructuralist, and radical critique. *Bleak Liberalism* turns the tables on such critical divestments from liberalism. For Anderson, the present bankruptcy of the concept of liberalism in academic discourse—as well as in intellectual and literary history—discloses a deficit not so much in liberal thinking as in radical critique. By *radical critique* Anderson refers less to an explicit political affiliation or

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ideology than to the critical-theoretical tendencies that largely determine the norms of critical inquiry due to the pervasive influence of Marxist, deconstructive, and poststructuralist thought. *Bleak Liberalism* argues that liberalism (and what Anderson will call the "liberal character," "liberal aesthetic," and "liberal critique") is much more complex, aesthetically and existentially dense, and negative than current critical frameworks admit and that it has its own critique of neoliberalism. Anderson refers to the critically robust form of liberalism that her study recovers as "bleak liberalism," which she argues embodies not an exceptional version of liberalism but a set of acute negative insights always already fueling the internal dynamics of liberal thought. If her reclamation of a liberalism that is neither naively optimistic nor assuredly progressivist doubles as a critique of the limits of current radical critical-theoretical frameworks, *Bleak Liberalism* rejects the premise of pitting liberal and radical critiques against each other in any zero-sum power struggle. On the contrary, Anderson values radical political theory as one form of critical thought among others and as an ally against neoliberalism and illiberal "alt-right ideology."[1] *Bleak Liberalism* seeks to recover liberalism's aesthetics, dialectical negativity, and criticality not only to reestablish the legitimacy of liberal critique but also to make room for more critically pluralistic theory cultures, intellectual histories, and forms of argument than current critical frameworks can acknowledge.

While the introduction and the first chapter of Anderson's study are largely devoted to theorizing bleak liberalism, the subsequent four chapters pivot more explicitly toward literary studies to explore the liberal aesthetic and the liberal critique in nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels that reconstruct debates between liberal and radical thought in intellectual and literary history. Anderson, who began her career as a Victorianist, still specializes in Victorian as well as in modernist novels and critical theory; her previous work, *The Way We Argue Now* (2005), a major study of argumentative tendencies in theory cultures in the humanities, prepared her well for the highly ambitious project of *Bleak Liberalism*. Classifying the latter primarily in literary studies or literary criticism seems inadequate: Anderson's body of work makes significant original contributions to aesthetic and political theory, and her current study is no exception.

In *Bleak Liberalism*, however, her aesthetic and political thought becomes even more dialectically mediated: it is next to impossible (and artificial) to cleanly separate Anderson's theorizations of bleak liberalism in the study's introduction and opening chapter from her interventions into literary studies, because the complex interactions between the liberal aesthetic and liberal critique are constitutive of (and immanent to) what she understands as bleak liberalism.

The sheer ideational density and complexly negative, disjunctive, yet accretive thinking of *Bleak Liberalism* make it almost as challenging to fit into a linear narrative as all the turns of thought in Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Much like Adorno, Anderson sees this difficulty as a critical feature of the aesthetic rather than as a bug. Analogies to Adorno are in fact quite useful for understanding the ambitions of Anderson's study: *Bleak Liberalism*'s recovery of the liberal aesthetic is intended to complicate the relation between aesthetics and politics to achieve for liberal critique something similar to what Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* achieves for radical critique.[2] Indeed, Anderson devotes chapter 4, "The Liberal Aesthetic in the Postwar Era: The Case of Trilling and Adorno," to a comparison of the bleak liberal aesthetic and Adornian aesthetics, which sharpens the distinctions between what she understands as liberal versus radical critique. For Anderson, the liberal aesthetic mediates the experience of theory as a form of life whose embodied "pressures of existence" will "always exceed the realm of ideology" or the limits of reason and abstract theorization (*BL*, 98, 104).

Bleak Liberalism responds to the perceived sense that critique cannot accurately assess the distinctive character of liberalism, in part because what we call neoliberalism has disfigured our sense of liberalism, so much so that it is nearly impossible to imagine a liberalism outside of it. Worse still, liberalism has been radically disfigured by critique itself. Critique in the humanities has predominantly meant radical critique due to the emergence of the critical humanities from the radical Left of Marxism and poststructuralism (*BL*, 19). If *Bleak Liberalism* resonates partly with Rita Felski's aim in *The Limits of Critique* to "de-essentialize the practice of suspicious reading by disinvesting it of presumptions of inherent rigor or intrinsic radicalism," it seeks to de-essentialize critique's sense of its intrinsic

radicalism without divesting it of its rigor.[3] In fact, in *Bleak Liberalism* the limits of critique call not for postcritique but for a more critically rigorous engagement with the liberal aesthetic.

Anderson's introduction and her first chapter ("Bleak Liberalism") are devoted to theorizing her study's operative concept. *Bleak Liberalism* opens with a liberal critique of "critical frameworks [that] typically fail to credit liberalism for the genuineness of its predicaments and the seriousness and complexity of its engagement with them" (*BL*, 1). Much of radical critique has flattened liberalism into an ideology that is "naively optimistic" and blithely progressivist, "failing to attend to structural inequities or economic, psychological, and political actualities" of late capitalism (*BL*, 1), with tragic perspectives delimited to political conservatism and the radical Left. Further still, "as a theory characterized as 'thin' or abstract, liberalism has been seen as unable to register the existential density, and the affiliation-prompting intensity" of other political commitments and belief systems (*BL*, 1).[4] Rather than naively progressivist or optimistic, liberalism for Anderson is "best understood as a philosophical and political project conceived in an acute awareness of the challenges and often bleak prospects confronting it" (*BL*, 1). Bleak liberalism is not an exceptional form of liberalism but rather is the expression, however manifest or latent, of a critical negativity always already animating liberal thought.

Liberalism's critical bleakness stems from an enduring commitment to acknowledging and struggling with the inexorable existential challenges of political being-together such as "the intractability of liberal vices, the limits of rational argument, the exacting demands of freedom amid value pluralism, the tragedy of history, and the corruptibility of procedure" (*BL*, 2). Against critiques of liberalism that reduce it to a fixation on the individual, Anderson insists that liberalism has always been characterized by a "double view," or what she calls a "split within liberal thinking" (*BL*, 3)—a toggle switch in narrative focalization between the moral and the sociological, the individual and the communal, the personal and the transpersonal, the local and the systemic. The operative preposition for Anderson is *within*: she rejects the critical tendency to read darker moments within liberal thought and literature as instances in which

a text ceases to be liberal rather than as a moment within the internal dialectics of liberal thought that powers its distinctively bleak energy and critical momentum. Compellingly, Anderson argues that Sisyphean obstacles are not so much external to as constitutive of liberalism's distinctive affect or character, its lived commitment to the "enduring challenges, often born of crisis, that exert their pressure on the internal dynamics of liberal thought" (*BL*, 2).

To make sense of what Anderson recovers as bleak liberalism, it is important to understand how she disables the axiom of liberalism's ideological complicity with the status quo by liberally critiquing the radical critique of neoliberalism. How we understand what we now call neoliberalism as a concept and "a diagnosed form of governance" (*BL*, 38) is itself a product not just of "critique" (all too often idealized and dematerialized) but of a particular historically contingent form of radical critique with its own set of political values and interests. For Anderson, the present deadlock in radical critique's understanding of neoliberalism stems from the analytically paralyzing tendency to synonymize neoliberalism with liberalism. Anderson's critical historiography of the emergence of the concept of neoliberalism undertakes the propaedeutic work of reversing this synonymy. Unpacking first its maximally telegraphic form, Anderson writes that "the rhetorical and political effects of the term's use within the humanities—as shorthand for the powerful extension of market power within a global capitalist system—do not properly reflect more considered analyses of the idea and reality of neoliberalism" (*BL*, 39). Liberalism, by contrast, fundamentally values human life and social welfare above economic interest. Liberalism is invested in "incremental reform of existing democratic institutions and states as well as extensions of principles of justice and access" and combats "human suffering and human violence" (*BL*, 114) in critiquing established power by means of a "rigorous scrutiny of principles, assumptions, and belief systems" and a "commitment to openness and transparency" (*BL*, 3) through rational argument, proceduralism, and value pluralism and critical scrutiny of their limits. For Anderson, neoliberalism is not only conceptually distinct from but also existentially incompatible with the values of political liberalism that have long resisted narrow forms of classic economic liberalism and the

impersonal forms of market liberalism associated with John Locke and Adam Smith.

In the dominant radical historiography of the emergence of neoliberalism, Anderson maintains, "the key feature is the argument that economic liberalism prevails in a way that destroys the gains and the promise of political liberalism" (*BL*, 40). *Bleak Liberalism* complicates this narrative by challenging the reception history of Michel Foucault's *Birth of Biopolitics*, a foundational text in the radical critique of neoliberalism. Against much of radical critique, Anderson argues that Foucault's precise relation to neoliberalism is far from certain: "His attitude toward neoliberalism has been variously interpreted as negative, positive, and neutral, which gives some indication of the complexity of the evidence involved" (*BL*, 41). If Daniel Zamora and Michael Behrent contend that Foucault prefers forms of freedom that become less disciplined under neoliberalism, present radical critical-theoretical frameworks tellingly ascribe to him a systemic diagnostic critique of existing forms of governance, effectively attributing an intrinsic radicalism to Foucauldian critique (*BL*, 41).[5] Problematizing this presumption of Foucault's radicalism by focusing on a key passage in which "Foucault stresses his own evaluative neutrality," Anderson demonstrates how he "goes on to make a somewhat more subtle point, that those invested in the significance of their own denunciations of state power should recognize the connection between such a stance and emergent forms of state reductionism" (*BL*, 41, 42).[6] For Anderson, critique's risk of collapsing into a mirror image of state reductionism lies precisely in what Foucault himself diagnoses as the radical tendency to meld liberal and neoliberal forms of governance into a systemic, totalizing denunciation of state power. Undoing this reductionism, Anderson reveals that even many scholars like Wendy Brown, whose radical commitments make them wary of liberalism, understand neoliberalism as "informed by its distinct difference from, and damage to, the tradition of political liberalism" (*BL*, 43). Anderson argues that "the more considered analyses of neoliberal theory and practice"—such as Brown's *Undoing the Demos*, which she identifies as an ally to her own bleak liberal project—"actually invoke forms of liberalism as a counter-ideal" (*BL*, 43).[7] For Anderson, even radical critiques of neoliberalism

demonstrate that "the liberal ideal is alive and well in the very diagnosis of neoliberalism's assault on the achievements of traditional political liberalism" (*BL*, 45).

Bleak Liberalism exposes how neoliberalism is less systemic and totalizing than fragmentary and precarious, allowing us to critique it as a form of governance by piercing its concept's reified form. The crude pessimism of the hermeneutics of suspicion that sees neoliberalism everywhere—and thereby dedifferentiates and essentializes late capital, mistaking ubiquity of vision for critical rigor and analytic privilege for insight—has handed neoliberalism more power than it deserves by occluding at once existing liberalisms and the victories of radical activism. Following David Harvey's work in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Anderson argues that "neoliberalism is unevenly and only ever partially achieved" (*BL*, 43).[8] The gaping holes in neoliberalism's armor—such as the uneven development of late capital's gridlock, its parasitic dependency on state activism and legislative intervention for survival, its ideological flatness and inability to "supply the forms of ideological or moral support that any successfully hegemonic worldview requires" (*BL*, 42), and its incompatibility with liberal values—should renew the radical and liberal Left's hope in the efficacy of critique and political action. By breaking the conceptual deadlock in critiques of neoliberalism, we can begin to figure out futures beyond it.

Chapter 2 ("Liberalism in the Age of High Realism") transitions into literary criticism to examine precisely how the liberal aesthetic works in literary representation. This chapter is particularly representative of how the liberal aesthetic and liberal critique are dialectically mediated by (and embodied in) what Anderson calls bleak liberalism. Here she considers how major high realist novels such as Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, Anthony Trollope's *Way We Live Now*, and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* aesthetically mediate liberal concepts key to bleak liberalism's double view of "progressive aspiration and bleak diagnosis" (*BL*, 48). Mediation, which retains a critical form of negativity, nontheorizable excess, and difference, is the concept Anderson uses to theorize the liberal aesthetic: cutting against organicist and essentialist models, she insists that "what is required is not a fusion of 'life' and 'doctrine' but a mediation between them"

(*BL*, 73). Anderson challenges the totalizing and systematizing forms of critical literature dominant in scholarship on the realist novel, in which "a restrictive ideological alliance between liberalism and realism is asserted, one in which the consolidation of liberal power and the development of the realist novel are coterminous" (*BL*, 47). For Anderson, the uncritical totalization of paranoia in approaches to the realist novel in the spirit of D. A. Miller's influential *Novel and the Police* "have failed to capture the dynamic relation between liberalism's focus on systemic inequities and its investment in the achievements of temperament and character" (*BL*, 48).

Bleak House might be taken as a synecdoche for *Bleak Liberalism*'s double view of negative insights—or the split *within* liberal thinking—critically mediated by the liberal aesthetic.[9] Anderson argues that *Bleak House* itself is driven by a liberal double view in the form of its dialectical movement between a first-person narrative by a female character, Esther Summerson, and a systemic third-person narrative. The latter narrative "engages in a broad critique of established power and its attendant social and psychological effects . . . of an airless world ruled by ever-present forms of diffuse power effects, strategic rationality, and corrosive self-interest" that for Anderson marks a moment of liberal critique (*BL*, 49). Crucially, however, this systemic, totalizing narration is interrupted by first-person, characterological narration in the form of an individual moral voice. Much of the Marxist scholarship on *Bleak House*, from Raymond Williams to Terry Eagleton, identifies this local response of an individual agency or moral perspective as "fundamentally liberal in character" (*BL*, 50).[10] Anderson does not dispute this point so much as one of the deadlocks of radical critical-theoretical frameworks that follows from it: how any weight placed on the individual over against the system is perceived to do nothing more than feed back into liberal ideology. Anderson's problem with this dominant critical perception is that it "remains unable to see that the critical diagnosis and the emphasis on local response or individual agency form a complex whole and together constitute the very kind of liberalism this project aims to reconstruct" (*BL*, 51). Far from ideologically affirmative, the reparative energies of liberal reform in *Bleak Liberalism* are underwritten by a darker systemic critique that negatively expresses

liberal values, lighting up a critical understanding of what qualifies as a morally significant local response (*BL*, 51). By such logic, Anderson argues that characters like Allan Woodcourt and Jo mediate a narratological "breaching of the structuring gap between sociological and moral perspectives" (*BL*, 56). Anderson's breaching (or bridging) of the structuring gap between liberal aesthetics and liberal theory comes to be embodied in the very rhetorical and argumentative form of her study. Such mediations of the critical "moral perspectives" of literary characters (with their own affective or aesthetic existential mediations of life and liberal theory) through liberalism's critical-sociological, systemic perspectives fuel the internal dialectics of *Bleak Liberalism*.

As chapter 2 makes evident, much of *Bleak Liberalism*'s critical dynamism derives from a sense of liberal critique's productive tensions with radical critical-analytic tendencies. Probing the parities and disparities between bleak liberalism and the Frankfurt School, chapter 4 lays bare the complex ties between bleak liberalism and bleaker forms of radical thought by analyzing the relation between the aesthetics and the politics of the Cold War. Anderson turns to Lionel Trilling's novel of ideas *The Middle of the Journey* to recover the acute negative insights of bleak liberal aesthetics and politics as formidable rivals to Adorno's (*BL*, 17). Given how Anderson's introduction underscores that postwar liberals are most representative of her sense of bleak liberalism (and even serve as a synecdoche for her book), it is no surprise that Trilling emerges as the protagonist of her study, rightly hailed on the back cover as the twenty-first-century successor to *The Liberal Imagination*. "Trilling's thinking about liberalism," Anderson stresses, "prompted an understanding of the modern novel trained on the lived relation to ideas, in both its social and its existential dimensions," and this understanding "brings to light certain under-recognized elements of the liberal tradition" (*BL*, 99). Chapter 4's recuperation of Trilling encapsulates *Bleak Liberalism*'s critical tendencies toward reparative work on liberal theory and aesthetics that doubles as a critique of the limits of contemporary radical critical-theoretical frameworks.

Anderson's treatment of Trilling's thought discloses the productive tension between the critical forms of negative insight valued

by bleak liberalism and the Frankfurt School. Anderson helpfully glosses Frankfurt School thought as a "bleak radicalism" (*BL*, 114) that, though actively opposed to liberalism, was preoccupied with problematics that cut aslant of bleak liberalism's, including a rejection of progressive optimism and a concern with the limits of reason (and the dangers of instrumental reason). By far the most crucial common ground and contested territory between bleak liberalism and radicalism, however, lies in Anderson's recognition that "both Trilling and Adorno advance a strong claim for aesthetics as a response to the limits and dangers of formal politics" while they diverge on the form of aesthetic negativity valued (*BL*, 103). Anderson further elaborates on the difference between Adornian negative dialectics and bleak liberalism's dialectical negativity. Adorno "defines his position in part by opposing specific aesthetic attitudes and forms" (*BL*, 103–4), radically dissenting from explicit political content (as in Jean-Paul Sartre's literature of commitment), literary realism, and existential thought. As Anderson argues, Adorno's "contempt for the existentialists" lies at "the heart of the difference between Adorno and Trilling on the matter of aesthetics" (*BL*, 104). In contrast, bleak liberalism recovers an existential aesthetics currently foreclosed by radical critical-theoretical frameworks. What Anderson calls "existential realism" refers to the idea that "the most relevant literary art shows individuals actively living their moral and political lives within conditions that always exceed the realm of ideology" (*BL*, 104), including both radical and liberal ideology. If Adorno is critical of wrong life, liberalism is critical of wrongly abstracting from life. Bleak liberalism's distinctive form of aesthetic negativity emerges as an excess to any ideological totalization of the relation between theory and life, an excess that feeds back into the internal dialectics of liberal critique. Dissenting from radical critical frameworks that systematically and totalizingly negate existing forms of governance while holding out a negative-utopian hope of moving beyond political negativity, *Bleak Liberalism* critically departs from radical negations not by rejecting but by acknowledging and struggling with the claims of political existence.

If Anderson's turn to *Bleak House* in chapter 2 is more representative of her compelling argumentative tendencies for analyzing the

systemic, third-person half of the bleak liberal double view or split within liberal thinking, her treatment of Trilling's *Middle of the Journey* in chapter 4 affords a sharper sense of how the theorization of the liberal aesthetic strengthens her analysis of novelistic characters who feel the existential pressures of embodied existence in attempting to personally mediate the irreducible excess between life and theory. Set in the 1930s, *The Middle of the Journey* features a "character system built out of mirrored dyads, in which one character's radicalism sustains another's liberalism and vice versa"; it pairs the main character, John Laskell, "a fellow-travelling liberal," with his more radical friend Gifford Maxim, whose decision to leave the Communist Party precipitates the novel's central crisis. Laskell is traumatized by Maxim's dramatic break, which he sees as a "morally repugnant act of betrayal" (*BL*, 108).

What is it about the liberal theoretical disposition (or liberal characters' lived relation to ideas) that would provoke such a strong response to their radical friend's ideological disavowal—a response that clearly occurs in a more felt or affective-existential register than at the abstract level of political ideology? This type of question motivates Anderson's key observation that Trilling's novel "repeatedly asks us to notice that liberals prop their beliefs on those who hold stronger views than theirs, and they do so by means of a concrete relationship or tie. Thus Laskell gets something important out of his relationship with Maxim, which is part of the reason the break is so traumatic for him" (*BL*, 108). For Anderson, Trilling's liberalism is always defined differentially, through characters whose ways of being come under the moral and psychological pressures of embodied existence. She engages with an important passage from the novel in which Trilling elaborates:

> Certain things were clear between Laskell and Maxim. It was established that Laskell accepted Maxim's extreme commitment to the future. It was understood between them that Laskell did not accept all of Maxim's ideas. At the same time, Laskell did not oppose Maxim's ideas. One could not oppose them without being illiberal, even reactionary. . . . He was left very much exposed, not to Maxim's arguments, for Maxim seldom argued, but to Maxim's

> inner authority. This Laskell did not regret. Maxim never formulated an accusation in words, yet he did make an accusation. He made it by being what he was. This accusation was unlike any other—it was benign. It brought the guilt into the open, the guilt of being what one was, the guilt one shared with others of one's comfortable class.[11]

Here we can see Trilling's conviction that even while "ideas and ideology, as self-consciously held conceptions" (*BL*, 109), inform the identity of a novel's characters, such ideas must not be lived as fixed ideologies but instead modulated through lived relations to larger political and characterological systems. For instance, this moment in Trilling's novel investigates how the undecided personality or open-ended character of liberals like Laskell can become dangerously dependent on the comparative moral certainty or charismatic "inner authority" of radical characters like Maxim. At the same time, it reflects on how the very strength and certainty embodied by radical characters can readily collapse into fixed ideology, "a distorted relation to ideas" (*BL*, 109) that for Anderson represents the corresponding danger of twentieth-century radical thought. If Trilling's "idea in modulation" insists that argument is vital to the life of ideas[12]—a position that, if left unqualified, one would associate with a less dialectical liberalism—argument also has "crucial limits, and those who engage in it must recognize that communicative practices include elements of aggression and withdrawal and that the intellectual life is not immune to the pressure of what we might call the claims of existence" (*BL*, 109). Such claims of existence, which present theory as a form of life, are precisely what the liberal aesthetic critically mediates.

Here one wishes that Anderson also directly addressed the variety of pluralism operative in *The Middle of the Journey*—or, for that matter, in *Bleak Liberalism* as a whole. The limits of argument internal to the dialectical motor of Anderson's bleak liberalism seem to impose some sort of pluralism as a constraint on external argumentation with other political affiliations. In the passage from Trilling's novel, for instance, "elements of aggression and withdrawal" preserve the non-zero-sum "character system" of intellectual life without

zero-sum critical standoffs, respecting each ideology's claims for existence. Laskell's insistence that "one could not oppose [Maxim's ideas] without being illiberal, even reactionary" evokes an affect of pluralism that is everywhere palpable but never explicitly articulated in *Bleak Liberalism*. Liberal "guilt"—here, Laskell's affective stance toward Maxim's existential "accusation," his embodied being as a lived rejection of liberal politics—is "brought . . . into the open" and made "benign," incorporated into a character system that seems to embody an aesthetically and affectively complex variety of pluralism latently operative in Anderson's study yet left unnamed.[13]

Anderson's powerful conclusion to chapter 4 seems to demand some such hitherto untheorized form of critical pluralism that entails neither neutralization nor depoliticization but that aims "to disable [the] tendency somewhat . . . for liberals and radicals to define themselves against each other" "without obliterating the real differences that do exist" in the critical humanities (*BL*, 114). This is nothing less than a "dissent from the orthodoxies of dissent" that demands a non-zero-sum theory culture critically sensitive to commonalities and differences (quoted in *BL*, 153).[14] Anderson recovers intellectual breathing room for theory cultures in the humanities—and, more broadly, in academic life as a whole—for a tropological system of critical pluralism that would recognize the claims of existence (and the strengths and weaknesses) of differentially defined critical-theoretical dispositions without unreflectively normalizing radical critique as the default mode.

Critique in *Bleak Liberalism* is not an effort to assert the superiority of one form of critique over another or to either dissolve or ontologize the differences between radical and liberal critiques. Rather, the task in *Bleak Liberalism* is to make forms of critique smarter and better for both the radical and the liberal Left; to make more (and de-essentialized) forms of critique available; and to recognize the commonalities and divergences between liberal and radical critiques: their respective strengths and weaknesses, blindnesses and insights, and distinctive characters. An intellectual culture of critical pluralism aims not for value neutrality so much as for value criticality.

After the 2016 US presidential election, it is now more important than ever that the liberal and radical Lefts in the critical humanities

recognize their common values in a mutual commitment to critically "come to terms with human suffering and human violence" (*BL*, 114), whether such violence to human (and, one might add, nonhuman) life takes the form of late capitalism, "alt-right" ideology, or the type of reactionary politics advanced by Mark Lilla that seeks to put an end to the differentially defined identities of liberal pluralism as an obstacle to a unified politics.[15] As Anderson's study makes clear, any such political unity that emerges from doing violence to rather than from recognizing the differential claims of existence is fundamentally illiberal and reactionary. What the liberal and radical Lefts must both stand firm against is precisely the sort of unitary politics that fails to dialectically acknowledge that difference is part of what we have in common and that the obstacles of critical pluralism are not mere hindrances to unity but instead are precisely what critically animates common political existence. Not a bug but a constitutive feature of political life, the existential challenge of pluralism is of critical value to any politics and aesthetics worth fighting for in our bleak political climate. Nothing better equips us for such a challenge than *Bleak Liberalism*, which develops the critical negativity to struggle with the existential obstacles of living a commitment to pluralism.[16] Even while Anderson's *somewhat* leaves the form that a critical pluralism might take open to argument, her sense of the aesthetic claims of existence warns us of the limits of argumentation and theory: our bleak political crisis demands a pluralism at once aesthetic enough to not too violently abstract from human (and nonhuman) forms of life and critical enough to acknowledge a world of difference.

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Notes

1. I will refer to the current blend of white supremacism and neofascism as "alt-right ideology," with the quotation marks intended at once to steer clear of euphemism and to acknowledge the term's contemporary usage. This is my term, not Anderson's.

2. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*.
3. Felski, *Limits of Critique*, 3. Anderson's recovery of a liberal critique and aesthetic also accords with Felski's goal of "freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument" (3).
4. In her study Anderson also recovers a bleak liberal thought of commitment to living theory that is far more aesthetically and politically complex than Sartre's notion of "committed literature" that Adorno famously critiques in "Commitment" (see *BL,* 83, 116).
5. Zamora, "Can We Criticize Foucault?"; Behrent, "Liberalism without Humanism." See also Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy."
6. The key passage in question is Foucault's sequence of reflections beginning with "I add straightaway that in saying this I am not trying to make a value judgment" (*Birth of Biopolitics*, 191).
7. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*. See also Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, for another potential ally to Anderson's project that is not explicitly mentioned in *Bleak Liberalism*.
8. Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*, esp. 87–119.
9. Dickens, *Bleak House,* 29, 257–58, 710–11, 722.
10. Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, 129–30; *Williams*, *Country and the City*, 156.
11. Trilling, *Middle of the Journey*, 134.
12. Trilling, *Middle of the Journey*, 352.
13. Trilling, *Middle of the Journey*, 134.
14. Anderson takes this phrase from Trilling, *Liberal Imagination*, 9.
15. Lilla, "End of Identity Liberalism."
16. Anderson steers clear of the celebratory affect that would normally follow from her pluralistic ambition to open out the liberal aesthetic to "a near-infinite multiplicity of individual cases of ideological form and expression": "I am not particularly interested in dwelling on this dizzying irony" (*BL*, 19).

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