FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MARCH/APRIL 2024 • VOLUME 103 • NUMBER 2

Who's Afraid of Freedom?

The Fight for Liberalism's Future

HELENA ROSENBLATT

REVIEW ESSAY

Who's Afraid of Freedom?

The Fight for Liberalism's Future

HELENA ROSENBLATT

The New Leviathans: Thoughts After Liberalism
BY JOHN GRAY. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023, 192 pp.

Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times
BY SAMUEL MOYN. Yale University Press, 2023, 240 pp.

It has become trite to say that liberalism is in crisis. As long ago as 1997, in an article in these pages, Fareed Zakaria warned of the rising threat of "illiberal democracy" around the world. Since then, countless essays, articles, and books have tried to explain the growing threats to the liberal world order posed by populism, authoritarianism, fundamentalism, and nationalism. Scholars have also devoted a great deal of thought to the human dislocations—be they economic, political, demographic, cultural, or environmental—that seem to have given rise to these threats.

In the last ten years or so, another theme has emerged. A small but vocal group of thinkers claim that the source of the crisis lies within liberalism itself. Often referred to as "postliberals," those in this camp argue that liberal conceptions of the social and political order are fatally flawed. Liberalism, they say, is responsible for many of the ills that afflict the world today, including rampant globalization, the destruction of communal bonds, rising economic insecurity, environmental degradation, and other perceived defects of twenty-first-century society.

Now, the British political philosopher John Gray and the Yale intellectual historian Samuel Moyn, two academics turned public intellectuals, have both weighed in on what they see as the self-inflicted decline of the liberal project. Although they agree that liberal democracy has, in some sense, failed, what they mean by liberalism and what they see as its prospects diverge sharply. In *The*

HELENA ROSENBLATT is Professor of History, Political Science, and French at the CUNY Graduate Center and the author of *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century*.

New Leviathans, Gray contends that liberalism is a fundamentally erroneous creed built on dangerous myths and illusions. Rather than bringing freedom, it has led to unfettered government power that has brought much of the world to the brink of totalitarianism—not only in Vladimir Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China but also in advanced Western democracies.

By contrast, in *Liberalism Against Itself*, Moyn argues that liberal thought is fundamentally sound, based as it is on ideals that are both laudable and realizable. As Moyn sees it, the present crisis has been caused not by liberalism but by its betrayal, by none other than the architects of the liberal order themselves. Abandoning their core values and principles, he argues, liberalism's champions have become timid and anxious—more concerned with fending off their enemies than winning new converts. Where Gray sees liberal states growing into ever more controlling monsters, Moyn finds them reduced and enfeebled, having presided over the tragic dismantling of the welfare state.

THE NEW THOUGHT POLICE

The pessimism of *The New Leviathans* should not come as a surprise. Long known for his criticism of liberalism and gloomy forebodings, Gray posits that the contemporary liberal order was constructed around the delusion that "where markets spread, freedom would follow"—that market capitalism and liberal values were destined to triumph everywhere. Instead, he writes, these forces were simply a temporary "political experiment" that has "run its course" and left nothing but disaster in its wake. The future is bleak, he asserts. Societies will not be able to arrest climate change or prevent environmental destruction. New technologies will not save civilization. The English economist Thomas Malthus's dire eighteenth-century predictions about overpopulation may yet be proved right. Western capitalism, Gray says, is "programmed to fail."

Perhaps most disastrous of all, Gray argues, market forces, and the resulting connection between wealth and political leverage, are making our states more, not less, totalitarian. "Instead of China becoming more like the West," he writes, "the West has become more like China." Moreover, there is no reason to think that in the future, liberal governments will be any more successful than other forms of political order. Instead, he foresees "disparate regimes interacting with one another in a condition of global anarchy."

For Gray, liberalism is based on faulty premises. Liberals flatter themselves when they assert that humans are better than animals. They are not. Humans persecute for pleasure. Liberal dreams of making the world a better place are just that: dreams, and hazardous ones at that. The idea of humanity, Gray writes, is a "dangerous fiction" that allows some people to be identified as less human than others and can provide a justification for eliminating them. The notion that history is a story of progress is another self-flattering illusion. He singles out the political theorist Francis Fukuyama and the cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker for special rebuke for their assumptions about society's inexorable advancement.

But the liberal myth Gray most wants to shatter is that people in the West live in free societies. He acknowledges that for much of the modern period, liberal states set out to extend freedom and safeguard against tyranny. With the fall of the Soviet Union, however, these same states increasingly "cast off" traditional restraints on power in the pursuit of material progress, cultural conformity, and national security. "Like the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century," he writes, liberal states today "have become engineers of souls."

If governments have become totalitarian, so has society. Gray sees pervasive efforts in Western countries to control thought and language, and he is especially agitated by what he calls the "woke religion" on college campuses across the United States today. Indeed, his distress over "wokeism" seems to feed both his fear of totalitarianism and his penchant for hyperbole. The American university, he writes, has become "the model for an inquisitorial regime." Wokeism and identity politics, he continues, are the products of "a lumpen intelligentsia that is economically superfluous" yet eager to become society's guardians.

The New Leviathans is studded with occasional insights and curious bits of information. Gray writes that Putin admires an obscure nineteenth-century Russian thinker named Konstantin Leontyev, who revered feudalism and wanted the tsar to impose an "autocratic socialism" on Russia. Gray, in fact, devotes more than 70 pages to Russian or Bolshevik topics whose purpose, one surmises, is to remind us how random and full of horrors life is and to make clear that liberal society is headed toward totalitarianism. After all, tsarist Russia had its own "lumpen intelligentsia" that turned against the society that nurtured it, and look what happened there.

What any of this history really has to do with liberalism, however, is left unexplained. Gray also does not make clear what he means by liberalism. At the beginning of the book, he lists four key liberal principles he identified in 1986: that individuals have moral primacy over any social collectivity; that all people have equal moral worth; that moral values are universal for all humans and take precedence over specific cultural forms; and that all social and political arrangements can be improved. But Gray does not acknowledge that these principles can mean different things to different people at different times. Today, there are people who call themselves "classical liberals," "social liberals," "liberal socialists," or just plain "liberals." Although they may share a number of beliefs, the policies they support can vary radically. Which variety of liberalism is proto-totalitarian? For Gray, as for many other postliberals, liberalism seems to mean whatever he wants it to mean.

BAD AUTHORITY

Gray's jaundiced view of the liberal tradition partly explains his odd use of the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Each chapter of *The New Leviathans* begins with a quotation from *Leviathan*, Hobbes's major treatise on state power, as if to provide the reader with a kernel of truth and an ominous warning about what is to come.

Culture wars: protesting a far-right campus speaker in Berkeley, California, September 2017

Among liberals, Gray writes, Hobbes is "the only one, perhaps, still worth reading." Hobbes is worth reading, it seems, because of his exceedingly dark view of human nature, a view Gray shares. Hobbes famously referred to the state of nature as a state of war, in which life was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Men, he reasoned, would willingly submit to an absolute sovereign—they would form a social contract to give up their liberty in exchange for safety—to escape such an existence. In other words, government with unlimited power is necessary for society to flourish.

Through Hobbes's eyes, Gray invites readers to see for themselves where the world is headed. He insists that no matter what liberals may say, they actually fear freedom and, to relieve them of its burdens, seek protection from the state. Supporters of liberalism will thus inevitably create a powerful state, one that will devolve into totalitarianism. By calling Hobbes the only liberal worth reading, Gray implies that liberals are really closet totalitarians—and know it.

But Gray is wrong here. Hobbes was no liberal. Although twentieth-century political philosophers often recognized Hobbes, along with John Locke a generation later, as one of the founding fathers of liberalism, this Anglocentric tradition ignores the actual language and ideas that both men used, as well as the stark differences in their conceptions of liberality. Notably, *Leviathan* was published over 150 years before there was anything called "liberalism"; and no self-identified liberal has ever recognized Hobbes as a founder, or even a member, of the liberal canon. Had Gray begun his book with a true early liberal thinker, he would have been obliged to tell a different story.

JUSTIN SULLIVAN / GETTY IMAGES

Consider the French Swiss political theorist Benjamin Constant (1767–1830). One of the first to identify as a liberal and be called one in his own lifetime, Constant rejected the concepts of the state of nature and the social contract as too abstract for practical use. He had an optimistic, although never naive, view of human nature. Like his fellow nineteenth-century liberals, he believed humans were capable of peaceful self-government in the best interest of all. These early thinkers fought to make Hobbesian authoritarianism impossible by establishing the rule of law and constitutionally limited government, with safeguards in place to protect individual freedoms. Although Gray recognizes this to a certain extent—and even admits that emerging democracies initially showed that "Hobbes was mistaken"—he blames liberalism for supposedly abandoning its original intentions by creating omnipotent states in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

By taking on nineteenth-century liberalism more directly, Gray would have seen that, from the very beginning, liberals concerned themselves with threats posed not only by an all-powerful state but also by society, whether through an unfair economy, an oppressive religion, or the many impediments to individual advancement and fulfillment, including stultifying social mores. Rather than fearing freedom, as Gray says, nineteenth-century liberals, as well as their successors, fought to secure and expand it. To blame liberalism for restricting individual rights and liberty makes no sense at all. But for Gray, not even Hobbes is pessimistic enough. "There is no final deliverance from the state of nature," Gray writes. In the end, he topples the only liberal he thinks is still worth reading.

PARADISE LOST

Moyn agrees that there is a problem with liberalism, but the similarities with Gray's account end there. A scholar best known for his iconoclastic history of human rights—arguing that the late-twentieth-century human rights movement largely failed—Moyn nevertheless believes that humans are not doomed and that liberalism is reparable. In *Liberalism Against Itself*, he argues that liberal thought in its original form is not the cause of the current crisis. In his telling, nineteenth-century liberals were optimists about human nature and believed in human beings' ability to improve themselves and society. And until the mid-twentieth century, he writes, liberals were committed to "free and equal self-creation" and strove to establish the conditions for human flourishing. Over time, these conditions came to include universal suffrage and the welfare state, as well as individual empowerment and market freedom.

But then, in Moyn's account, a group of Cold War liberals reconceived liberalism beyond recognition. Having experienced World War II and the extremes of Nazism and Stalinism, they embraced views of human nature that were much less hopeful. These thinkers worried that by embracing ideals of emancipation and continual improvement, liberalism could devolve into totalitarianism. As a result, Cold War liberals became

"anxious" and "minimalist," adopting a negative view of liberty in which freedom was defined as noninterference by the state. According to Moyn, they shrank their aspirations for human progress, and liberalism eventually "collapsed into neoliberalism and neoconservatism."

Moyn devotes separate chapters to representative Cold War liberals, including the Oxford political theorist Isaiah Berlin, the Austrian British philosopher Karl Popper, the American historian of ideas Gertrude Himmelfarb, the German Jewish émigré political theorist Hannah Arendt, and the American literary critic Lionel Trilling. Along the way, he introduces others, including the libertarian Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek and the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Moyn takes special interest in Judith Shklar, a political theorist who taught at Harvard through much of the Cold War and whose work shows how liberalism became downgraded, its ambitions diminished. Thus, in her 1957 book, *After Utopia*, she lamented a new liberal order that had abandoned many of its original Enlightenment precepts. Yet by the later decades of her career, she, too, viewed liberalism as, in Moyn's words, "less a basis for the construction of a free community of equals and more as a means of harm reduction."

"Cold War liberalism was a catastrophe," Moyn writes. By overreacting to the Soviet threat, it failed to produce a liberal society "worthy of the name." The world is living with the consequences. Even if these thinkers did not oppose the welfare state, Moyn argues, their rejection of liberal idealism set the stage for spiraling in equality and the assault on welfare in the generations that followed. Rather than challenging this tradition after the fall of communism, Moyn sees a new generation of writers and theorists extending Cold War liberalism to a range of new perceived threats to democracy, from Islamist extremism to the MAGA right to what he calls "'woke' tyranny." This later generation, he writes, has continually failed to make clear the qualities that might give liberalism "enthusiastic backing" in the first place.

Notably, Moyn's account of what happened to liberalism is diametrically opposed to Gray's. In Moyn's view, Cold War liberals and their contemporary successors have weakened the state, not, as Gray insists, made it grow. One is even tempted to read Moyn's book as a response to Gray. Moyn disagrees with those who insist that liberalism is "poised on the precipice." He believes that it is precisely this kind of catastrophism that has led people astray and made them afraid, fatalistic, and despondent when action is needed. It is such thinking that has caused liberalism to take a wrong turn.

CRISIS OR CATALYST?

Even skeptics and critics must admit that *Liberalism Against Itself* is clearly written and argued. Moyn does not make the mistake of anchoring liberalism in the thought of an antiliberal such as Hobbes. Instead, he draws on the ideas of true liberals such as Constant and his younger contemporaries John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville. Moyn also brings to light something that is often left out

of histories of liberalism, namely its moral optimism and what could even be called its moral agenda. A central purpose of nineteenth-century liberalism was to create the conditions that would allow people to grow intellectually and morally.

But Moyn picks and chooses the principles of early liberalism with which he agrees. He favors a socialistic form of liberalism, but there was another, libertarian form that he leaves out. It is something of a simplification to say that nineteenth-century liberals saw the state as a "device of human liberation." Some of them, such as the British idealist philosopher T. H. Green and the French politician Léon Bourgeois, did, but others, such as the British philosopher and social scientist Herbert Spencer and the French economist Frédéric Bastiat, did not. These latter thinkers, who would be called "classical" or "orthodox" liberals, also believed in progress and emancipation and were optimistic about the future, but they had less confidence in the state.

The New Leviathans, unlike *Liberalism Against Itself*, is a sad book, one that suggests there is no way out of the present predicament. As Gray sees it, to try to save liberalism—or what he calls "the moth-eaten musical brocade of progressive hope"—would be pointless. Instead, Western democracies should simply lower their sights and "adjust." Moyn rejects such fatalism. People have important choices to make about how they should live their lives and what kind of society they wish to live in. He thinks it is time to reinvent liberalism, not bury it.

Liberalism has faced multiple crises throughout its history. It was even born in crisis, the crisis of the French Revolution. It has faced formidable enemies before and has reinvented itself several times, as well. It can certainly do so again. Exactly how it should do so is up to a new generation of thinkers, policymakers, politicians, and, ultimately, voters themselves to decide. They are more likely to find success, however, if they aspire to a vision of liberalism in which a well-governed society does not come at the expense of individual liberty but rather serves to further it.