

Joshua L. Cherniss: *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Pp. xvii, 306.)

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Liberalism is a fraught philosophical doctrine. Its focus on individual liberty imposes strict normative constraints on state action, and these impede the state's ability to cultivate civic virtue. Yet the success of any decent social order depends partly on the character of its people. Hence, the root of what is broadly called the "liberal predicament": liberalism arguably cannot secure the bases for its own flourishing.

This predicament has been central to liberal theory at least since Locke. To be sure, it admits of various formulations. Some frame it as the puzzle of whether liberals must tolerate the intolerant. Others regard it as a problem concerning the public role of religion. Communitarians express it as the concern that liberalism cannot support an adequate conception of citizenship. Rawlsians cast it as the problem of distinguishing "public" from "nonpublic" reasons.

In each instance, liberalism appears conflicted. Liberal toleration seems to apply only among liberals; liberal freedom of worship appears to amount to secularism; liberal autonomy trumps civic duty; and the idea that public discourse must be conducted in terms that are acceptable to all is a notion that many citizens find unacceptable. Seizing on these tensions, antiliberals contend that liberalism is a sham.

These debates are familiar, perhaps stale. Yet Joshua Cherniss has given them new life. This owes to two innovations of *Liberalism in Dark Times*. First, Cherniss focuses on *ruthlessness* (2), the disposition to pursue one's political aims by whatever means available. Second, Cherniss proceeds by way of *exemplification* (10); he draws philosophical lessons from sketches of five twentieth-century liberals who confronted ruthlessness—Max Weber, Albert Camus, Raymond Aron, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Isaiah Berlin.

*Liberalism in Dark Times* culminates in a case for "tempered liberalism." This liberalism is "tempered . . . by the crucible of criticism, struggle, and tribulation"; it is "informed by and seeks to maintain a poise of balance between (and maintains its balance *against*) extremes" and "centers on personal temperament" (7–8). Tempered liberalism hence is an ethos, a "complex of dispositions, perceptions, self-understandings, values, and styles, which interact to guide the way in which an agent engages with the world" (31). The book's core thesis is that although liberalism is indeed a fraught doctrine, tempered liberalism can serve as an "antidote" to ruthlessness (218).

As Cherniss's exemplars demonstrate, a persistent political temptation is to fight fire with fire—to defend liberalism by illiberal means, to become *ruthlessly liberal*. In Cherniss's hands, the liberal predicament becomes the challenge of sustaining the moral fortitude to refuse ruthlessness. With liberalism cast as an ethos, Cherniss can say why liberals *should* refuse

ruthlessness: “acting ruthlessly, even if it is an isolated incident, tends to leave an agent changed” (106). Ruthlessness corrodes the liberal ethos, eventually transforming us into our foes.

Although tempered liberalism is appealing, difficulties remain. Late in the book, Cherniss announces that tempered liberalism relies upon an “underlying pluralism” that envisions a normative landscape of “distinct, genuine obligations, ideals, and virtues, which may (and often do) conflict” in ways that resist a singularly rational resolution (200). Tempered liberalism requires that we “internalize” (190) the view that Berlin named *value pluralism*.

The trouble is that value pluralism is disputable. Its central claim is that some values are incommensurable. This means that there is at least one pair of values where it is neither the case that one is better than the other nor that they are equally good. The view also asserts that some values intrinsically conflict with others. Thus, value pluralism holds that some value conflicts are both inevitable and rationally irresolvable. In such cases, one simply must choose.

I will not canvass the literature examining this position. My point is not that pluralism is incorrect, but that it is one among many conceptions of value in currency. This deserves emphasis because Cherniss’s discussion suggests that the only alternative to pluralism is a monomaniacal ethic of inflexible homogeneity that claims an “infallible method” for achieving harmony (194, 201). This is a caricature of nonpluralist views. Notably, Cherniss engages no critics of value pluralism.

This liability runs deep. *Liberalism in Dark Times* aims to make the case for tempered liberalism (198), and tempered liberalism invokes an ethos rooted in pluralism. Accordingly, if pluralism is false or implausible, tempered liberalism is jeopardized. What is needed, but not offered, is an argument for pluralism. Although exemplification can portray advantages of the pluralist frame of mind, it cannot show that pluralism is correct.

This difficulty is compounded by Cherniss’s unclarity about the supposed relation between pluralism and tempered liberalism. Berlin famously endeavored to *derive* liberal commitments from value pluralism. Such arguments are doomed, because pluralism is a descriptive theory of the structure of value while liberalism is a normative view of what is valuable. Cherniss denies that the relation is “logical or justificatory,” opting instead for a “phenomenological-psychological and ethical-educative” connection (190). But this maneuver rings hollow, as his subsequent discussion affirms relations that are logical and justificatory (even if not strictly deductive): pluralism “requires,” “fosters,” “encourages,” and “conduces to” a variety of liberal dispositions (190–91); it is “linked to,” “tied to,” and “allied to” various features of the liberal outlook (194). If, despite appearances, these claims are posed as psychological generalizations, no evidence is given for their truth. Cherniss’s account hence amounts to the stunningly unremarkable claim that pluralists who have internalized a palate of liberal values tend to

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be liberals. The same holds of monists for whom the *summum bonum* is a core liberal value.

By the book's end, tempered liberalism is revealed to be a species of perfectionist liberalism, complete with prescriptions for how society could educate citizens so that they internalize pluralism (201). Sensing trouble, Cherniss denies that his view is perfectionist, claiming that it is "not a comprehensive ideal, but a specifically *political* ethos" (208). Yet this is belied by his earlier depiction of pluralism. There, pluralism is "a certain relationship to the moral life" (190) and is "connected to existential and epistemological/methodological pluralism," which denies that there could be "one infallible method of intellectual framework" to make sense of human experience; Cherniss also claims that pluralism rejects the idea that "life can be rendered meaningful by reference to some single ultimate good" (201).

Oddly, *Liberalism in Dark Times* ends where the later Rawls begins. The lingering question is whether there is a viable conception of liberalism that can accommodate the fact that liberal citizens will disagree persistently over fundamentals concerning the structure and content of liberal values. Ultimately, tempered liberalism stands as nothing more than another liberal doctrine that one hopes can join an overlapping consensus on specific institutional arrangements. That said, Cherniss is correct to think that the political project of liberalism would be on firmer ground amid the social turmoil we are currently experiencing if all liberals were committed to the same way of understanding how core liberal values fit together. But that is no response to the liberal predicament. Rather, it is simply another formulation of it.

—Robert B. Talisse

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S. D. Chrostowska: *Utopia in the Age of Survival: Between Myth and Politics*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021. Pp. 215.)

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S. D. Chrostowska's thought-provoking new book invites several interpretations. The one I privilege in this review focuses on the book's potential to change our reading habits as political theorists. There will be other ways in which readers may benefit from these densely argued reflections on the promise of utopianism today.