Saving liberalism from itself

Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023). 240pp., £25.00 hb., 978 0 30026 621 4

In a typically provocative tone, Samuel Moyn opens his latest book *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Time* with the striking claim: 'Cold War liberalism was a catastrophe – for liberalism'. Moyn's book contributes to a veritable cottage-industry of books on the dire fortunes of contemporary liberalism but his distinctive argument is that liberalism's wounds were largely self-inflicted. In a series of tightly-argued chapters, Moyn argues that, in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust, liberals abandoned an optimistic belief in human perfectibility and progress in favour of an anxious and minimalist attempt to secure freedom in a dangerous world. Moyn's indictment is scathing: in their desire to protect individual liberty from tyranny, he argues that Cold War liberals rejected utopianism and demands for greater economic equality, and in their fear of mass politics they turned against democracy itself. The Cold War is long over, at least in its first iteration, but Moyn suggests that contemporary liberals have failed to notice. Liberalism, as he frames it, has become a minimalist and fearful creed that struggles to articulate any reason for its existence – except that the alternatives are worse.

The book is devoted to six twentieth-century intellectuals: political theorist Judith Shklar, political philosopher Isaiah Berlin, philosopher of science Karl Popper, historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, political theorist Hannah Arendt and literary critic Lionel Trilling. The rationale for this cast of characters is not articulated in the book and it includes several figures who are not generally understood (primarily) as Cold War liberals: Popper, for instance, came of age in the Austrian milieu of neoliberal economists Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, and was a member of the neoliberal Mont Pelerin Society, raising the question of the criteria by which he is defined as a Cold War liberal rather than a neoliberal. Arendt always denied being a liberal, and even Moyn seems unsure whether to characterise her as one, preferring to describe her as a 'fellow traveller'. And Himmelfarb, who was married to Irving Kristol and was the mother of Bill Kristol, is often understood as a central figure in the rise of neoconservatism.

If Moyn excoriates Cold War liberalism, it is in part because his picture of the liberalism it eclipsed is so rosy: 'Emancipatory and futuristic before the Cold War, committed most of all to free and equal self-creation, accepting of democracy and welfare (though never enough to date)', he writes, 'liberalism can be something other than the Cold War liberalism we have known.' This claim blends past and future to affirm that, if liberalism *has been* something else, it can dispense with its anxious minimalism once again. Liberalism's past, however, largely remains in the background and must therefore be pieced together from scattered remarks. These do not always support the contention that Cold War liberalism marked a rupture with an emancipatory liberalism that it succeeded. 'Before the Cold War', Moyn notes, 'liberalism largely served as an apologia for laissez-faire economic policies and it was entangled in imperialist expansion and racist hierarchy around the world'. Throughout the book Moyn stresses the progressivist, emancipatory and futuristic aspects of nineteenth-century liberalism rather than the radically laissez-faire ideology of a figure like Herbert Spencer or the racial hierarchies that animate the progressivism of numerous nineteenth-century liberals (on which, more below.) And yet the Cold War reinventors of liberalism found no shortage of material in the liberal tradition with which to fashion a pessimistic and deeply anti-democratic creed.

Moyn distinguishes Cold War liberalism not only from an earlier nineteenth-century liberalism but also from another re-orientation of liberalism that became hegemonic in the late twentieth-century: neoliberalism. Cold War liberalism and neoliberalism were distinct, he argues, and 'both sides understood the differences that kept them apart'. Yet those differences are not always clear. In the book's introduction, Moyn depicts both neoliberalism and neoconservatism as 'successor movements' to Cold War liberalism, which was condemned to 'give birth to monsters'. Yet immediately afterwards,

he notes the striking proximity of the Cold War liberals to 'the neoliberalism of Friedrich Hayek and others, invented across the same decades'. Moyn's critique draws on the much earlier critique of 'conservative liberalism' penned by a young Judith Shklar before her own transition to Cold War liberalism. Yet, while Moyn describes Shklar's first book *After Utopia* – originally published in 1957 and re-issued in 2020 with a foreword by him – as 'a composite survey of Cold War liberalism', Shklar attributed liberalism's conservative turn to a very different cast of characters. It was in the German Ordoliberalism of Walter Eucken, Alexandre Rüstow and Wilhelm Röpke, the Austrian School of Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, and in the French philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel and the British-Hungarian polymath Michael Polanyi that Shklar identified liberalism's conservative turn. Not only did these authors 'share a real community of opinion', as she noted. They were also almost all members of the neoliberal Mont Pelerin Society, founded by Hayek in 1947 to revive liberalism in the face of widespread support for socialism, social democracy and economic planning and they all became central figures in the rise of neoliberalism.

Shklar was influenced by her Harvard advisor Carl Friedrich who published a prescient critique of 'The Political Thought of Neo-Liberalism' in the *American Political Science Review* in 1955. In contrast to those who (still) conceive neoliberalism as an anti-statist revival of laissez-faire, Friedrich recognised that neo-liberalism stressed the need for a strong state to protect the market from the interference of sectional interests, notably trade unions. The motto of neo-liberalism, as Friedrich saw it, came from the nineteenth-century liberal Benjamin Constant: 'The government beyond its proper sphere ought not to have any power; within its sphere, it cannot have enough of it.' Although these figures were, to various extents, invested in the Cold War, their animus was aimed much more centrally at what they saw as the deterioration of 'Western civilisation' caused by the rise of socialism and social democracy and the rationalist belief in economic planning. Although Moyn does not devote extensive space to economic questions, he faults the Cold War liberals for failing to defend the welfare state, and so leaving it 'unguarded' in the face of neoliberal attacks. And his critique of Cold War liberalism appears to be animated by his strong critique, developed in his 2018 book *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World,* of the liberal abandonment of a concern for economic equality.

Yet nothing is less certain than the belief that a return to the liberalism of the nineteenth century is the best way to challenge the neoliberal destruction of the welfare state or to revive a robust conception of economic equality. Moyn's recognition that earlier liberalism was also an apologetics for laissez-faire and the racial hierarchies of European colonialism appears to undercut his argument that Cold War liberalism marked a rupture with the emancipatory liberalism that preceded it. On his account, earlier liberals – such as John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, Benjamin Constant and T.H. Greene – were inspired by the Enlightenment and saw creative agency and free human self-realisation as the highest good and history as a forum in which to pursue it. In contrast, the Cold War liberals turned away from the Enlightenment and from optimistic belief in progress and perfectibility, and purged liberalism of the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx. In doing so, they cut off liberalism from ideas of collective self-determination, the ethical state, progress and human perfectibility. In positing a clean break between Cold War liberalism and its precursors, Moyn takes his distance from Shklar, who depicted nineteenth-century liberalism as balanced precariously between anti-Jacobinism and fear of conservatism. Liberalism's conservative turn, she insisted in 1957, 'has not been the work of one day.' In contrast Moyn – who has devoted much of his career to identifying breaks and ruptures in history, notably that between the modern rights of man and contemporary human rights – contends that Shklar's account of continuity understates the extent to which the Cold War utterly transformed liberalism, rendering it unrecognisable.

When Moyn concretises this earlier emancipatory liberalism, it is in a surprising place: Palestine. While Cold War liberals were usually suspicious of collective and national projects, he argues that they made an exception for Zionism. 'In an age when it is common to condemn Zionism', he contends, 'perhaps the deepest problem with Cold War liberalism is that it wasn't Zionist enough'. Moyn's account of Zionism is radically romanticised. It was in their Zionism, he argues, that 'Cold War liberals did challenge Eurocentrism' by supporting a 'statist liberation movement' aimed at 'postcolonial emancipation'. Casting Zionism as the repository of the

older emancipatory liberalism he seeks to redeem, he argues that it was only in the Cold War liberals' accounts of Zionism that 'earlier forms of liberalism, with their activism and statism, were allowed to survive'. To the extent Moyn criticises the Cold War liberals, it is not for their Zionism but for their refusal to extend the same support to the struggles against European colonialism that raged across Africa and Asia throughout the Cold War. In Arendt's *On Violence,* for instance, he identifies what he calls 'flagrant tensions between her enthusiasm for "Jewish self-emancipation" and her skepticism of decolonization'. And he identifies what he sees as a deep inconsistency between Berlin's 'Zionism and his far less indulgent attitude towards other new states after WWII'. What is striking here is Moyn's own assumption that consistency would require support for both Zionism and struggles against European colonialism, and his implicit framing of Israel as a post-colonial state.

Moyn does not grapple with those critics who have understood Zionism as a colonial project built on the racial hierarchies that sustained European colonialism, aligned with the ends of the British and then the US empires, and unified by what the late Palestinian scholar Edward Said called the negation of Palestinians. In his seminal 1979 essay 'Zionism from the Perspective of its victims', Said suggested that, for Palestinians, Zionism is simply the most successful of the European attempts, stretching back to the Middle Ages, to colonise Palestine. By examining it 'as it was inscribed in the lives of the native Palestinians', Said characterised Zionism as a movement committed to the eradication of Palestinian reality in the name of a "'higher" cause'. In what Moyn depicts as Zionism's progressivist, emancipatory, violent, self-assertion, Said saw a continuation of the European colonial assumption that native peoples and cultures are inferior and can therefore be eradicated to make way for a higher or more civilised form of life. Far from rejecting Eurocentrism, Zionism, from this perspective, is 'an essentially Western ideology' that framed itself as 'bringing civilization to a barbaric and/or empty locale'

(Herzl's 'outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism') and then as 'a movement bringing Western democracy to the East'. As Said notes, this latter framing appealed to American liberals like Reinhold Niebuhr, Edmund Wilson and Eleanor Roosevelt. From this perspective, Cold War liberals' support for Zionism appears quite consistent with their broader commitment to 'Western civilisation' and US empire.

Moyn does, at one point, characterise Israel as 'a kind of postcolonial state (however much it was simultaneously a settler colony)'. This position is in line with Derek Penslar's argument that 'a nation can engage in both settler-colonial and anticolonial practices'. But Penslar's analogy between Zionist settlers in mandate Palestine and Afrikaners in South Africa, neither of whom 'identified as scions of the colonizing power', is a long way from Moyn's analogy between Zionism and the successful struggles by non-European peoples against European colonialism in the second half of the twentieth century. And neither adequately capture the fact that the British Empire, as Areej Sabbagh-Khoury argues in *Colonizing Palestine: The Zionist Left and the Making of the Palestinian Nakba*, 'enabled and protected Jewish immigration, Zionist land acquisition and settlement' in Palestine. As Rashid Khalidi stresses in *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine*, it was only once the post-World War II decolonisation made colonialism suspect, that Zionists stopped referring to their project as one of colonising Palestine and rebranded Zionism as 'an anticolonial movement.'

In relegating settler colonialism to brackets, Moyn is consistent with much scholarship on liberalism, which, even as it has begun to probe liberalism's intimate relationship to colonialism, has tended to focus on Britain's overseas extraction colonies, with a particular focus on India. More recent scholarship has begun to examine the foundational role of settler colonialism in liberal thought and highlighted the extent to which liberals viewed settler colonies as what Duncan Bell has called 'spaces of political freedom' that were preferable to the despotic, alien rule practiced in India. Moyn is aware that early liberalism was, in his words, 'entangled from the start with global domination' and animated by civilisational and racial hierarchies. And indeed, the earlier liberals to whom he refers for inspiration – figures like Mill or Tocqueville – were often deeply involved in the European colonial project and enthusiastic advocates of settler-colonialism. Tocqueville called for a war of colonisation in Algeria that would 'ravage the country'. And Mill defended the colonisation of what is now Australia by arguing that, as a whole society would be transplanted there from Britain, 'this colony will be a civilized country from the very commencement'. Whether this entanglement was contingent or constitutive of their liberalism is a question Moyn does not pose but answering it has significant implications for whether liberalism can, or should, be re-invented in the present.

Moyn's Cold War liberal protagonists inherited from their liberal precursors a sanitised account of settler colonialism, which directly influenced their understanding of Israel's founding. Berlin, for instance, declared in a 1990 letter that he was willing to defend to the death the claim that Zionism was not in any way racist. The 'hatred of Arabs' that does exist in Israel, he wrote to Kyril Fitzlyon, 'has nothing to do with the Nazis, much more with the Spaniards versus Indians.' Arendt was far more critical of Zionism and characterised the demand for a Jewish nation-state as an extension of German nationalism. But she too romanticised settler colonialism throughout her work, most notably in *On Revolution*, where she claimed the 'colonization of North America and the republican government of the United States constitute perhaps the greatest, certainly the boldest, enterprises of European mankind.'

Rather than criticising this aspect of their thought, Moyn criticises the Cold War liberals for something quite different: while early liberals were committed to civilisational hierarchies and 'entangled' with European colonialism, he argues that 'Cold War liberalism did something much worse. Not only did they take sides in a global conflict that wrought enormous damage to the people of the former colonies, having 'been global imperialists', he writes, 'many liberals lost global interest'. Moyn never quite explains why this abandonment of the belief in 'global liberty' and their role in bringing it about was *worse* than the active role of liberals like Mill or Tocqueville in European colonialism, or indeed than the distinctly American conception of freedom that Aziz Rana has termed 'settler empire' in which the prerogatives of settler freedom, and the subordination that accompanied it, are expanded to the world. As applied to our own time, this indictment is perplexing. 'Liberals have not

yet figured out how to spread freedom without empire', he writes. 'The forlorn Cold War liberals counselled them not to try.' But not only did the Cold War liberals see themselves as engaged in a great global struggle of freedom against totalitarianism, their inheritors took up this pose to defend what Moyn, in his 2021 book *Humane*, called the United States' 'forever wars'.

Those Moyn depicts as the contemporary heirs of Cold War liberalism – Anne Applebaum, Timothy Garton, Paul Berman, Michael Ignatieff, Tony Judt, Leon Wieseltier – were almost all fervent defenders of the Iraq War, which they depicted as a crusade for freedom. While Garton expressed some 'tortured liberal ambivalence' in the lead-up to the invasion, Judt was alone amongst this group in criticising both the wars and 'Bush's useful idiots' for defending them. After decades of endless US wars, many around the world would be forgiven for thinking that if US liberals have still not 'worked out how to spread freedom without empire' it would be far better if they abandoned their self-appointed role of bringing freedom to the world. If there is anything to retrieve from Cold War liberalism it is the chastened recognition of the early Cold War liberals that US militarism abroad risked catastrophe. As a new Cold War looms, the inheritors of Cold War liberalism have combined the worst of liberalism's past: the anti-democratic foreclosure of alternatives is accompanied by a war-mongering commitment to spread their values to the world. *Liberalism against itself* offers a compelling critique of Cold War liberalism; but freeing ourselves from its hold will require a deeper reckoning with liberalism's imbrication with colonial capitalism than the book itself provides.

Jessica Whyte is Scientia Fellow (Philosophy and Law) and Associate Professor of Philosophy in the School of Humanities Languages / Faculty of Arts Social Sciences at UNSW Sydney

Jessica Whyte

Cyberstructure

Bernard Geoghegan *Code: From Information Theory to French Theory* (New Haven, CT: Duke University Press, 2023). 272pp., £25.00 hb., 978 1 47801 9 008

In 1969 George Boulanger, president of the International Association of Cybernetics, asked:

> But after all what is cybernetics? Or rather what is it not, for paradoxically the more people talk about cybernetics the less they seem to agree on a definition.

For the general public he proposed that cybernetics 'conjures up visions of some fantastic world of the future peopled by robots and electronic brains!', but added various of his own interpretations: theories of mathematical control, automation and communication, a study of analogies between humans and machines, and a philosophy of life. Cybernetics may be all of those things. At its height it was something more like a movement than a method or a branch of science. It involved a collection of thinkers from various branches of the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities, who worked together on shared concepts and theories – primarily control, information and communication – which were discussed and disputed at a series of conferences. Much of the work was funded by private bodies, and generated both serious and passing interest within certain areas of the academy (including amongst prominent philosophers in Germany and France), and a buzz in the press. It began to decline in the 1970s, however, and is of greatly reduced significance today. (James Baldwin's identification of a 'cybernetics craze' may have been more accurate than Heidegger's prophecy that 'the sciences now establishing themselves will soon be determined and guided by the new fundamental science which is called cybernetics'.)

The diversity of projects under the umbrella of cybernetics, alongside a lack of a unifying theory or method, almost necessitates a historical approach, which has been taken by various books to date. Bernard Geoghegan's *Code: From Information Theory to French Theory* follows this tendency but makes its own contribution in attending to the politics of cybernetics, particularly as it related