Every student of twentieth-century history should recognize the dangers of what Joshua Cherniss calls *ruthlessness*: a belief that one serves some greater cause, and pursues some essential principle or goal, for which all else may be sacrificed. Even when motivated by “sincere benevolence and idealism,” a ruthless actor believes that others can be treated as expendable in pursuit of their aims, allowing the self-righteous to justify iniquity, oppression, and outright cruelty with an “absence of reservation, remorse, or regret” (16). During the “dark times” of the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, proposes Cherniss, ruthlessness became a central concern for liberal intellectuals in the West.¹ For how were liberals to oppose such ruthlessness without being ruthless themselves? How “can one be effective in urgently pursuing a just cause” against illiberal actors during *any* political crisis “without hardening one’s heart, stopping one’s ears, getting one’s hands dirty?” (2). This is what philosopher Isaiah Berlin first called the “liberal predicament” (5), and it is the essential problem for political thought pursued by *Liberalism in Dark Times.*²

Cherniss responds to this problem by tracing a tradition of “tempered liberalism” through the twentieth century, a tradition which he offers at once as an “historical position” and as a “normative position” (198). His book, in other words, offers an historical study of how thinkers such as Berlin, Albert Camus, Raymond Aron, and Reinhold Niebuhr expressed and grappled with the “liberal predicament” in various ways, as well as a principled defense of their efforts to sustain a liberal ethos against the temptation to ruthlessness—a temptation, Cherniss rightly reminds us, which “remains our problem” today (219).

Tempered liberals, explains Cherniss, move “between stances of prudence and moral integrity, dispassionate advice and austere criticism,” (135) exemplifying through their attitude and mode of thinking—rather than through any fixed principles—a way of engaging in political life that remains rooted in “modesty, fortitude, forbearance, intellectual flexibility, ethical resolution, and decency” (13). This emphasis on *political ethics,* on the vital political importance of what these thinkers variously described as “character, temperament and sensibility,” (6) represents one of the signal interventions of *Liberalism in Dark Times.* Whereas our dominant academic methods for discussing “liberalism” tend to emphasize institutional arrangements or abstract procedural justifications, Cherniss insists that “the true treasure of liberalism” lies “not merely in its


institutions or policies… but in core liberal values—and the ethos needed to sustain them in action” (205). This pivotal claim, as he notes, has been made before: by the mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell, the literary critic Lionel Trilling, and most recently critical theorist Amanda Anderson, whose book *Bleak Liberalism* represents perhaps the closest intellectual companion to *Liberalism in Dark Times.* Yet Cherniss extracts continuities across his cohort of thinkers with singular rigor and richness; he continually teases out meaningful distinctions between the positions these figures held, the subtle but significant degrees of emphasis on realism or idealism that distinguish their respective characters and conclusions; and he provides an especially enlightening view of the way that each thinker’s personal experiences shaped their liberal temper, such as Camus shifting from his support of *épuration légale*—an official purging French collaborationists after World War II—to his retreat from this view, and eventual admission that “absolute claims to justice” must be abandoned (76).

As an historical study, peering into the lives and minds of major midcentury thinkers, this book seems to me exemplary. Every text Cherniss engages with yields suggestive nuances through his careful analysis; reading sociologist Max Weber’s “Politics as a Vocation,” for example, he moves beyond the traditional view of Weber defending responsibility (consequentialism) against conviction (deontology), and shows the lingering purchase of this opposing ethos for Weber, while elucidating a key distinction between ethos as character and ethics as moral theory (45). One might likewise repeat about Cherniss the praise phenomenologist Karl Löwith once gave Weber: “The acuteness of the questions he posed corresponded with his refusal to offer any cheap solutions.” Cherniss consistently admits when his cohort of thinkers equivocated, or changed course, as well as the potential problems or charges to which their tempered liberal ethos left them vulnerable.

With the rest of this review, I want to focus on these issues, upon which the status of “tempered liberalism” as a normative position—rather than an historical one—must rest. To his credit, Cherniss anticipates many of these problems; I should add, as well, that I am deeply sympathetic with his overall project, and his insistence that liberalism must be seen not just as institutions or abstract concepts, but as a realm of ethical struggle, which is rooted in lived experience. Yet precisely because I have been intellectually drawn to the ethos of these tempered liberals, I have also encountered the practical concerns that face it as a normative position. Hoping to bolster rather than challenge Cherniss’s insightful study, I want to consider four such concerns, moving in sequence from the issue I believe *Liberalism in Dark Times* acknowledges most thoroughly and ending with the one it addresses least. I call these four issues the problem of rhetoric, the problem of pluralism, the problem of tragedy, and the problem of inclusion.

Several times in his book, Cherniss admits that tempered liberalism faces a simple but profound problem of rhetorical appeal. Tempered liberals caution against impulses such as “intolerance, self-righteousness,” and the “craving for simplicity and certainty,” but they offer no fixed ideals or standards that would provide people a comparable sense of purpose, meaning, or control (13). At one point, Cherniss terms this the “motivational gap” (30). Preaching a “politics of moderation, circumspection, and decency,” he concedes, is “likely to be insufficiently inspiring, and too emotionally demanding, to win wide adherence or motivate arduous action” (196). Even if today’s liberals “toughen up” (214), as he proposes in his conclusion, it is unclear how they can “hope to win either on the battlefield or at the ballot box” (214). And, obvious though it may be to say, winning matters. Despite their eloquent writing, it was not Niebuhr and Aron who ended World War II, but US President Truman’s ruthless bombs. This problem of rhetorical appeal risks leaving

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tempered liberalism little more than a futile nobility, a temperament “appropriate for (liberal) intellectuals and social critics,” as Berlin once remarked about Russian writers Ivan Turgenev and Alexander Herzen, “but not well-suited to the role of politician” (182). Living in an American state wracked by claims of voter fraud, facing troubling prospects in our upcoming elections, I worry that liberals who “lack all conviction” facing “opponents…full of passionate intensity” must solve this rhetorical problem to have any influence—to win—even if it means that they must compromise the nobler ethical posture modeled by these twentieth-century forbears (214).

This struggle for popular appeal presupposes a condition of value pluralism, which has long been a contentious subject in liberal political theory. Cherniss traces, with characteristic rigor, this “common thread connecting” his cohort of thinkers (189). But what he calls “the problem of pluralism” seems to me to miss the heart of this debate (208). He uses this phrase to describe an apparent self-contradiction in his liberals adopting one temper that advocates for a plurality of tempers or values; he neatly dismantles this false problem, explaining that tempered liberalism does not represent a “comprehensive ideal” that would exclude others (208). The real problem of pluralism, however, does not concern its internal consistency but rather what to do with anti-pluralists. In its extreme form, this problem would be: what should a liberal state do with its totalitarian actors? But in its broader, more mundane form, the problem is simply that a pluralist liberalism accepts the validity of political positions whose cultural or religious basis would reject pluralism, leading to value disputes that pluralist liberalism cannot solve, such as the abortion debate, or the questions of censorship and apostasy raised by the case of novelist Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses. Some political theorists have seen this “neutrality” with regard to fundamental values as one of liberalism’s unique virtues, but others have seen it as self-defeating. Political theorist Bert van den Brink called it The Tragedy of Liberalism, with liberal pluralism fated to welcome illiberal positions that would undermine the very pluralism that makes their expression possible.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, to find the terms “tragedy” and “tragic” appearing in nearly every chapter of Liberalism in Dark Times, from Camus’s description of the “Algerian conflict” as “truly tragic” (78), to Aron’s “tragic philosophy of history” (107). Besides these local engagements, moreover, a tragic sensibility arguably shapes the method of this book, and not simply in the sense of futility that sometimes creeps in when Cherniss discusses challenges to the liberal ethos. This tragic sensibility appears more essentially in the book’s prose: everywhere the sentences hang on a balance between binaries, an avoidance of extremes; tempered liberalism does not exist so much in fixed nouns as in fluid adjectives, and no single word in the book carries so much conceptual weight, or conceals so much difficulty, as “between.” Tempered liberals must believe in, and dwell in, this ambiguous zone, even as they also seem to accept that some conflicts are tragic in nature—tragedy precisely denying any space between. Cherniss briefly addresses the notion (Hegel’s, by way of philosopher Alexander Kojève) that tragedy represents a moral conflict in which both sides are legitimate yet irreconcilable. But he does not address the serious problem that arises from turning this dramatic framework into an ethical posture: it can serve to erase personal agency and culpability, reframing unnecessary suffering and resolvable conflicts as tragically inescapable, lending to bare cruelty the glimmer of fate. Tempered liberals of course aim to avoid such a ruthless perspective, yet it remains a real problem that the same tragic framework that these liberals would use to advocate viewing conflicts from competing perspectives has been historically used to direct public attention away from choices such as using atomic

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weapons, or destroying indigenous populations.9 Niebuhr may not have been personally complacent, but I would be far from the first to suggest that his simplistic, Manichean rhetoric of politics as tragic struggle (redeemed only, in his view, by Christ’s sacrifice) provided influential figures in American political circles with a justification for complacency on domestic issues and containment as a foreign policy.10 Cherniss insists that tempered liberalism should not be identified “with a conservative turn in postwar liberalism which stymied reform” and surely this is right, but could this ethos have nonetheless, and unintentionally, served to legitimate Cold War realpolitik? Does tempered liberalism represent an “antidote to ruthlessness” (218) or just a personal evasion of it, leaving others to continue their power politics and calling it tragic fate?

This brings me to my final problem: inclusion. I have already suggested that tempered liberalism may be a posture suited to intellectuals, but not politicians, or most voters, given the education required to foster an informed grasp of political conflicts from multiple sides, as well as the emotional exhaustion that must come from trying to maintain this precarious stance. Even among intellectuals, moreover, this ethos seems a rare commodity. Cherniss often employs “tempered liberals” as a plural, and yet besides our four midcentury thinkers, the book mentions only one venerable predecessor in Weber, and gives one brief nod to Lionel Trilling.11 It may seem obvious why Trilling does not receive extended treatment—he was no political philosopher—but grappling with a boundary case like his would have been useful, since Trilling championed an ambivalent liberal ethos, yet famously recoiled from many of the central political concerns of his day—and even from fiction by women or minority writers that these concerns might have made exigent. One could easily imagine now-familiar critiques of the liberal tradition’s blindness to questions of race, gender, geography, and colonial struggle reiterated again about the tempered liberalism surveyed in Cherniss’s book. Many critics have described Trilling’s liberal “ethos” as ultimately something more like an aesthetic posture than a political ethic, a performative written style suited for appreciation of modern art’s ambiguities but ill-equipped for protecting or promoting any progressive values or policies.12 Other boundary cases, whether US contemporaries like historian Arthur Schlesinger, sociologist Daniel Bell, and philosopher Sidney Hook, or later figures such as Richard Rorty, might have likewise been useful to sharpen the contours of tempered liberalism by testing its edges, demonstrating how it can lapse into tragic conservatism or postmodern complacency.13 With just four examples and one boundary case in Weber, it seems fair to ask whether tempered liberalism is really a tradition at all: is it a durable way of engaging with politics across time, or was it an intrinsically unsustainable posture of ambiguity temporarily licensed by the twentieth century’s political extremism? Answering this question seems vital, not only given the problem of rhetorical appeal I have described, but also for understanding what a potential return of tempered liberalism would mean today.

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Once again, I remain sincerely compelled by the liberal ethos Cherniss has brought to life in this stirring book, am invested in the ideas of all the tempered liberals he has surveyed, and was impressed by his rigorous scholarship. By dwelling on these four problems, I do not mean to identify faults in this impressive contribution to liberal political theory, but rather to emphasize the urgency of its concerns. Given the global resurgence of “an increasingly authoritarian, overtly nativist and racist right,” it is essential to demonstrates that the liberal tradition possesses resources to combat its illiberal opponents (219). *Liberalism in Dark Times* provides an all-important reminder that these resources extend beyond abstract concepts, legislative priorities, and legal frameworks, and crucially include the modes of conduct with which we approach political life, including a “middle space of decency” sorely in demand again today (31).

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