The Review of Politics 87 (2025), 271–274.
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doi:10.1017/S0034670524000883

Response to my Gentle Critics

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Bernard Yack's quotation from Nietzsche, his complaint about the herd whose idea of paradise is no more elite wolves to fear, is telling. Nietzsche was no liberal, but even more to the point he misunderstood the way in which a liberalism like that of John Stuart Mill was intended to promote the kind of struggle Nietzsche favored, even if Mill included among the potential combatants women and other groups Nietzsche despised, such as Germans. Certainly, Nietzsche evinced no interest in improving the lot of the poor, which during the *fin de siècle* was the preoccupation of most liberals. Yack, however, does not think the fear of poverty should have been a focus of the book, because the fear of poverty is "very hard" to include "as one of the species of liberal fear" (260). This is "because it focuses less on freedom as a certain kind of subordination than escaping a more generalized form of insecurity" (260). Yack accurately points out that the fear of poverty is different from the other organizing fears of liberalism, something I acknowledge in the book. It is, nonetheless, central to what most liberals talk about in the *fin de siècle*, 1873–1914, and they, I argue, see the struggle against poverty as both integral to their liberalism and central to it. This encourages *fin de siècle* liberals to lay the foundations of the welfare state, and helps explain why later a Friedrich Hayek or a Milton Friedman are comfortable with the idea of a social safety net. This modern liberalism, preoccupied with the poverty question, was based on the new realization that (a) with the help of the state you really can do something about poverty in a world much wealthier than it had ever been, and (b) a new focus, inspired partly by the rise of labor movements, on how poverty subjects poor people to coercion and abuse in ways only partly addressed by liberal constitutionalism, etc., during first-wave liberalism. It is true, as Yack notes, that it is only with John Rawls that you get a liberalism focused on the question of economic equality. However, as the book argues, there is a big difference between the *fin de siècle* fear of poverty and the demand for/presumption of material equality that Rawls made central to his variety of third-wave, anti-totalitarian liberalism in the late twentieth century. In the end, what Yack sees as my "genus problem" (260) is in my view really a historical question, about which I stand my ground. Perhaps it is also a matter of second-wave, *fin de siècle* liberals thinking the economic pillar of liberalism is not different in genus from the

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others. Yack's view that it should be separate may be a product of the late twentieth century, third-wave liberal view.

Richard Boyd thinks I have gone too far with fear. He prefers "something softer like concerns, challenges, or dilemmas" (263), or perhaps a return to a more traditional description of liberalism in terms of rights, since "isn't the liberal response to any given 'fear' more often expressed in terms of a right?" (263). I respond that liberals invent rights, or if one prefers find or discover them, as tools to limit fears. In using those rights as tools it is inevitable and natural that liberals engage in a lot of rights talk, which may lead people, including some liberals, to obsess about the "right" in itself and leave the purpose of the right, or its effects, in the background. As Boyd notes, we can see in FDR's speech about the four freedoms—each, I would add, clearly a response to a significant fear of the time—a transition from negative to positive freedoms which demands "active intervention by the state" (263). This, in the terms used in the book, represents a typical modern liberal response to the problems of the early twentieth century, which beginning with state action to curb poverty gradually expanded, in what classical liberals saw as falling down a slippery slope, into other areas.

Boyd also calls me to task, echoing Nietzsche's criticism of liberalism cited by Yack, for turning the liberal struggle against fear into a "liberal aspiration to expunge all fears in the name of safety … and what Tocqueville called 'well-being'" (263). Part of my response may be found above, but the larger part would be that Boyd has overlooked the extent to which I emphasize that perfectionism and not just utilitarianism have frequently been central to liberalism. For some liberals, a certain degree of safety for all, whether constitutional protections or a minimum wage, is desirable because it is necessary in order for human beings to attain the "democratic greatness" which Tocqueville sought to encourage, *pace* Nietzsche. Boyd wishes more had been said about these "perfectionist impulses," and how the hope they rely on coexists with liberal fear. I agree that liberalism is about striking a balance between something like Michael Oakeshott's politics of faith and politics of skepticism. The appropriate balance will vary by time and place. As I suggest, among the typical liberal contradictions is the question of liberalism as a party of movement or a party of resistance. Indeed, hasn't the line between liberal and illiberal often been about striking a prudent balance between caution and paranoia? Or in the metaphor beloved of nineteenth-century liberals, between Scylla and Charybdis? Dangers to the right, dangers to the left, liberals are stuck in the middle (thank you, Stealers Wheel).

Joshua Cherniss raises a fundamental question about my definition of liberalism as the search for a society in which no one need be afraid. He doubts whether this really distinguishes liberals from others because he thinks that the obvious response, that only the illiberal wish to make some people, whether Blacks, capitalists, heretics, etc., afraid, has been refuted by *Freedom from Fear.* The book shows that in some places and times liberals have

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been perfectly comfortable "disregarding or defend[ing] sources of fear for women, workers, non-Whites, Catholics, and/or Jews" (267). The illiberal might even claim, Cherniss notes, that they too wish to spare all from fear—once the heretics have been exterminated once and for all. Instead, Cherniss characterizes liberalism as a project to "constrain all agents through the erection of barriers to power, and the hope that people will master the anxiety, ambition, and impatience that drive them to override such limits" (267).

The second part of Cherniss's statement, the hope that people will not attempt to override constraints, would have struck most liberals as a little too optimistic, to say the least. James Madison did not think any plausible level of human virtue/self-restraint would be enough to contain the behavior of factions. On the other hand, just about all liberals would have agreed about the necessity of constraining all agents and erecting barriers to all powers. Restricting arbitrary authority has been central to limiting people's fears from the beginning of liberalism. I also differ from Cherniss's use of the history presented in the book. Liberalism did not spring fully formed from the American and French Revolutions, and its development has not followed any straight rational line (even Hegel did not think historical Reason moved in a straight line). The historical record shows liberals, not without difficulty, struggling over time to broaden the fears they took into account and the groups whose fears deserved recognition. That this process was and is open-ended does not lessen its importance. There is no parallel development at work among the illiberal. For liberals the "one" in "no one need be afraid" is both in fact and in theory expandable, not necessarily indefinitely (liberals have never fully solved the problem of how to deal with the illiberal), but widely. The same cannot be said of the illiberal. Liberals could and eventually did extend their conception of those who need not fear to homosexuals. This is much harder, if not impossible, for fundamentalist Protestants.

Cherniss also objects to my claim that the moral pillar of liberalism was not much relied on by post-WWII liberals, and that this contributed greatly to liberalism's weakness as the twentieth century drew to a close and populism began its rise. Cherniss thinks the claim lacks sufficient evidence of the causal connection between the decline of liberals' use of moral and religious language and liberalism's current crises. More particularly, as a noted commentator on Isaiah Berlin, Cherniss objects to my characterization of Berlin as a thinker who did not endorse any positive moral doctrines, quoting Berlin to the effect that people live by multiple positive goals, albeit sometimes incompatible ones. Berlin and Raymond Aron are, according to Cherniss, too much identified with the "end of ideology" school of liberalism by *Freedom from Fear.* To take the particular objections first, it is true that Berlin has often been overly identified with the idea of "negative liberty," as my book notes (353). His later essays make claims about universal, albeit conflicting, moral values. In given situations, people would have to choose among them. But Berlin steadfastly refused to provide any guidelines, no matter how provisional or circumstantial, about how people should make such choices. This may have

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been philosophically astute but it has proved to be, I contend, politically and psychologically damaging to liberalism. As for Aron, Cherniss acknowledges his allegiance to the "end of ideology" framework but sees it as temporary and circumstantial. He cites Aron's later rejection of both the ideological fanatic and the self-satisfied materialist. But what is missing is how Aron would have filled in the space in the middle. Aron left it blank and Cherniss effectively admits as much: "Post-war liberals articulated a liberalism of not only fear or tolerance but resistance" (267). Resistance is not a sufficient substitute for the missing perfectionist element.

To return to Cherniss's broad objection about a lack of proof for my contention that liberalism without perfectionism produces populism, I wonder what kind of evidence for this claim he would accept. In fact, he goes part way towards agreement: "Some will need promises of progress or perfection to sustain faith in liberalism" (267). For some, utilitarianism or to put it more concretely high rates of growth in GDP per capita, will be and has been sufficient justification for liberalism. But not for all. I endeavor to show, in chapter 11, that populists characteristically use perfectionist language, and in chapter 10 that late twentieth-century liberals typically do not. The mismatch, I think, is highly suggestive as to why liberalism has fallen on hard times.

I have found all these responses to my work suggestive and fruitful for further reflections on the question of how to evolve a democratic liberalism for the twenty-first century.

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