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On Liberal Disharmony: Judith N. Shklar and the “Ideology of Agreement”

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How political are the humanities, and how political should they be? The two main answers to these questions remain those put forward by Max Weber and Karl Marx. Weber’s ideal of a “value-free” sociology **calls for** “opinions on issues of practical politics, and the academic analysis of political institutions and party policies” (20) to be treated strictly separately. Marx, on the other hand, demands, as a higher form of objectivity, the political identification with that “world-historical” class from whose point of view alone bourgeois ideology can be recognized **as what it is**, the “illusion of the epoch.” (57) If, for Weber, Marx would be a poor scholar, Marx would call Weber’s notion of value freedom ideologically distorted.

These two main lines of argument have remained largely unaltered. While the “normal science” of most of today’s humanities claims value-freedom at least pragmatically and implicitly, no matter how constructivist it may appear, contemporary social criticism from Agamben to Žižek sees all assertions to neutrality already as ideology in action. Only those who adhere to the

hegemonic ideology can claim to be non-ideological. In most cases, this ideological non-ideology is rather vaguely diagnosed as some form of “liberalism.”

Accusations of this kind are to be expected in a post-Marxist context. It is more surprising when they come from liberals. Few have addressed liberalism’s blindness to its own status as ideology more incandescently than the political philosopher Judith N. Shklar (1928–1992). Instead of categorical declarations of neutrality or the standard technique of “**ideological unmasking**” (48, 78–86), which exposes ideology and disposes of it at the same time, Shklar’s concern is the fundamental recognition of one’s own ideological ties in the humanities and social sciences. Only such reflexivity, she believes, can show how the ineluctable **intellectual pluralism**, the multitude of simultaneously existing convictions in modern secular societies, can be borne in practice. Shklar’s liberal perspective retains a keen sense of the dangers of non-reflective ideologies that seek to deny or overcome this pluralism, preaching harmony rather than acknowledging differences, and, while appearing to be engaged in conflict resolution, actually prepare the ground for repression and exclusion.

Liberalism as Ideology

At the beginning of her career, Shklar approached ideologies as a harbinger of their demise. In her first work, *After Utopia* (1957), she analyzed what remained of the “age of ideologies,” the nineteenth century, in the age of their implementation, the twentieth. Very little, in her estimation: Ideologies no longer offer any explanations nor inspire “the urge to construct grand designs for the political future of mankind.” This also means that “the last vestiges of Utopian faith required for such an enterprise have vanished.” (vii) That she **later** disavowed this judgement reflects a refinement of her approach to ideology.

If one takes “ideology” to mean something more basic than the grand intellectual systems of political theory as Hobbes, Rousseau or Marx had established them, then ideology is never overcome; rather, it possesses a necessary *epistemic* and *pragmatic* function. Towards the end of her life, in the fall of 1989, when Shklar co-taught an introduction to political ideologies at Harvard with the political scientist **Stanley Hoffmann**, this was her basic lesson. In her first lecture, she defined ideology as “an action-directed system of beliefs about society designed to explain it, alter it, or at least to combat other points of view. . . . What it does is to define issues, identify enemies and draw up plans for action. Its function is to offer maps for understanding and acting in politics.”[1]

The emphasis on ideology’s epistemic function brings Shklar close to contemporary ideology theorists like **Michael Freeden**, who sees ideologies primarily as matrices through which to interpret one’s own social and political world. But Shklar also emphasizes that ideology possesses the positive outlook for the future she denied it in the debate on the “End of Ideology” (Daniel Bell) in the 1950s: It can indeed point toward “ways to change and to a better future” (“The Origins of Ideological Combat” [1989], HUGFP 118, Box 5). This is precisely what Shklar would try to do in the 1980s and 1990s with her conception of a liberalism of fear.

Between the two texts, the resigned *After Utopia* and the more activist ideology lecture, came what may be Shklar’s most important book: *Legalism* (1964). Only here does Shklar pursue her

self-identification as a liberal more actively, acknowledge the epistemic necessity of ideology, and finally lament her peers’ insensitivity to their own political and moral assumptions. Her book tackles this forgetfulness of ideology in discussing the dispute between the legal positivism of H. L. A. Hart and the natural law doctrine of Lon L. Fuller. Where Hart treated law as a “neutral social entity” rather than the result of political struggles and moral stances, Fuller argued that an inherent morality could be derived from analyzing positive law. Both, according to *Legalism*, are forms of “a refined political ideology, the expression of a preference.” (34)

Shklar’s reproach of the liberal Hart brings her surprisingly close to Marx’s critique of ideology, in that she presents his liberalism as an ideological wolf in the sheep’s clothing of value-freedom. The difference, of course, is that her criticism is not only aimed at but delivered from a liberal standpoint, as she believes that her political cause as well as her discipline are better served by stating “the ideological contribution that the author is about to make to the debate.”

Legalism therefore begins with the declaration of a **political creed**. It advocates, writes Shklar, “a defense of social diversity, inspired by that barebones liberalism which, having abandoned the theory of progress and every specific scheme of economics, is committed only to the belief that tolerance is a primary virtue and that a diversity of opinions and habits is not only to be endured but to be cherished and encouraged. The assumption throughout is that social diversity *is* the prevailing condition of modern nation-states and that it *ought* to be promoted.” (5)

One may wonder at such a passage, so rare are ideological self-positionings still today in academic political theory – especially, those that openly call themselves so. For Shklar, however, there is **no reason** “to feel that the expression of personal preferences is an undesirable flaw.” To think so means to believe that ignoring personal and shared experiences amounts to being objective. To Shklar, ideology is “merely a matter of emotional reactions, both negative and positive, to direct social experiences and to the views of others.” Understood this way, “ideology is as inevitable as it is necessary in giving any thinking person a sense of direction.” (4)

Such a reflexive concept of ideology has consequences for the self-understanding of political theory and the history of ideas: if, as a scholar, one is always part of a society saturated with ideologies, one must on the one hand recognize them, but also be able to make them the object of analysis, since these “maps for understanding” are not given to **us blindly**. The analysis of one’s own structures of orientation abuts the goal of political theory, which is “to articulate and examine the half-expressed political views that the various groups in any given society at any time come to hold.” (4–5) Analyzing others’ ideology with an eye on one’s own is therefore Shklar’s main methodological rule – which brings her closer again to Weber, who ultimately **expected nothing less** from science than to help the individual “render an account of the ultimate meaning of his own actions.” (26)

In addition to descriptive analysis, Shklar’s reflexive approach also aims at the normative evaluation of ideology. For if one is always already involved in ideology, it can no longer be a matter of uncovering the truth “behind” it, but rather of analyzing its function in a social system and its political consequences. And that raises the question: Which ideology leads to acceptable, which to unacceptable results? By making such assessments, however, political theory itself produces maps for understanding and makes epistemic orders. For Shklar, the *analysis of ideology* is therefore always tied to the *production of ideology*.

Ideologies of Agreement

The fact that one cannot escape from the circle of ideology does not mean, however, that all ideologies are equal. Shklar, although a skeptic, is **by no means a relativist**. There are, **she writes in 1966**, “vast qualitative difference between the sloganlike utterances that act as cohesives for mass parties and the reflections of the great political theorists of the past and the work of the best contemporary social scientists.” That is why political theory should be concerned with establishing “standards for qualitative discrimination.” (18)

Shklar’s own production of ideology did not result in establishing such standards until the 1980s, in the “liberalism of fear” inseparably linked to her name. It does not assume a highest good but a **highest evil**: “That evil is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself.” (11) Already in *Legalism*, Shklar reflected on one of the central means to avoid this *summum malum*. Just as apparent neutrality in the humanities produces reductive analyses, the disavowal of conflict can have repressive consequences. For this reason, Shklar, with all her polemical acuity, targeted those ideologies that seek to deny or eliminate pluralism. In *Legalism*, she called them “ideologies of agreement” (88–110).

In practice, such ideologies exclude and repress; as theories, they are simply incapable of facing the contradictions of knowledge production in the humanities. All attempts to either reduce them to the natural sciences or encompass them within a grand theory have failed. For Shklar this ultimately means “**facing up to intellectual pluralism**,” accepting its necessity and considering its irreducible diversity as a good. This radical intellectual heterogeneity corresponds, in Shklar’s interpretation, to the social differentiation of secular societies. Political plurality is a fact worth protecting, but that entails **accepting** “conflict among ‘us’ as both ineluctable and tolerable, and entirely necessary for any degree of freedom.” (227) The task of Shklar’s liberalism is therefore to give social conflict a form that allows it to exist without fear and cruelty – but not to eliminate this conflict at any price.

In *Legalism*, she analyzes how natural law theorists try to render eternal norms plausible by simply denying the plurality that contradicts them, frequently with reference to a source of “agreement,” such as “nature” or an unspoken common “consensus.” Yet nature, Shklar objects, often only affirms the given and pathologizes what differs from it, while consensus ignores those not explicitly included in it. For her, the main problem is the question of who constitutes the standard of consensus: Is it the “**man on the Clapham bus**” (89–92) or even a version of the *gesundes Volksempfinden*? Not to mention the **methodological problem** that divining any community’s reigning standards is a particularly **dubious form of science**. “In any case,” **Shklar asks**, “what on earth is so impressive about agreement and unity?” As a sole political goal, she considers it extremely dangerous, because in the end “in any society where moral diversity exists, agreement-as-an-end-in-itself can only be achieved by totalitarian methods.” (100)

For this reason, Shklar rejects not only overtly illiberal politics but also an overly harmonistic liberalism. This brings her close to contemporary agonistic philosophers, such as Chantal Mouffe or Jacques Rancière, although she is just as vehemently opposed to the fetishization of “community” as she is to Carl Schmitt’s definition of enmity as the essence of the political or to Hannah Arendt’s heroic understanding of politics. Shklar is interested neither in consensus nor in

the agon as an end in itself, but sees conflict simply as a condition for freedom – because it means the absence of a homogenizing instance, which often tacitly presupposes the acceptance of a consensus.

At this point, Shklar’s own liberalism turns into an activist position that also affects contemporary political issues. When, for example, Shklar writes that **liberalism and democracy** often, but not necessarily, go together (19) – that, in other words, liberal democracy is not a tautology – one is reminded of contemporary “illiberal democracies.” After all, democracy, as Carl Schmitt **argued**, can very much be an ideology of unity if it considers its *demos* as strictly homogeneous, even identical to an *ethnos*. Shklar thus did not forget to include democracy in her lectures as that ideology that conceives of “the unity of a people as its essence.”^[2]

Accordingly, Shklar does not think much of the invocation of national identity as a guarantee of unity. “Why do we need an ‘identity’ as a people?” **she asks in *Legalism*** (101). The desire for such monolithic and anti-pluralistic attributions appears in ideas of the European Right such as *Leitkultur* or its theoretical justification, *ethno-différencialisme*. For Shklar, national identity is an “ideology of agreement” that is touted as a remedy for problems that it, even if it existed, could not solve. *Il n’y a pas d’identité culturelle, as François Jullien has put it*. For Shklar, the call for a *culture* that is binding for all – and not just for the institutional containment of conflicts that makes possible quite different cultural and group-specific expressions – would be tantamount to **admitting** that one “cannot endure contradiction, complexity, diversity, and the risks of freedom.” (5) But it is precisely pluralism itself – “**polyarchy**” as the spreading of power onto different groups – which in Shklar’s liberalism of fear is an important **shield against oppression**. (10, 13) For Shklar, pluralism means both, positively, the precondition of any freedom, and, negatively, the distribution of power among as many centers as possible to prevent abuse of power.

The ideological uniqueness of liberalism as Shklar presents it, then, is its ability to tolerate a multitude of competing ideologies, and at the same time to be the only ideology that escapes the myth of unity. In a sense, it thus confirms the hegemonic accusation of the critics of liberalism, because it only wants to concede this plurality under the condition of liberalism, which is always careful not to let conflict become a source of cruelty and fear. Shklar would **very** likely agree with the Left’s reproach that behind the neutrality of liberalism hides “**a fighting creed**.” (62) But only because she wants to give up the illusion of value-freedom, not the awareness, and defense, of one’s own creed.

For Shklar, the humanities **simply are political**; ideologies “insensibly come to condition one’s interests, one’s methods of study, one’s conceptual devices, and even one’s vocabulary.” Instead of ignoring this fact, she calls for intellectual honesty. For if we bid farewell to considering ideology “a gross form of irrationality, we would be less anxious to repress it and our self-awareness would be correspondingly greater.”

[1] Judith N. Shklar, “The Origins of Ideological Combat” [1989]. Papers of Judith N. Shklar, Harvard University Archives, HUGFP 118, Box 5. I am grateful to Michael Shklar for the kind permission to quote from Shklar’s papers.

[2] Judith N. Shklar, “The Challenge of Democracy”, winter term 1989, Shklar Papers, Box 5.

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Image: Photograph of Judith Shklar, March 1972. Courtesy of Reuters.