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Fear Not, Liberalism: Liberal Psychology as Intellectual History

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I commend Kahan for this ambitious and erudite new intellectual history of liberalism. *Freedom from Fear* tells a story of liberalism's development that de-centers concepts such as natural rights, consent, equality, constitutionalism, or even the proverbial social contract with which liberalism is commonly identified. Locke is out; Adam Smith and Montesquieu are in. Instead of fixating on seventeenth-century England or the so-called "Enlightenment," the "short 19th century" (9–22, 77–120) becomes decisive. Contrary to reductionist criticisms of liberalism as atomistic, secular, or deracinated, Kahan emphasizes that liberalism has traditionally been bolstered by three distinct "pillars" of political freedom, free markets, and morality. These pillars have been marshaled at successive stages of liberalism's development in response to a number of liberal "fears," ranging from the threats posed to liberty by the arbitrary power of church and state, by social and political revolutions, poverty, nationalism, totalitarianism, populism, and so forth. Extrapolating from Judith Shklar's seminal understanding of liberalism in terms of minimizing cruelty, Kahan expands her concern with fear to a wide range of periods and thinkers, offering fresh interpretations of canonical figures such as J. S. Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville while showcasing lesser-known thinkers such as A. V. Dicey, Léon Bourgeois, L. T. Hobhouse, the Ordoliberals, and many others. Kahan's readings of individual thinkers are consistently illuminating and worthy of discussion in their own right, but my remarks focus on the book's larger conceptual framework.

I wonder about the relationship between the more traditional vocabulary of liberalism—for example, liberalism's ubiquitous "rights talk"—and Kahan's reframing of liberal commitments in terms of fears. "Fear" may imply both too much and too little about these liberal concerns. Too much: must every problem with which liberals wrestled be reckoned as a full-blown "fear"? Take poverty. J. S. Mill and other nineteenth-century liberals were surely anxious about the "laboring classes"—their inevitable political enfranchisement, Malthusian proclivities for reproduction, how their ignorance

contributed to the perpetuation of the patriarchal family or facilitated the rise of political demagoguery. No doubt these and other moral, economic, and political dimensions of poverty were vexing—both to its victims as well as liberal observers. Even the advent of the middle classes brought perils of its own for Mill, Tocqueville, and others. Still, it seems odd to cast the whole lot of technical policy dilemmas with which liberals have contended as akin to Shklar's proverbial "knock at the door" in the dead of night, those "arbitrary, unexpected, unnecessary, and unlicensed acts of force…and habitual and pervasive acts of cruelty and torture."[1] Would anything be lost by dropping the term "fear" and using something softer like concerns, challenges, or dilemmas?

Many liberal fears were concrete, to be sure. For evidence of Tocqueville's literal "fear" of the lower orders one need look no further than his melodramatic recollections of Paris during the June Days of 1848. And while Tocqueville initially frames the fundamental dilemma of modern democracy in terms of his own "terreur religieuse," he also warns against the metamorphosis of modern democrats into trembling wards of the state. For many nineteenth-century thinkers—liberals and non-liberals alike—the axial value of liberalism is not so much the alleviation of fear but rather a longing for a modern functional surrogate for aristocratic courage.

If fear implies too much, it may also designate too little. I worry that the ubiquitous metaphor of "fear" ends up just being another way of articulating traditional liberal commitments, albeit in a conceptual language foreign to the thinkers themselves. Isn't the liberal response to any given "fear" more often expressed in the form of a right? Fear of poverty gets framed as a right to work; fear of crime or violence entails a right to life or self-defense. Franklin D. Roosevelt's seminal 1941[2] speech on the "Four Freedoms" is revealing of precisely this fungibility between the language of fear and the nascent discourse of human rights:

> In the future days which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.
> The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.
> The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.
> The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.
> The fourth is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in

[1]Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 29.

[2]Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Annual Address to Congress on the State of the Union," January 6, 1941," in The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt. 1940 Volume. (New York: MacMillan, 1941), 670–2.

> such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.
>
> That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. … A good society is able to face schemes of world domination and foreign revolutions alike without fear.

Besides anticipating Kahan's title, several things about Roosevelt's speech stand out. The first is confirmatory: here, in media res, we find the classical liberal preoccupation with negative liberties—the proverbial "freedoms from" state coercion to express one's ideas or profess religious beliefs—morphing into modern liberal concerns with totalitarianism and the "freedom from want" (poverty) so fundamental to late liberalism. Yet at least in the first three of Roosevelt's freedoms, this transformation is wrought not so much by the invocation of a language of fear, but rather by means of a clever linguistic mutation of traditional negative rights claims ("freedom" or "freedom from") into universal moral entitlements ("world terms") demanding active intervention by the state, if not the coordination of an international liberal order. In this instance a "freedom from fear" is just a different idiom for expressing the same fundamental liberal commitments.

Roosevelt's speech also serves to underscore liberalism's universalistic vocation. This is significant because, for many, the most attractive features of Shklar's original "liberalism of fear" and "putting cruelty first" were their realism and non-perfectionism. Liberals reliably agree about one thing: despotism must be avoided because cruelty is abominable. "Freedom from fear," however, seems to imply a commitment to a universal human rights regime. The "fear" at the heart of modern liberalism is global in scope; its resolution entails the construction not only of a better iteration of the liberal nation-state, a "good society" proof against populism, but a hopeful "vision" of a new "moral order," "everywhere in the world." Critics on both the left and right have lamented precisely this liberal aspiration to expunge all fears in the name of safety, longevity, security, health, and what Tocqueville called "well-being." Paradoxically, if these critics are correct, then what liberalism may have most to fear is fear itself.

On this subject, much more could be said about fear as a psychological phenomenon. Fears may be sensible and proportionate, on the one hand, or hysterically exaggerated, on the other. There are well-grounded fears and pathological obsessions. With respect to Kahan's typology, liberalism is mainly demarcated by the different objects that liberals have feared over time: state, revolutions, poverty, populism, and so on. But regardless of the substance of particular liberal daydreams and nightmares, the fine line between liberal and illiberal has often been as much about striking a balance between prudence and paranoia. After all, fear is a key ingredient in conspiracy-mongering, scapegoating, xenophobia, dehumanization, and other illiberal impulses. One wonders how, on Kahan's account, liberalism

can successfully modulate its fears—not just by fearing the right things—but confronting any and all threats with due consideration. Kahan's three pillars of liberalism—politics, markets, and morality—might offer resources in this regard.

Although fear may be necessary for understanding liberalism, it is not sufficient, as Kahan acknowledges from the start. Liberals are also about "hope," which appears as the flip-side of their aspiration to eliminate the sources of fear. One wishes more was said about these utopian, rationalist, and perfectionist impulses. The visionary quality of "hope" is, after all, part of the more traditional story of liberalism's development—part and parcel of the "heavenly city" of the eighteenth-century philosophers, the progressive "civilization" of nineteenth-century liberals, and a motivation for socialist utopias of the twentieth century. How do these two impulses coexist with one another? Is liberalism less about the necessity of one or the other, and more about striking a balance between what Michael Oakeshott called the politics of faith and the politics of skepticism?[3]

Freedom from Fear is not only a provocative work of intellectual history, but a major restatement of liberal political philosophy. What liberalism gains or potentially loses by Kahan's reconceptualization remains an open question, but readers will take away from it a deeper understanding of liberalism's abiding tensions and animating tendencies.

[3]Michael Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, ed. Timothy Fuller. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).