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Author(s): Seyla Benhabib

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AT THE TIME OF HER DEATH in September of 1992, Judith N. Shklar was one of this country's most revered political theorists. For thirty-five years she had been an extraordinary presence at Harvard's government department, educating generations of students and, some would even say, colleagues. The author of eleven books and innumerable articles, she was a brilliant stylist. Crisp formulations, pointed comments, and stunning psychological *aperçus* give her prose an unmistakable voice. Averse to abstract systematization as well as pretenses of analytical rigor, she followed her favorite thinkers—Montaigne and Montesquieu—in making the essay a medium of political reflection and moral criticism.

Judith Shklar belonged to the generation of European Jewish émigrés whose world was shattered and, as she expressed it in an extraordinary piece of autobiographical writing (“A Life of Learning,” the Charles Homer Haskins Lecture, ACLS Occasional Paper, No. 9), “whose childhood had been brought to an end” by Hitler. Born to a German-speaking Lithuanian Jewish family of professionals, Shklar carried into her political thought the indelible marks of disbelief in the face of a world gone insane. Yet she registered the destruction of her familiar world and the end of her childhood without pathos. This absence of pathos, along with her refusal to indulge in generalizations about the “end of the Enlightenment,” the “decline of the public sphere,” or “the disappearance of the political,” distinguishes her sharply from Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt, both German-Jewish émigré philosophers, twenty years her elder. Although brought up in a German-speaking household, Judith Shklar was not a “German-Jewish” philosopher. Her skeptical and restrained temperament put her rather in the company of East European ironists such as Franz Kafka, Milan Kundera, and Gyorgy Konrad. It is this temperament that colors Shklar's “dystopic” liberalism—a liberalism that is not only anti-utopian but self-consciously dystopian.

Throughout her writings Shklar used a variety of terms to characterize this vision, such as “barebones liberalism” and “the liberalism of permanent minorities”; and in one of her most memorable essays, she coined the phrase “the liberalism of fear.” The earliest statement of this vision is contained in *Legalism: An Essay on Law, Morals, and Politics*, published in 1964. With the memories of the Nuremberg trials and the Cold War still very much alive, Shklar positioned herself against too much self-congratulation on the part of Western liberal democracies. Drawing a sharp line between the ideologies of free-market capitalism and the political essence of liberalism, she wrote of her contribution: “. . . it is at its simplest, a defense of social diversity, inspired by that barebones liberalism which, having abandoned the theory of progress

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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.” (5)

Why did Shklar reject a liberalism based upon a more comprehensive doctrine of human nature, history, and society? She distinguished the Lockean liberalism of natural rights from the Rousseau-Kant tradition of liberal autonomy, and both from the liberalism of self-perfection, represented by John Stuart Mill. Like Hannah Arendt, and unlike Leo Strauss, she thought that developments in modern science and technology had rendered appeals to nature, such as Locke’s, understood as a reality untouched by human intervention and manipulation, mythical and fictitious. But she was equally skeptical of the rationalistic view of human nature and the teleological view of history that Kantian liberalism seemed to presuppose. Why? An extremely close, nuanced, and sharp observer of human psychology, Shklar reflected upon the diversity, ambiguity, opacity, and tenacity of human emotions and motivations throughout her work. She was a shrewd moral psychologist, and this made her a nonrationalist without being an antirationalist.

Her barebones liberalism was linked to her belief that we must face “cruelty” first. Surely, cruelty is too thin a concept to describe the horrors of the twentieth century; it also seems exaggerated in the face of the many petty misdemeanors and meannesses that characterize much of everyday life. But by designating cruelty as the chief vice, the *summum malum*, that liberalism must avoid, Shklar was calling attention to the accompanying sentiments of fear, degradation, and humiliation that would ultimately make a liberal polity impossible. “Ordinary Vices” (the title of her 1984 book, Harvard University Press) needed to be identified and their force muted, since “liberal democracy becomes more a recipe for survival than a project for the perfectibility of mankind.” (4)

Shklar’s extraordinary treatment of cruelty, hypocrisy, snobbery, betrayal, and misanthropy in *Ordinary Vices* came at the end of a period of twenty years after the 1964 publication of *Legalism*. During these two decades, Shklar, who was a resolutely private person, raised, together with her spouse of many years, a family of two sons and one daughter. She also authored three works in the history of political thought: an edited volume on *Political Theory and Ideology* (1966); a study of Rousseau’s social theory called *Men and Citizens* (1969); and in 1976 she published *Freedom and Independence: A Study of the Political Ideas of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind*.

It is widely agreed that it was with her 1989 essay “The Liberalism of Fear” that Shklar found the words to sum up her unique point of view. In a wide-ranging tribute to her work and life published in 1996 under the title *Liberalism Without Illusions. Essays on Liberal Theory*

and the *Political Vision of Judith Shklar* (1996), her colleagues both praised and questioned this point of view. In the words of her one-time colleague at Harvard, Michael Walzer, was “negative politics” enough?

I personally belong among those who think that in the last decade of her life Shklar’s voice and her vision of politics became more robust. Shklar, who had shied away from movement politics all her life, was now ready to talk somewhat more freely about being a woman in the American academy. As more young women entered the profession (I had the honor of being her colleague at Harvard between 1987 and 1989) and as Harvard University’s government department hired its first senior women faculty members, Shklar was ready to reflect upon the absurdity of having been a part-time lecturer without tenure in the government department for nearly a decade and a half, until President Derek Bok put an end to the situation in 1971 and named her the John Cowles Professor of Government. A MacArthur Fellowship grant, received in 1984, sealed her public status in the academy. Several years later, in 1990, she was elected to be the first female president of the American Political Science Association.

Her presidential address delivered on that occasion, “Redeeming American Political Theory,” was a *tour de force* that argued that American political thought had long been unjustifiably neglected and subsumed under the influence of John Locke. Shklar saw from the beginning three political sciences in America. “Jefferson’s was speculative and physiological. Madison’s was institutional and historical, and Hamilton’s was empirical and behavioral.” (94) But from its inception, this political science was marred by the dual experiment this country had embarked upon: one in democracy and the other in tyranny. Shklar saw the presence of black chattel slavery not only as being woven into the fabric of Southern life, but as the United States’s “original sin,” which one perpetually sought to escape even if one was morally opposed to it. The grandeur of American political thought was marked, and perhaps enabled, by the tragedy of its birth.

In *The Faces of Injustice* (1990), her next major work after *Ordinary Vices*, Shklar introduced the concept of “passive injustice.” Passive injustice results from the failure of republican citizens to uphold justice and to support those informal relations of “democracy of everyday life, in the habits of equality, and the mutuality of ordinary obligations between citizens.” To overcome passive injustice requires a citizenry imbued with a sense of public justice, the rule of law, and the protection of equal rights. A citizenry full of vigilance and a public officialdom with a deep sense of rectitude are pivotal to the realization of liberalism. Thus, wrote Shklar, “liberalism is monogamously, faithfully, and permanently married to democracy.” Although she also added

that this was “a marriage of convenience,” increasingly, her deep moral aversion to passive injustice made it clear that liberalism required the democratic virtues of participation, concern for the common good, and continuous public vigilance to succeed. In her view, it was not the origins of suffering and injustice that were important but the possibility of alleviating them; what is unforgivable is doing nothing when something can be done. Otherwise we are all implicated in “passive injustice,” in not hearing the voices of the victims.

This concern with justice resonates throughout Shklar’s last work, published the year before her death, in 1991, and based on her Storrs Lectures, delivered at the Yale Law School. In *American Citizenship. The Quest for Inclusion* Shklar developed the thesis that America rested on the dual experiments of democracy and tyranny. She focused on the capaciousness of the American concept of citizenship, and its equally cruel forms of excluding blacks, women, and other disadvantaged groups from the Republic. She added a characteristically original turn to these thoughts, however, by emphasizing the significance of work and gainful employment as essential to the “standing” of the citizen. Wage-labor, contrary to what many philosophers from Aristotle to Karl Marx and Hannah Arendt thought, was not wage-slavery. None were more aware of this existential distinction than the independent laborer citizens of the early American Republic, and every other group, such as women, for whom salaried work was crucial in the step toward emancipation. Shklar was not a snob. During a memorable lunch at the Harvard Faculty Club with the well-known critic and thinker George Steiner, at which I was present and which centered on and off on the Arendt-Heidegger affair, Shklar simply said à propos of Heideggerian abstractions, “But my dear George, somebody has to clean the kitchen tiles without worrying about *Dasein!*”

Shklar’s death was sudden and premature. A heart attack, whose warning symptoms she failed to identify quickly enough while she was writing in her house in New Hampshire, put her into a coma, and by the time her husband and family had moved her back to Boston, it was too late. The originality, the vivaciousness, and the sheer scope of the essay collections published posthumously, *Redeeming American Political Thought* (1998) and *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (1998) well prove that we lost her unique voice all too soon, when her creativity and productivity were at a high.

Judith Shklar touched all those who knew her with her learning, insight, wit, and sharp observations. She was a person of strong convictions, and even more strongly held opinions. Disagreement was not always easy—but in this respect, too, she was a liberal: she treated what she viewed to be the foolishness of the left and the right even-

handedly, and did not discriminate between the opinions of her younger and more senior colleagues. What she wrote of the friendship between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams serves equally well to illuminate her enduring legacy for those of us who were lucky enough to have known her: “When one is used to personal freedom and really cherishes it, unity and oneness do not seem inherently quite so valuable. It is the ability to love without demanding likeness or agreement, especially on political matters, that marks the friendship of free men and women.”

Elected 1990

SEYLA BENHABIB
Eugene Meyer Professor of
Political Science and Philosophy
Yale University