

## Symposium on Joshua Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*

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**To cite this article:** Hugo Drochon (2024) Symposium on Joshua Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*, History of European Ideas, 50:3, 535-535, DOI: [10.1080/01916599.2023.2275102](https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2023.2275102)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2023.2275102>



Published online: 03 Nov 2023.



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## INTRODUCTION



# Symposium on Joshua Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*

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Can we meet intolerance with tolerance? Illiberalism with liberalism? Political ruthlessness with a certain temperament? This is the 'liberal predicament' that Joshua Cherniss, in his thought-provoking book, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century*, explores: faced with extremists on the right and the left willing to do anything to achieve their goals, what can liberals do? Should they too put aside their principles to defend liberal-democracy? No, answers Cherniss: liberals should stay true to themselves and cultivate a political ethos of 'modesty, fortitude, forbearance, intellectual flexibility, ethical resolution and decency'. Instead of fighting fire with fire, liberals need to focus on their own virtues. With the world going mad around them, in doing so they will become a haven of peace and stability. Instead of going to the world, the world will come to them.

Cherniss develops this 'tempered liberalism' by recovering the thought of Cold Warriors such as Albert Camus, Raymond Aron, Reinhold Niebuhr and Isaiah Berlin, with a detour via Max Weber to begin with. To deepen this reflection, a stellar cast of discussants has been assembled, including John Hall who opens by questioning the institutional foundations such a 'moderate' liberalism presupposes, and whether these need to be reinforced. Sophie Marcotte Chenard wonders what consequences this combination of personal lives and personal ethos has for how we do political theory, and whether any lessons for political judgement can be taken from it. Echoing Marcotte Chenard's point about 'intellectual biography is the point where theory, political practice and personal history meet', Michael Rosen asks whether Cherniss' 'ethos' is reserved only to liberals, or can be found in other traditions, such as conservatism, too. He also poses a fundamental challenge to moderation, namely whether radicalism needs sometimes to be the order of the day, when moderation can be tantamount to a defence of the (gendered, colonial, racist) status quo: a point also made by Marcotte Chenard. Alicia Steinmetz asks whether callousness, instead of ruthlessness, is the biggest threat we face today, and if so whether what is needed is more ideology – more energy – and not less. Indeed, if we might all become more tempered, this does not mean that the social and economic structures we operate in will become themselves less ruthless (capitalism). Iain Stewart, finally, closes by reflecting on what Cherniss' study tells us about the historiography of liberalism, and indeed the history of liberalism more broadly.

Cherniss, needless to say, responds to all these queries in a most temperate way, and indeed the whole symposium is an example of – nay an *exemplar* – of the liberal ethos at play. Perhaps it can indeed effect change. Either way, with interest in Cold War Liberalism growing anew due to the collapse of the neo-liberalism – and a desire, therefore, to better understand what preceded it – Cherniss' *Liberalism in Dark Times* is a key intervention in a debate about what liberalism meant in the past, what it means today, and what it will mean in the future.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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