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Book Reviews

Judith Shklar and the Pleasures of American Political Thought

Rogers M. Smith

In the mid-1970s, Judith Shklar began teaching an undergraduate course entitled “American Political Thought” at Harvard. I was the second “grader” she chose for it. (The first was William Kristol, later Vice President Dan Quayle’s Chief of Staff.) Shklar’s interest in teaching the subject surprised many, including me. She had been raised, after all, largely in the Baltics and Canada, with several European locations in between, as her family sought distance from Stalin and Hitler. She was best known for her writings on European political thinkers, especially Rousseau and Hegel. And the field of American political thought was then largely disdained in political science, as empiricists focused on behavior while theorists regularly declared that worthwhile American political philosophy had begun and ended with the *Federalist Papers*. That perception was so widespread that I somewhat resisted her encouragement of my own interests in the field, suspecting it reflected her silent judgment that more profound European thinkers were best left to others.

But in fact, it was Shklar’s belief in the importance of American political thought that was profound. The subject would be increasingly featured in her publications, including portions of her 1990 book, *The Faces of Injustice*; her 1990 presidential address as the first female head of the American Political Science Association; and her final works, *American*

Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion and The Bill of Rights and the Liberal Tradition. American thought, including a study of Jefferson, was also central to the typically ambitious writing agenda she had planned when a heart attack ended her distinguished career prematurely in September, 1992. Her abiding fascination with the American revolutionaries, in particular, is vividly apparent in her eloquent draft review of Gordon Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, which follows. In it, she cheerfully employs Wood's book as a vehicle to make some of her favorite points from her undergraduate lectures.

Shklar appreciated American political thought, despite its relative dearth of grand metaphysical pretensions, in part because she found most if not all metaphysical pretensions intellectually silly and politically pernicious. Her sense of rigor compelled her to examine all claims to ultimate truth seriously, albeit skeptically. But she studied political thought chiefly as a way of revealing the characteristic meaning that different political institutions, commitments, and ways of life expressed and fostered. Her approach to political texts thus displayed a distinctive literary sensibility, and indeed her course featured Fenimore Cooper and Hawthorne as much as Lincoln and Calhoun.

These concerns account for why American political thought was immensely significant to her. Like Tocqueville, she believed that in America, more than anywhere else in world history, one could discover the human fruits and perils of living within broadly democratic institutions, trying to make them work, and trying to make sense of the lives they shaped. She was far from enchanted with the results. Shklar perceived the blowhard demagoguery, the crass hucksterism, the shallowness and hypocrisies of American culture as well as anyone, Tocqueville included. She had ample personal experience of American anti-intellectualism, xenophobia, and sexism. And despite her rich knowledge of humanity's potential for cruelty, as she studied America's past and present she was dismayed by the extent of illiberal, undemocratic injustices she found. They, too, became increasingly prominent in her later works, as part of a process by which she became militantly convinced that contemporary political theorists had to speak more directly to concrete human problems rather than philosophical abstractions.

Yet with all that said, she also found in American political thought a wealth of practical insights into what a democratic society can and cannot hope for, and how its best potential might be achieved. With all their flaws, Shklar also liked many American political thinkers as people. Even the worst of them generally gave short shrift to the exquisitely elaborated, baroque justifications for domination that characterized so many aristocracy-obsessed European writers. She deeply admired the bookish but practical Madison. She was thoroughly charmed by the bookish but unabashedly worldly Franklin, though she acknowledged his darker side.

She shared Jefferson's childlike delight in learning about all sorts of things, even as she relished Adams's piercingly barbed insights into the many sources of depravity in human nature. Who they were and what they thought were equally important, and intricately interwoven, in the ways she taught and thought about them.

For in the end, Shklar valued the study of American political thought, and political thought generally, not just because it was a way to address serious problems people face in their lives, however firmly she insisted that it must be that to be worthwhile. As the close of her review suggests, above all she loved gaining insight into the minds, psyches, ideas and passions of people, especially political people. Talking with her, arguing with her, and learning from her always meant being lifted by her zeal for enhanced understanding and her joy in its ever-partial achievement.

