

1

On Negative Politics

Michael Walzer

JUDITH SHKLAR OFTEN TALKED as if her politics was largely negative in character, and I think that is the way the "liberalism of fear" is most often understood. Fear is a negative emotion, manifest in a movement away, a backing off from danger, a defensive reaction to the threatening object or person. A similarly motivated politics would be similarly manifest—the state conceived, say, as shield and shelter, protecting individuals even from its own agents. "Putting cruelty first" means starting with what we most want to escape. This is a politics founded equally on the history of war and revolution in the twentieth century and on Shklar's own experience: as she escaped from the Gestapo, so should we all. The liberalism of fear is a bulwark against Nazism in particular and the secret police in general.

It is a necessary bulwark, and I shall assume that readers of this essay are as ready as Shklar was, as I am, to build and defend it. The question that I want to pose is whether this readiness can possibly form the substance of a political position, either intellectually or practically. Is there such a thing as a purely or simply or even largely negative politics? After all, a bulwark and its defenders stand in front of something. What is it that they are defending? On behalf of what are we fearful? The answer most consistent with a negative politics is life itself, physical security. But this is a curious answer since it is at least sometimes true that the best way to save our lives, if that is all we mean to save, is to surrender to whatever it is that threatens us—or to give up politics entirely and hide from the threatening forces, in accordance with the classical wisdom of Proverbs: "When the wicked rise to power, the wise run for

cover." A purely negative politics might well require radically nonpolitical behavior.

When we defend the bulwarks, we are usually defending something more than our lives; we are defending our way of life. The cruelty that we are putting first includes but is certainly not limited to death and torture; it extends also to betrayal, dispossession, exile, the breakup of families, the defeat of everyday expectation and hope. These negatives correspond to a highly diverse set of positives: different cultures, different property and kinship systems, different understandings of the normal life course. There is a certain sameness on the other side of the bulwarks, but a great diversity on this side. On the other side are invaders and usurpers, ruthless tyrants and their gangs of violent men who rule or plan to rule in their own interest and not in the common interest (the first of the ancient definitions of tyranny) or who seize the women and property of their subjects (the second ancient definition) or who seek to impose an absolutist and all-encompassing ideology (the most important of the modern definitions). On this side of the bulwarks are men and women, complexly related, with their personal status and sense of themselves; families and their varied holdings; customary rights and privileges; established communities of many sorts; different institutional arrangements; different moralities and religions. We oppose the tyrants in the name of all these; negative politics always has a substantive subject—a certain necessary positivity.

We probably should support a politics of this sort even when we have qualms about or are opposed to what it protects—so long as the forces on the other side of the bulwarks are violent and tyrannical. I don't mean to rule out revolutionary politics, but vanguard revolutions, pressed forward against the wishes not only of the rulers but also of the ruled, are clearly excluded. Imagine a group of people defending a hierarchical society—where priests rule lay people, or landlords rule peasants, or capitalists rule workers—against a band of revolutionary terrorists: we have learned to fear terrorism more than hierarchy. Or, better, we have learned that the hierarchy of terrorist and terrorized is the very worst kind. That is the real meaning of our negativism. It requires that we defend, or support the defense of, a wide range of regimes and societies whenever they face a common threat. What is defended, however, is always *something*, different in each case, even if the threat is similar in kind

I

A "liberalism of fear" might describe just this defense of something, with *liberal* defining the means of defense, the architecture, so to speak,

of the bulwarks: constitutional government, civil liberties, a free press, and so on. Or it might describe the things we most value and most readily defend: a particular regime and culture, individual autonomy, and the social space within which free men and women enact their life plans. These individuals with plans constitute liberal positivity, and it is hard to imagine any liberalism, however fearful, without them. Compare the liberalism of fear to the doctrine of "negative freedom," which is probably its philosophical analogue. Negative freedom has the same positive subject. Its purpose is to give the individual, conceived as an agent, room for agency; its negativity is a bulwark against intrusive and high-handed officials, armed with laws, seconded by the police.

What makes this negativity seem sufficient unto itself is the givenness of the individuals behind the bulwarks. They are just there, like natural beings, autonomous unless constrained. But this givenness is in fact a problem. One can't build the bulwarks just anywhere and expect to find autonomous men and women behind them. Here are the physical individuals; why aren't they busily shaping projects, developing and enacting life plans? So we are led to think about education, culture, politics, and everything else that is necessary to the formation of the positive subjects of negative freedom. The case is the same with the liberalism of fear: before we can be fearful in a liberal way, we must learn what it means to be liberal.

Consider a more particular example: the free market as an instance of negative freedom. Many economists believed that what was required, and all that was required, to transform the state-run economies of Eastern Europe into market economies was the destruction of the existing constraints on entrepreneurial activity. So the constraints were destroyed, and freedom proclaimed. Where are the entrepreneurs? It turns out that disciplined energy, methodical work, deferred satisfaction, and a readiness to take risks are more rare than the economists thought. Entrepreneurs are not natural beings but cultural formations.

In much the same way, liberalism is a particular social-historical construction, and it isn't made by throwing up bulwarks around a piece of social space. It requires work within that space. Insofar as this work is intentional, it will be driven by some positive vision of its purpose. So the liberalism of fear depends upon what we might call the liberalism of hope. I don't mean this in any sentimental way but quite literally: what we are afraid of is that the things we have come to value, our accomplishments until now, and our plans for the future will be destroyed by violent men. When we defend the bulwarks, then, we are committing ourselves to an ongoing engagement and a pattern of activity. For what the bulwarks are meant to defend doesn't exist naturally, has to be made, and isn't finished.

I must stress again that this engagement and activity represent not only the positive side of the liberalism of fear but also the particularist side. They are doubly particularist, first and most obviously because they are liberal and not conservative or communitarian or fundamentalist, and second because they are liberal in a specific way. I shall illustrate this latter point by considering in some detail the positive content of Judith Shklar's liberalism. But first I suggest a brief look at how one puts cruelty first in an American context. In a purely negative sense, and from the standpoint of the person at risk, the opposite of cruelty is physical safety: injury and torture are what I am safe from. But when Shklar writes about America, she is more focused on social or psychological degradation than on bodily injury, and the opposed state is equality, independence, dignity. When I am independent, I can't be degraded. Slavery is the key to her account of American history—slavery imagined (with Orlando Patterson) as a form of social death rather than physical vulnerability. Since this is a kind of dying or, better, killing that is still remembered and still, in various mitigated forms, endured, putting cruelty first means attending to it. And this attention makes for a highly specific American liberalism.

II

Consider now Shklar's positive account of this liberalism in her book *American Citizenship* (1991). In her view, liberalism requires first a certain sort of political community, constituted as a democracy of citizens, political equals with suffrage and civil rights and, second, a certain sort of political economy in which everyone is guaranteed the chance to work for a living wage. These two requirements are elaborated against the background of slavery (understood, again, as the denial of citizenship and free labor) but also with reference to the women's movement and the trade union movement. The standard left analogies—"domestic slavery" and "wage slavery," though Shklar is always careful to distinguish them from the real thing—make sense to her. Hence she defends the "struggles" of workers against the threat of unemployment and dependency and of women for voting rights and jobs—the crucial political and economic status markers. She doesn't assert the intrinsic value of participation or work; hers is in no sense a moralizing account of liberal politics. Nor does she dwell much on the instrumental value of participation (to defend interests) or of work (to make money). She is interested above all in their cultural or symbolic value: this is how individuals achieve equal standing and dignity in American society.

We don't give the members of the American political community a special name like *citizen* and *comrade* in the French and Russian revolu-

tions. Nonetheless, membership is very important in establishing individual autonomy, and the vote is its crucial symbol—probably more important in the context of a multiracial immigrant society than in any of the countries of Europe. At the same time, America has never been, despite its revolutionary origin and republican tradition, a radical republic where individual standing is wholly determined by citizenship and participation. It is also a capitalist society, where standing is determined by work and wealth. Hence the parallel importance that Shklar attributes to suffrage on the one hand and employment on the other. Hence, too, her most radical proposal: that liberalism in America requires for its completion what seems least likely—an American version of social democracy.

An American version, for this is a social democracy focused on the working individual, not the working class. Shklar argues that the liberal state, representing the political community as a whole, has a "comprehensive commitment . . . to provide opportunities for work to earn a living wage for all who need and demand it."¹ Work is a right, she says, but not a right of the sort that philosophers usually describe. It is "a right derived from the requirements of local citizenship, not a primary human right."² People around the world cannot claim this right, though they no doubt have others, both primary and secondary. Nor can its American claimants look to the courts for its enforcement. Primary rights are presumably enforceable by the courts; rights like this one are closer to "presumptions guiding our policies." It would be better to say "presumptions that ought to guide our policies"—insofar as we understand our history and society.

I take that first person plural pronoun to be very important. Of course, the aggressors and usurpers and would-be tyrants against whom we defend the bulwarks are *our* enemies, but they are also, or ought to be, everyone's enemies. We have rights against them that we share with all humanity. The locally derived right to work is ours in a stronger sense. It reflects the particularism of positivity. When we imagine a society of voting and working members where the vote and the work guarantee individual membership but don't provide the necessary content of individuality, where men and women are free to plan a life beyond voting and working, then we are imagining an American liberalism. We give expression, with Shklar, to an American imagination.

III

So the point of the liberalism of fear is to open up social space for many liberalisms, including our own. I don't mean to suggest that fear

doesn't constrain what goes on within this open space. I have been using the bulwarks metaphor in too literal a way, as if there really was a wall around the city. Sometimes there is, of course, and sometimes the defense of the bulwarks is an actual endeavor. But the walls are also within the city, and the more liberal the city is, the more pervasive are the walls. Liberalism is a culture of barriers, animated by a deep suspicion of power, protecting every individual member against the rampages of the powerful. Though it cannot form the content of a way of life, negativity penetrates more deeply into substantive liberalism than into any other political formation. Here lies liberalism's claim to universality: that its doctrinal arguments and institutional arrangements reflect a common fearfulness whereas every other politics is naïve about or complicitous in the power of aristocrats or kings or bureaucrats or vanguards. Obviously, this claim is only plausible if made on behalf of a liberalism that is not itself naïve about or complicitous in the power of plutocrats and corporate managers. Nonetheless, it makes sense to see liberal suspicion as a universally useful force and the culture of barriers as a common good.

Should we, then, all be liberals? If we regard liberalism now as a purely negative politics, this is not something that we can *be*. We can only be something else *in a liberal way*, subject to liberal constraints. *Liberal*, in this sense, is properly used as an adjective: liberal monarchist, liberal democrat, liberal socialist, and insofar as the major religions are political in character, liberal Jew, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and so on. In these formulations, the adjective expresses our fears, the noun, our hopes. This isn't a universally necessary usage, for liberalism is also, as I have been arguing, a substantive politics. Focused on individualism and autonomy, it may require modifiers of its own—as in *social* or *communitarian* liberalism—which address the local pathologies of autonomy. But *liberal* as an adjective, expressing fearfulness and negativity, is likely to be useful everywhere. I cannot imagine a political regime that I would not want constrained in at least some of the ways that it suggests. And the constraint that comes first to mind is one focused on the cruelties of power.

How does liberal negativity work? I don't think that it does anything more than intensify and institutionalize the negative features of other political doctrines and regimes. Defenders of monarchy, for example, will always claim that the monarchy they defend is not tyranny. Their kings rule or are supposed to rule in a not arbitrary, not capricious, not irresponsible, not lawless, not oppressive way. Liberal monarchy is a regime where these negatives are realized politically, where the king, at least in the ordinary course of events, *cannot* rule arbitrarily, capriciously, and so on. But it won't necessarily be autonomous individuals

who are protected against the royal will; it may well be ancient guilds or chartered towns or an established church or even hereditary aristocracy. Similarly, the king may choose a mercantilist economic policy and still be a "liberal" king in this negative sense—if his choice is made with the consent of parliament, say, or through some legal process, and without overriding the customary rights and privileges of his subjects.

When these subjects join together to defend their ancient "liberties" against a usurping king, are they liberals? They probably think of themselves as true monarchists; their hopes lie in a good king. But their politics is very much like (a local version of) the liberalism of fear: it misses the substance of liberalism but captures the essential negatives. Think how many revolutions start in this way, driven by fear, aiming at the constraint of power, and then are taken over from within by the advocates of an illiberal positivity. Substantive liberalism certainly can be a revolutionary ideology—in fact it has been that, briefly in the French and more lastingly in the American case—but the negative version seems more powerful. It is also characteristically episodic and recurrent; every abuse of power brings a "liberal" response.

Liberal socialism has a form similar to liberal monarchy, though the doctrinal connections are very different. Central socialist doctrines make individual liberation the long-term goal of the movement; they claim, in effect, to incorporate liberal positivity. But the idea of class struggle, the dream of "seizing" power and using the state to bring about rapid social and economic transformation, the acceptance of "vanguard" leadership—all these, for many socialists, undermined the commitment to negative constraints. If the proletariat was in theory a "universal" class and in practice a majority class, and if it acted in the interests of all humanity, and if everything it did was historically determined, why were constraints needed? The proletariat was the world-historical good king. But the actual rule of the bad advisors of this good king quickly produced not only a straightforwardly liberal but also a liberal socialist opposition. The latter was led by men and women still committed to the substantive means and ends of socialism, who advocated at the same time a variety of limits on the exercise of political power: an independent judiciary, a free press, a strong civil society.

I call these features of a political system negative, though they obviously have positive content (and value) because their content is not given by liberal doctrine. "The liberal method of taking part in the political contest," wrote Carlo Rosselli, author of a book called *Liberal Socialism* (1937), "cannot be qualified; it is not and cannot be either bourgeois or socialist, conservative or revolutionary."³ This seems to me wrong, since liberalism in fact can both qualify and be qualified. Even within liberal limits, a political contest can take very different

forms involving different protagonists, different kinds of mobilization, different degrees of participation, different styles of debate. Socialism should press these differences in one direction (class-based or ideological parties, mass mobilization, intense participation), substantive liberalism is another. We defend the "liberal method," however it is positively expressed, for the sake of the protection it provides against tyranny.

A last question: Does liberal negativity set limits on substantive liberalism, too? If there is a liberal (and illiberal) socialism, is there also a liberal (and illiberal) liberalism? I think that *libertarianism* is the name we use for a liberalism set loose from its own negativity. In this version of liberal politics and society, individual autonomy, unlimited in its scope, gives rise to a pattern of domination: the strong over the weak, the rich over the poor. Since such a pattern, once established, opens the way for cruelty and oppression, it is certain to produce, as a characteristic recoil, the liberalism of fear. What fear will dictate in this case is a defensive reaction aimed at setting limits on liberty itself in order to secure the basic interests of the weakest members of society. If these fearful liberals move beyond defensiveness and try to make this or that version of autonomy universally available, they will become liberals of a positive sort, driven by hope as well as fear, "social" liberals, say; or they will reach toward some further positivity and become liberal socialists.

We always have to be afraid of political power; that is the central liberal insight. But this is an insight into a universal experience that wasn't discovered, only theorized, by liberal writers. Nor does this fear by itself make for an adequate theory of political power. We must address the uses of power as well as its dangers. And since it has many uses, we have to choose among them, designing policies, like Shklar's guaranteed employment, that enhance and strengthen what we most value in our way of life. Then we try to enforce those policies; carefully, if we are wise, remembering the last time we were fearful and acting within the limits of liberal negativity.

Notes

1. *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*, 99.
2. *American Citizenship*, 100.
3. Carlo Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, ed. Nadia Urbinati, trans. William McCuaig (Princeton, 1994), 94.

2

The Democracy of Everyday Life

Nancy L. Rosenblum

American citizenship finds its glory not simply in the right to political participation but in the democracy of everyday life.

The Faces of Injustice [1990], 43

JUDITH SHKLAR DESCRIBED THE TASK of intellectual history as an attempt to discover the spiritual antecedents of contemporary thought, and her most influential work focused on the precursors of the "liberalism of fear" (1989). A number of recent commentators claim to see a shift in Shklar's later writings, away from this grim preoccupation with warding off the worst official cruelties and toward a positive theory of social democracy. It is true that Shklar was increasingly interested in democratic citizenship, American citizenship in particular, but attempts to recruit her as a social democrat or philosopher of equality go too far.¹ It is not surprising, after all, that the author of a study of Rousseau would see the sense of injustice as "the core of the modern democratic political sensibility" (*The Faces of Injustice*, 92, 86). But Shklar consistently declined to engage in the business of systematic normative theory, where notions of social justice and responsibility are given solid ground. On the contrary, she always insisted that the experience of injustice has "an exuberant life of its own," which no system of justice can grasp. Nor did she subscribe to the collection of political preferences that define social democracy, and where we find some overlap of sympathy or policy her reasons diverged from the conventional ones. For example, she recommended a "right to work" for Americans because, for reasons specific to our shameful history of slavery, earning has become a prerequisite for first-class citizenship. She continued to see "ac-

I would like to thank Peter Berkowitz, Rogers Smith, and Catherine Zuckert for comments on an earlier version of this essay.