

# A pessimistic liberalism: Jacob Talmon's suspicion and the birth of contemporary political thought

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## Abstract

Discussions of liberalism as a political ideology often focus on the progressive, civilisational, and triumphalist ideologies of liberal thinkers. Scholarly work on liberal empire situates these issues in the context of colonialism, and contemporary discussions of liberal world order devote much intellectual space to optimism about liberalism. Scholars have spent much less time connecting liberalism to deep cynicism and suspicion. This article, in focusing on what I term a 'pessimistic liberalism', fills this gap by examining the ways that the spectre of totalitarianism influenced post-war liberal thought. The mid-20th century was a pivotal moment where both liberalism and its critics proceeded to make arguments about politics that began from similar attitudes about the nature of the political: suspicion, cynicism, resignation, and fear. Specifically, the article analyses historian Jacob Talmon's genealogy of modern leftist thought to illustrate the shift in liberal thinking from its 19th century optimism to its 20th century pessimism and scepticism. Talmon's engagement with the issues of political messianism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism represented a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (pace Paul Ricoeur) that critiqued the triumphalism of previous political projects. The article concludes by connecting this project to the broader development of 'contemporary political thought' and reflects on pessimism's place in politics.

## Keywords

Cold War, international relations, Jacob Talmon, liberalism, pessimism, political theory

## Introduction

The end of World War II brought not only the institutional reconstruction of world order, but fundamentally altered the way that intellectuals, policymakers, and publics *wrote* global politics. Discourses about a triumphant liberalism, civilisational narratives, and myths of empire gave way to new methods of thinking about the world and the relationship between freedom, liberty, and the duty of Western liberal states: less triumphant, more pessimistic. Much of the literature on international political thought has focused on the contributions of modern and pre-modern thinkers in an attempt to

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show how those theories can lead to a more peaceful, friendly international system, or, alternatively, the dangers of some of the ideologies emerging from ‘classical theory’ (see, inter alia, Doyle, 1983; Hoffman and Fidler, 1991; Jahn, 2005, 2013). This historical reconstruction has often neglected to examine the role that 20th-century thinkers have played in not only constituting contemporary theorising about global politics,<sup>1</sup> but also how mid-century global political thought itself has contributed to the development of contemporary political theory.

I argue that the work of Jacob Talmon, a 20th century historian, illustrates the emergence of a pessimistic liberalism in the 20th century and highlights its origins, fears, tensions, and ruptures during the Cold War. Talmon’s work has been underappreciated in the history of political and international thought, leaving one commentator to write, ‘Talmon’s *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* had a “vast influence among historians”, but the larger impact of his work has been limited and probably has declined since the 1980s, especially compared to that of Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt’ (Jacoby, 2007: 60). Like the latter thinkers, Talmon’s thought is fueled by a scepticism of grand narratives, and the danger such narratives could ravage on the world – particularly narratives of political messianism, cosmopolitanism, and nationalism. Berlin and others were liberals similarly influenced in their thinking by the Holocaust – perhaps the 20th century’s most horrific reminder of the terrors of ideology. ‘Talmon was well aware of the fact that his heroes’, argues Arie Dubnov (2008b: 134), ‘instead of being protectors of human dignity and individual liberty, can provide sophisticated justifications and cruel rationalisations for oppression and autocracy’. While Talmon was not the only theorist belonging to this tradition of a ‘liberalism of fear’ (Shklar, 1998) or a pessimistic liberalism, his work provides a look into a notable attempt at *tracing* the history of a crusading, optimistic, liberalism – and critiquing its failures, horrors, and legacies.

This article proceeds in three parts. First, I chart the emergence of a pessimistic liberalism, beginning in the immediate aftermath of World War II. This tradition has longer lineages in liberal international thought, to be sure, but the spectre of totalitarianism in a period of great uncertainty brought rise to a new way of thinking about liberal world order, one that breaks down the boundaries between ‘realist’ understandings of world politics and decidedly liberal views.<sup>2</sup> Second, I look to Jacob Talmon’s genealogy of political messianism as a representative case of pessimistic liberalism in the post-war era. Talmon exemplified what philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1970) termed a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, albeit from a perspective firmly rooted in liberalism. I continue this examination by explicating how this suspicion – originating from Talmon’s personal and intellectual experience with the Holocaust and European totalitarianism – resulted in his contribution to what might be termed a ‘pessimistic liberalism’. Finally, the article reflects on what a pessimistic liberalism means for rethinking the lineage(s) of international liberalism in the 20th century. In many ways, pessimistic liberalism is not just constitutive of contemporary international thought, but helps to define the temporal and methodological boundaries of contemporary political theory more generally.

### **An end to optimism: Liberal pessimism in the 20th century**

Mid-20th century liberal pessimism is sandwiched between two sets of liberal discourses that were quite the opposite: resoundingly triumphant. This pessimism represents two puzzles in understanding the development of international liberal discourse from the mid-19th century to the present. First, what explains the intellectual turn to

pessimism in the mid-century? Isaiah Berlin, Jacob Talmon, Raymond Aron, and, to some extent, Karl Popper represent a break from previous theorising about liberal world order, a new way of painting a bleak picture onto the canvas of a liberalising world. Second, the question of how do we explain the subsequent decline of pessimistic liberalism moving into the twenty-first century is no less interesting. This article focuses more precisely on the first question.

Pessimistic liberalism as an intellectual tradition exists at two levels. First, it is a tradition grounded in what Judith Shklar termed the 'liberalism of fear'. Shklar (1998: 5) argues that 'liberalism's deepest grounding is in place from the first, in the conviction of the earliest defenders of toleration, born in horror, that cruelty is an absolute evil, an offense to God or humanity'. Pessimism was a way of positioning one's self in the aftermath of the horrors of the 20th century. Cruelty on a scale never previously imagined was possible; liberals had to come to terms with this fact of the contemporary condition. As Elisabeth Anker (2014: 818) notes, liberalism is often 'coupled to, and mobilized by, monstrous violence, coercion, demonization, imperialism, and fear'. If one were to succinctly describe the mid-20th century in a metaphor, it was a century of horror.

Second, pessimistic liberalism represents a self-reflective critique of liberalism's own triumphalism. Amanda Anderson's (2016: 1) understanding of a 'bleak liberalism' emphasises this point. Anderson writes that liberalism is 'a philosophical and political project conceived in an acute awareness of the challenges and often bleak prospects confronting it'. While Anderson argues that the dialectical negativity of liberalism is constitutive of the ideology more generally, the Cold War and the aftermath of the Holocaust were integral moments in the move away from triumphalism and towards an attitude of pessimism. In short, pessimistic liberals were fearful; however, they were also introspective and critical of the troubling genealogies of liberalism, triumphalism, and political messianism.

The period of empire and the inter-war period's continuation of similar themes of developmentalism and progress represented the first iterations of a liberal triumphalism and optimism in world politics. In the period of 'new empire', which began in the 1870s, but began its ideological development much earlier, liberal thinkers focused their sights on a developmental theory of history that would bring the rest of the world into the civilisation of Western Europe. Civilising the 'barbarians' of the world, in the terminology used by thinkers like John Stuart Mill and others, was not only a duty of Western liberal states, but was also evidence of the triumph of an emancipatory liberal ethic. Alexis de Tocqueville (1872: 188–189) illustrated this well in the context of the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857 against British rule in India, arguing in a letter to his friend Nassau William Senior: '[T]here is not one civilised nation in the world that ought to rejoice in seeing India escape from the hands of Europe in order to fall back into a state of anarchy and barbarism worse than before the conquest'. For 19th-century liberals, an unrepentant liberalism was the greatest contribution of Europe to the rest of the world – the antidote to barbarism and anarchy.

In the post-Cold War era, a liberal triumphalism again emerged from the ruins of the USSR, and the success of the West in winning a protected ideological and material battle. Francis Fukuyama's (1989: 3) 'End of History' thesis – drawing on a Hegelian imagery about 'absolute truth' – suggested 'The triumph of the West, of the Western *idea*, is evident first of all in the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism'. Much of international theory took this triumphalist history as gospel. This was first expressed in an effort to develop liberal international relations (IR)

theory into a systematic alternative to political realism (see, *inter alia*, Keohane and Nye, 1977; Moravcsik, 1997) and apexed into a reimagining of history altogether as the triumphant decline of violence, harm, and barbarism in the face of the rise of new global values associated with cosmopolitanism and liberalism (Linklater, 2011; Mueller, 2004; Pinker, 2011).

Cold War liberalism was decidedly less triumphant. The shift in international liberalism from the universalist, and ambitious, civilisational development culture of the pre-World War II period began in earnest at the end of the war. This is not to say that these liberalisms were necessarily opposed to empire; however, optimism about empire's future was tempered. Some have associated this shift with a new sort of 'liberalism without illusions' (Yack, 1996), or a more sensible, fearful, and minimal liberalism that was terrified by the prospect of grand visions, global designs, and the rise of totalitarianism (Müller, 2008: 48). As Abbott Gleason (1996: 3) notes, 'Totalitarianism was the great mobilizing and unifying concept of the Cold War'. Furthermore, many Cold War liberals like Karl Popper, Raymond Aron, Jacob Talmon, and others wrote decidedly from an interest in the future of Jewish identity in the context of Israel and the aftermath of the Holocaust. Liberalism of the post-war era was linked closely to the struggle for survival (Hacohen, 2009).

This discursive change was perhaps best exemplified by two distinct intellectual movements, which shared the common fear of Soviet communism. The first of these came from left-liberals, influenced by socialism, who were becoming increasingly cautious of the extremities of the socialist project in the context of totalitarianism. George Orwell exemplifies this strand – as much of his political and critical literary writings during and after the Second World War indicates an intellectual concern with the evolution of ideology in British liberal circles. In a review of Arthur Koestler's corpus of work, Orwell (2010: 305) is emphatic about his disillusionment with the sort of liberal project of the imperial and inter-war periods, equating it, in unobvious ways, with the totalitarianism of Soviet communism, writing in 1944:

Perhaps some degree of suffering is ineradicable from human life, perhaps the choice before man is always a choice of evils, perhaps even the aim of Socialism is not to make the world perfect but to make it better. All revolutions are failures, but they are not all the same failure.

In fact, Orwell positions his cautious left-liberalism against that of George Bernard Shaw and Harold Laski, citing the ways in which their utopianism often led them into wrong-headed understandings of the socialist project (Orwell, 2010).

The second strand came from the emergence of value-pluralism, which was suspicious of the sort of self-actualisation liberalism of the previous era, equating it with the evolution of totalitarianism. Isaiah Berlin represented perhaps its most memorable proponent, and an exemplary figure in terms of how liberals were wrestling with the moral bases of their project in the post-war age.<sup>3</sup> In his famous 1958 essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty', Berlin (1969: 167) writes,

One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altar of the great historical ideals – justice, or progress, or happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society.

It is the rationalist, romantic, positive form of liberty that should be cautioned against. It represents an imperial liberalism and a totalitarian one.<sup>4</sup>

Although Orwell and Berlin represent two distinct political positions – a left-liberal and a pluralistic anti-essentialist one – they both exemplify the caution and fear of liberal intellectuals after World War II. This concern with communism and totalitarianism in the post-war period was nearly universal, such that, as Domenico Losurdo (2004: 30) argues,

The best way for the Western world to face this war [i.e. the Cold War] was to establish itself as the champion in the struggle against the new totalitarianism, which was labelled as the necessary and inevitable consequence of Communist ideology and program.

The fear of the communist threat was a recurring theme in policy discourse, as well (Campbell, 1998). Liberal policymakers, unlike their predecessors in previous times, were worried about the practical effects that a universalism, and a heavy-handed paternalism, would have on US strategic interests. On top of this, there was a clear understanding that liberalism – as a pluralistic enterprise – should value the ability of individuals in other countries to make decisions for themselves. Even policies that were grounded in expanding Western influence abroad were justified through new lenses—American empire, in short, became less triumphalist and more rooted in fear, suspicion, and pessimism.

While policymakers are not political theorists, these recurring themes show how these ideas represented liberal worldviews of the Cold War. That these actors' actions demonstrated an irony, and often a mismatch between word and deed, only further demonstrates how powerful these discourses were in forcing policymakers to 'talk the talk'. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who headed the US State Department from 1961 to 1969, describes this attitude well in an interview, stating that in regard to US policy towards South Vietnam,

[W]e can't make and unmake governments in Vietnam. We just don't have it in our capability. It would be silly for us to take steps that would cause the South Vietnamese to turn around and start shooting at us. There are limits beyond which you can [not] go in imposing your will upon somebody. You can give advice, you can persuade, you can cajole, you can sometimes put on pressure, you can sometimes threaten. But at the end of the day, these decisions have to be made by the South Vietnamese themselves because, although we've had a substantial military presence there, we can't take over running the affairs of seventeen or eighteen million people. There are limits beyond which you simply can't go. (Rusk, 1969)

In dealing with its own problems in Africa during the 1960s, Britain's relations with former, and existing, colonies represented an important cultural shift in British imperialism, as well, towards a moderation of universalism and away from the civilisational paternalism of the past. In response to Zimbabwean claims in the United Nations Security Council that UK policies in Rhodesia were characterised by 'abominable dishonesty', British Foreign Secretary George Brown argued (in quite an ironically illiberal context) that 'This is primarily a great moral issue. The only solution is one which is acceptable, and is seen to be acceptable, and is determined as being acceptable, to the people of Rhodesia as a whole' (as cited in Times, 1992).

This is a different understanding of the 'moral issue' than that of British liberals before World War II. Whereas peoples in the colonial periphery were relegated to an 'infantile' status – and therefore excluded from determining their own fates (see, inter alia, Mehta, 1990; Morefield, 2004), democratically or otherwise – this civilisational narrative became, for many liberals, a symptom of totalitarian governance: the worst of the evils of

Soviet Communism. Brown was not the only British liberal to make these discursive moves in the 1960s. Prime Minister Harold Wilson (1968) associated the problem of violence precisely with the reactionism of conservative and authoritarian political movements, further demonstrating the fear of Western liberals with both the rise of Soviet Communism and the excesses of a civilisational paternalism.

Talmon's work is paradigmatic of this trend in liberal thought, leading some scholars to suggest that he was, in fact, a 'leading representative of Cold War liberals' (Hacohen, 2008: 147).<sup>5</sup> This was partly due to Talmon's immersion in a British intellectual culture that produced a significant amount of Cold War liberals (Hacohen, 2008: 150). However, Talmon was an exemplary figure in his own right in the culture of suspicion and pessimism that emerged from within this tradition, particularly in the way that Talmon's genealogical studies of the development of liberal democracy highlighted just how easily optimism and messianism could spiral out of control, particularly when, *pace* Johann Gottfried Herder, 'the whole was more real, and came before the parts' of a society; true democratic totalitarianism' (Talmon, 1968: 100). Talmon's historical investigations of the aftermath of the French Revolution, as well, were not purely academic inquiries. His most famous work, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, was 'written under the strong influence of Cold War realities' (Dubnov, 2010: 564). Talmon-as-historian demonstrated just how much this suspicion penetrated all aspects of his intellectual production.

### Talmon's 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and the spectre of totalitarianism

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2017) defines pessimism as 'the tendency or disposition to look at the worst aspect of things; the attitude or habit of taking a negative view of circumstances, the future, etc'.

Pessimism, itself, is underdeveloped in the study of global politics. Tim Stevens (2018), in a brief review of some of these trends, shows that much of the discussion of pessimism in IR is focused on the tradition of realism, and with very little conceptual development (for a recent attempt at developing this concept in global politics, see Stevens and Michelsen, 2019). Stevens defines pessimism as 'resignation in the face of intractable human conflict, where cynicism substitutes for scholarly scepticism, and which fatalism shades into nihilistic acceptance of the futility of political action' (Stevens, 2018: 283). This description characterises some forms of pessimism, but not all of them. In many ways, looking for the 'worst aspect of things' does not entail a resignation altogether, but rather clears the air of false prophets that promise salvation. Joshua Dienstag's (2009) characterisation of pessimism as a critique of progressive philosophies and histories orients pessimism more clearly as a form of critical inquiry that sees the negativity of unfolding historical processes that attempt to sell us snake oil, without foreclosing the possibility that the destructions of those narratives may leave us better off. After all, even Theodor Adorno's pessimism about the culture industry, and the bleakness of a negative dialectics, opens us up to the positivity of those moments of clarity through which we can, even if for a brief time, mount a fight (see Adorno, 1981).<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, pessimism has been a present in political thought, particularly in the way that certain thinkers have revealed the concealed 'worst' of Western philosophy and politics through what Ricoeur (1970) has termed a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. Ricoeur charted this critical reading, a suspicious, pessimistic reading, of texts, by focusing on three theorists in particular: Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. All of

these thinkers, for Ricoeur, shared a concern with religion and a desire to strip away the vestiges that religion put up with the idea of showing something more sinister underneath (see also Stewart, 1989). For Marx, this was demonstrating that religion was the ‘opiate of the masses’; for Nietzsche, this was showing how religion was involved in the creation of a ‘slave morality’ that valued weakness over strength; and, finally, for Freud, it was humankind’s psychological need for a father figure. These three thinkers took historical and textual interpretation as a project of suspicion, of genealogy – an ‘historical narrative that explains an aspect of human life by showing how it came into being’ (Bevir, 2008: 262). Such genealogies mean to expose, uncover, to show the *pessimus* (‘the worst’) of a textual programme.

Ricoeur’s classification of a hermeneutics of suspicion in Western thought does not necessarily entail a *nihilistic* pessimism. Being suspicious – uncovering the ‘worst’ of something – is not necessarily a spiral into the bleakest, most hopeless, doom. In fact, suspicion opens us up to thinking about emancipation, about the future, about faith. Ricoeur (1970: 33) writes, ‘All three [Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud] clear the horizon for a more authentic world, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a “destructive” critique, but by the invention of an art of interpreting’. Being suspicious challenges some of our deepest assumptions about culture, politics, philosophy, and aesthetics. However, it does not necessarily entail a rejection of those projects. It is aimed at rewriting them through a specific method of interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

Talmon exemplified this hermeneutics of suspicion in the mid-20th century. His project was a genealogical one – an uncovering of ‘the worst’. This uncovering came through Talmon’s critical reading of the history of ‘political messianism’, especially that of the French Revolution. By political messianism, Talmon was referring to a utopianism aimed at an appeal to deified principles of political organisation that promised a freeing of the people from the yoke of all evil. ‘Rousseau, and in [Isaiah] Berlin’s writings also Kant and T.H. Green’, writes Dubnov (2008: 224), ‘were all preparing the grounds for totalitarianism because they began the process that eventually allowed the sacrifice of an actual “empirical self” to an abstract “true” or higher self’.

The main thread connecting all of Talmon’s works was locating, and explaining, how history could have unfolded from a moment of such promise (notably, the French Revolution) to one of death and destruction. He argued in his trilogy on totalitarian democracy that democratic thought and practice branched off in the Age of Revolutions into a liberal democracy strand that was premised on a pluralistic and negative conception of liberty, and a totalitarian strand that was premised on ideals of utopia and progress that lead to horrors, terror, and war. For Talmon, these ideas did not die with the French Revolution. These utopian projects were alive and well far into the 20th century; they were ‘the womb out of which in due course emerged the frame of mind and body of ideas which shaped the Bolshevik revolution and were made dominant by it’ (Talmon, 1960: 16). Talmon’s narrative challenged others of the time that saw the origin of totalitarianism in alternate totalising processes (imperialism and racism, for instance, as in Arendt’s work), or in the destruction of particularising projects (like the nation-state). For Talmon, however, it was the idea of progress itself that led to totalitarianism.

*Pace* Ricoeur, Talmon’s pessimism was not a nihilism; it was pervaded by a search for truth. It was the lack of reality, and the focus on a blind idealism, that led to the terrors of the modern age. Talmon (1960: 23) writes, ‘Under the impact of the French Revolution, however, the dialogue was pursued upon a plane of absolutes. For the French Revolution had given birth to modern ideologies, indeed ideologies *tout court*; and ideologies fight

shy of simple self-interest'. The problem with the revolution was that revolutionaries did not apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to their own ideas.

In addition to correcting a triumphalist narrative, Talmon's genealogy of political messianism and totalitarianism was driven by lived political realities. Talmon was an exile in the midst of the rise of totalitarianism in Europe. He left his native Poland to study history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1934, shortly after the Nazis came to power in Germany, moving to France shortly before the Nazis took over. He continued his studies in Britain after the Nazi occupation. For Talmon, the Holocaust could not be reduced to the decisions of Hitler, nor to rising anti-Semitism in Europe. This process was as much a part of the long historical trajectory that led to the blaming of European Jews for social and political problems – from 'the Right and the Left' (Talmon, 2015 [1973]: 193). It was also about European intellectual changes more generally, and particularly the supposed emancipatory effects of Enlightenment thought: thinking that would lead as much to the French Revolution as to the ethnic cleansing of entire peoples in the 20th century. The idea of objectifying rational ideas like progress, welfare, harmony, and justice (Talmon, 2015 [1973]: 194) and characterising the Jews as the 'other' who represented a disease that needed to be 'cut off of society's body like a dead limb' (Talmon, 2015 [1973]) demonstrated to Talmon that the promises we had about the Enlightenment only served to objectify a group of people and justify their mass murder.

In what ways did Talmon's interpretation of history and politics exemplify this suspicion? Three general themes are of importance: a fear of messianic political movements, an ambivalence towards liberal cosmopolitanism, and a reluctant (though often contradictory) relationship with exclusivist ideologies like nationalism.

The first of these themes is a fear of messianic political movements, and especially of ideological hegemony, fervour, and militarism. Talmon's historical work deals with these problems specifically, especially *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* and *Political Messianism*, which are examinations of how a certain sort of democratic project led from the French Revolution to the inauguration of the age of Stalin. This was based on a tendency towards a 'democratic perfectionism', or a rejection of pluralism altogether in the fervour of political movements (Talmon, 1952: 104). Fervour was central to this concern; Talmon's pessimism about messianic political movements was the ease with which elites take ideologies and use them in a way to rule out all other possibilities of living. He identifies Maximilien Robespierre as one such example of a fervour generator in the aftermath of the French Revolution: 'The fervour and ceaseless activity of the believers, on the one hand, and intimidation practiced on opponents and the lukewarm, on the other, are the instruments by which the desired 'general will' is made to appear as the will of all' (Talmon, 1952: 105).

Talmon examines this issue with pessimism from a top-down perspective. The idea of a 'messianism' that constructs a political theology with an ideological figurehead (metaphorical or personality) that will deliver the public from the horrors of the present did not represent a form of triumphalism for Talmon. Rather, it was an opportunity for the exploitation of genuine desires for change and betterment of the population. The French Revolution was the modern example of a democratic totalitarianism operating for the benefit of the elite, at the service of a political movement built on hegemony and militarism, ending with a Reign of Terror and Napoleon Bonaparte marching across Europe.

Talmon asserted his scepticism of grand historical narratives and ideologies by highlighting how these ideas could lead individuals away from freedom and into the throes of



dangerous ideological projects. One clear example of this comes from his work *Political Messianism*, where he argues that

the most awe-inspiring lesson of the French Revolution was not that men with their deliberating reason can make a revolution, but that revolution plays havoc with men, makes and unmakes them, throws them unexpectedly up and then sweeps them suddenly away. (Talmon, 1960: 295)

The second theme is Talmon's suspicion of the ideals of liberal cosmopolitanism as a solution for international conflict. Talmon considered cosmopolitanism itself to be a contributor to totalitarianism, and specifically that form of totalitarianism that dressed itself up in the authority of democracy. Cosmopolitanism, for Talmon, represented the same sort of utopian urges to reconcile the political conflicts of our times through an appeal to some sort of higher power. This was not only a critique of liberalism, but also of the metaphysics of socialist messianism: 'Life universal is life eternal, without any real break between life and death, life here, and life beyond' (Talmon, 1960: 120). Cosmopolitanism, as a form of totalitarian democracy, was a 'longing for a final resolution of all contradictions and conflicts into a state of total harmony' (quoted in Dubnov, 2010: 562). This sense that liberalism had overstepped its bounds in its cosmopolitan forms, trying to dissolve the political altogether, was a critique of liberalism of the post-World War I era more generally (see, inter alia, Carr, 2001, and Schmitt, 2007), but was particularly notable coming from an admitted liberal.

Talmon was nuanced in his studies of cosmopolitanism – or what he referred to most broadly as the 'universal'. Talmon (1965: 65) is clear that he believes Jews in the diaspora are connected through a universal commitment to a shared responsibility. In addition, Talmon (1965: 118) argues that the universal is a necessary mirror image of the unique. As he writes, 'We cannot ignore the fact of uniqueness evolved in time. We dare not do without the assurance of universality grounded in the timeless'. For Talmon, there is an important function served by universality and cosmopolitanism, particularly in understanding how global Jewry comprises as single and universal community. This is one explanation for Talmon's (1980: 82–90) sympathetic discussion in his book *Myth of the Nation*, of Rosa Luxemburg. She represented an internationalism opposed to the radical nationalism of European Marxism.

However, Talmon's distrust of this idea is pronounced. For instance, Talmon (1965: 66) attacks cosmopolitanism as a rhetorical tool used by the Soviet Union to entice Jews to be sympathetic towards communism. Furthermore, liberals, too, were guilty of relying on cosmopolitanism towards dangerous ends. Talmon (1965: 121) places blame on liberal cosmopolitanism as being 'indirectly a help to Hitler'. The liberal call for Jews to 'be like the all the rest of us' supported totalitarians' attempts to set Jews apart as altogether other and unassimilable – a threat to world order (Talmon, 1965).

Another example demonstrates this suspicion and fear of cosmopolitan discourses. When the term 'cosmopolitan', itself, was turned on critics of Israeli policy in the 1960s, Talmon was furious with the implications. In 1969, the Israeli Minister of Information, Yisrael Galili, sparked rebuke from Talmon in an open letter for comments the former made suggesting the Palestinian people had no national identity and no moral right to claimed land. Talmon (2015 [1969a]: 302) was blunt: 'I am deeply aware that your statement seriously endangers both the possibilities of peace in the area and Israel's reputation as a state'. More than that, Talmon anticipated arguments painting this criticism as a residual of cosmopolitan sentiment. Talmon preempted these criticisms in a telling passage from the letter:

I hope that you are not tempted to denounce our Zionist and Jewish loyalty or to throw at us accusations such as ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘decayed’, and ‘non-rooted’, – as it is enough for me here to hint at where, when, and who invented the terms ‘rooted’ and ‘real’ on the one hand and ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘nihilist’ on the other. It was my destiny to bury myself for twenty years in this kind of filthy literature composed by evil people and haters of Israel. (Talmon, 2015 [1969a]: 305)

Talmon’s method of revealing the ‘worst aspects of things’ shines through here, demonstrating the recurring parallels between a discourse of cosmopolitanism and one of totalitarianism – using an historical framing in order to show that even discourses used to justify the ethnic cleansing of European Jewry could be used against a supporter of Israel to stifle criticisms of policy. Talmon was suspicious of the way these historical languages were being used to connect cosmopolitanism with its greatest 20th-century critics. This is totalitarian word play, worthy only of dystopian futures.

The third theme reflected in Talmon’s pessimistic liberalism is an ambivalent relationship to nationalism. He was clear when writing of Herder, one of the intellectual progenitors of modern nationalist ideology, that the latter was ‘blissfully unaware, and remained so until the end, that he was forging the most dangerous dynamite of modern times’ (quoted in Mendelsohn, 2008: 197). However, Talmon’s view of nationalism was a view of suspicion and tragedy, rather than a blanket denial of nationalism as such. As an historian, Talmon was aware that nationalism could be used to mobilise people for great causes – and Talmon himself was especially interested in the movement for Polish nationalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries (see Mendelsohn, 2008, for a discussion). Furthermore, there are moments of recognition of the importance of the nation, particularly as it relates to Jewish history. He writes, in *The Unique and the Universal*:

If it was given to the Jews to make some mark on world history, it was not because God, as someone has said, was kind to the Jews, in scattering them among the nations, but because they had fashioned their real contribution – the Judaic heritage – in their own country, and were dispersed only after they had been molded into a unique phenomenon . . . (Talmon, 1965: 89)

The nation precedes the creation of a universal community of Jews. Uniqueness precedes universalism. In fact, as Talmon (1965: 13) notes in the same text, nationalism has revolutionary importance: ‘Nationalism is full of ambivalence. It is on the one hand a conservative force, but on the other a revolutionary factor’.

However, Talmon’s fear of nationalism was of its potential excesses and failures, not just as related to the Holocaust (or the Soviet Union in his discussion of Marxism’s nationalism in *The Myth of the Nation*), but also to the eventual mixed bag that was Polish nationalism, and the excesses that lead the French Revolution away from being a liberal revolution founded on individual liberty, to a series of wars and terrors instigated by political messiahs able to effectively mobilise the masses. In this sense, Talmon’s views were not dissimilar from other Cold War liberals who saw great emancipatory potentials in a sense of collective belonging and national citizenship. Nonetheless, nationalism was a way, in Talmon’s view, to create and sustain community. Its potentialities, however, were indeterminate. Talmon’s was a respect for nationalism rooted in historical suspicion.

Talmon’s suspicions held as much political implication as they did historical implication. One example of the ways this manifested in Talmon’s personal politics is his shifting

positions on Zionism. Talmon himself was, as Amikam Nachmani (2014: 389) lucidly demonstrates, a ‘supporter of the Zionist ideal, liberal critic of Israeli policies, and outspoken defender against anti-semitism’. Nonetheless, Talmon’s own positions were often, seemingly, contradictory. First, he was a fierce critic of the treatment of Palestinian refugees by the Arab states, as well as of Israeli militarism, which he thought would ultimately be a heavy price for a Jewish state to pay (Nachmani, 2014: 377). Even in Talmon’s personal commitment to Zionism, he demonstrated a pessimism and suspicion of Israel’s policies towards the Palestinians.

Second, Zionism was an exception to a messianic nationalism. For writers like Talmon (and Isaiah Berlin), Zionism was a form of ethno-nationalism that was anti-messianism, because it was a rejection of assimilationism rather than a project of universal and cosmopolitan aim. While past nationalisms, especially of the Messianic nationalism characterising the French Revolution, were destructive, Zionism was important in the way that it deconstructed universalism of such narratives altogether. As Dubnov (2010: 571) notes about Talmon and Berlin, ‘Post-war liberalism could not allow itself to make the mistake of offering a haughty philosophy that failed to satisfy the emotional needs for cementing social bonds in the name of abstract universalism’.<sup>8</sup>

This set of personal political beliefs, mixed with a philosophico-historical account of messianism, Zionism, and cosmopolitanism, also affected the way that Talmon variously criticised and justified Israeli policy against the Palestinians. In an essay about Israel’s relationship with the Arab World, written after the 1967 war, Talmon makes the case against arguments for superior force alone:

If anything has been proved by the fifty years’ conflict, it is precisely that it is just not true that the adversary ‘understands only the language of force’. Instead of bringing him to his knees, despair goads him on to more desperate acts of resistance or aggression. When he has nothing to lose, he can risk everything, because he risks nothing. This has been shown again and again by both Jews and Arabs, not to speak of Vietnam, Algeria and so many other cases. It would be amusing if it were not so painful to hear Jews expatiating on the special and different mentality of ‘our’ Arabs in the way anti-Semites have not so long ago been philosophizing about the innate and unalterable, usually mean, characteristics of the Jews. (Talmon, 2015 [1969b]: 244)

This criticism of Israel was shocking by the standards of the time. In fact, the prominent Israeli poet, Nathan Alterman, had planned to sue Talmon for making such comparisons between the Israelis and the anti-Semitic discourses leading to World War II (Nachmani, 2014: 383). Talmon’s commitment to suspicion and pessimism, for seeing the ‘worst aspect of things’, lead to these sorts of arguments. Interestingly, Talmon would later become much more fervent in his support for Israeli policies and Zionism, finding it ‘harder to distinguish between anti-Semitic prejudices and anti-Israeli expressions’ (Dubnov, 2008: 234).

What this discussion of Talmon’s suspicion demonstrates is two things. First, Talmon’s work belongs to a long tradition of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. What is rather surprising about this, however, is that Talmon’s suspicion – his pessimism – is unwaveringly liberal. Second, Talmon’s scepticism of messianic political movements, his ambivalence towards cosmopolitanism, and antipathy towards nationalism represented not only key themes in his thinking, but also his politics. His experience of the latter half of the 20th century, the aftermath of the Holocaust, the rise of the Soviet Union, and the embattlement of Zionism brought these issues into the realm of political practice. If the latter half

of the 20th century was characterised by a liberalism of fear, Talmon's work put these fears on wide display.

### **Making contemporary political thought: Living the 'non-fascist life'**

What Talmon's historical works attempt to do is nothing less than deconstruct two key components of modern liberalism: its messianism and its cosmopolitanism. The significance of Talmon, however, goes beyond this. Talmon, along with other Cold War intellectuals, inaugurated a new era of political thought: what we might specifically term the era of 'contemporary political theory'. The impact of the Holocaust and the fears of political messianism were not just idiosyncratic concerns of Talmon's. These ideas fundamentally changed liberalism at least until the end of the Cold War and constituted an emerging anti-totalitarian Left within continental political traditions. Cold War pessimism marked a decisive break from the modern period of political thought: an end to the optimism of the Enlightenment, and a movement towards thinking about the institutions necessary for an individual to survive the horrors of a catastrophic century.

Little conceptual work has been undertaken in political theory about the nature of 'contemporary political thought'. Many undergraduate and graduate courses use the term synonymously with 20th century political thought, and many use the term in a way that is decidedly temporal (in other words, contemporary is 'current'). John Gray (1995: viii) argues that contemporary thought is a riff on the Enlightenment project, while theorists like Daniel Rasmussen (2018: 39–60) suggest the opposite: that contemporary thought is a *criticism* of major facets of that project, including its faith in universalism and reason, enabling of oppression, hostility, and individualism. The journal *Contemporary Political Theory* (Editorial Board, 2002: 1) inaugurated its first issue with an argument that contemporary theory after World War II was interested less in large, normative constructions, and more with problem and concept-oriented theorising. What these ideas point to is that contemporary political thought represented a change in the way that it critically approached the Enlightenment, either immanently or outside of it, as a troubling, or at least incomplete, project.

This understanding is important in at least two ways. First, in a *conceptual* way it helps to distinguish between 20th century liberalisms. For example, though a 20th century thinker, John Rawls's (1971) *Theory of Justice* is a paradigmatically 'modern' work. It works within the context of rationalism, enlightenment understandings of progress, and from the method of ideal theory. This sort of liberalism is best understood as a continuation of an 18th-century project. Cold War liberals like Talmon represent another avenue for this project – one that critiques important aspects of the Enlightenment and that problematises the messianism of discourses of 'progress'. Second, in an *historical* way, understanding contemporary political thought as a reaction to the terrors of the 20th century helps to contextualise ideological changes after the Holocaust. It also aids in understanding the effects of modernity, modernisation, the bureaucratic state, and technology had on political knowledge in the 20th century.

Talmon's deconstruction of modernity is a datapoint in a shifting of focus for liberal political theory in the mid-20th century. His work represents the crisis of liberalism looking backward. The Holocaust, the rise of the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons, and the crisis of human displacement and statelessness forced liberals to have to reckon with the fear, anxiety, and dread that came with the 20th century. Political thinkers in the 20th

century had to first become historians – a marked contrast to modern liberalism, where political thinkers extrapolated universal history itself from reason.

Talmon was not alone in this deconstruction of the modernist project. As this article briefly reconstructs, other Cold War, liberal-sympathetic, theorists engaged in this process as well. Not only did the rise of European totalitarianism mark the beginning of a new age, it also cast the modern project – and its ideological spawn – into a crisis (for a comparison of Talmon with others in this intellectual milieu, including Raymond Aron, see Tatum, 2019).

Liberals, moreover, were accompanied in this endeavour. It is not a coincidence that deeply political intellectual movements – including varieties of Marxism, structuralism/post-structuralism, and postmodernism – developed, evolved, and found their strongest voices in a Cold War context. Though often contrasted as divergent and conflictual movements, 20th-century liberals and the radical academic Left had much in common in their efforts to reconstitute the contours of political thought during the Cold War. This is especially true of other great pessimists of the age, including the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, which took all hope out of Marxism, in demonstrating how modern monopoly capitalism has locked us into a world of one-dimensionality and political passivity. The Cold War was the context for what theorists like Adorno, Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse saw to be the cultural manifestations of a new kind of totalitarianism (see Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002; Marcuse, 1991).

This is true in terms of post-structuralism as well. Michel Foucault's work, for instance, is inseparable from the Cold War effort to battle totalitarianism and is symptomatic of the same pessimism and scepticism present in the 'liberalism of fear' tradition. In an illuminating, and celebratory, preface to Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Foucault (1977: xiv) briefly criticises the triumphalism of Marxism, while suggesting that fascism-as-totalitarianism was the enemy:

How does one keep from being a fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant? How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? How do we ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behavior? The Christian moralists sought out the traces of the flesh lodged deep in the soul. Deleuze and Guattari, for their part, pursue the slightest traces of fascism in the body. Paying a modest tribute to Saint Francis de Sales, one might say that *Anti-Oedipus* is an Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life.

What these trends had in common, despite different starting points, was a pessimism about the ability of the Enlightenment and associated ideas – for example, modernity, progress, the unfolding of history towards a positive, and emancipatory end – to truly contribute to human freedom. Totalitarianism is the spectre haunting 20th-century political thought. What makes such thought truly *contemporary* is the fact that history itself became the wreckage and devastation that Walter Benjamin (1968) imagined it to be; history was not a force of emancipation. At most, it could provide us with the resources we need to live the 'non-fascist life'.

The most surprising part of this new thematic of contemporary political theory is that its bases are not precisely in domestic politics. Talmon's concerns were global, as were those of theorists like Berlin and others: how could they not be? The fight against totalitarianism was a fight that would consume whole civilisations – the fate of a single people is inseparable from the fates of the whole. As Hannah Arendt (1994: 119) writes in conclusion to a powerful essay about the fate of Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust: 'For the first time

Jewish history is not separate but tied up with that of all other nations. The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted'. The contemporary period is global, connected, and inseparable. The treatment of international political theory as the 'bastard child' of political theory misses the important history of contemporary thought as a reaction to global processes.

It is worth expressing in summation that the problem with a Cold War pessimistic liberalism is that it was unsustainable. It existed alongside a developmentalist liberalism that continued an older ideology of triumphalism. This form of liberalism would set its sights on transforming whole societies, spreading democracy worldwide, and imposing Western ideas of state capacity, capitalism, and economic development. And, even more significantly, many of its remnants died out by the end of the Cold War. The most vociferous critics of liberal triumphalism from within that tradition, in fact, may be represented by what Michael Barnett (2011) calls 'emergency humanitarianism', which is sceptical of developmentalism, state-building, and other forms of interventionist liberalism. However, even this group engages in a triumphalism of its own. If contemporary political theory maintains any sort of basis in a well justified fear of totalitarianism, perhaps that basis is not one from within liberalism, but one that stands outside. International theory, especially, deserves a closer engagement with alternative traditions – or, if we are ambitious – a return to a fundamental rethinking of liberal international order that occurred during the Cold War.

## Conclusion

Jacob Talmon provides a window into the origins of post-war political thought. In addition, Talmon's genealogical approach to the study of ideas, and his pessimistic 'hermeneutics of suspicion', gives us much to reflect on about the importance of pessimism in international theory. Unlike pessimists of other stripes, including the 'grand hotel abyss' of Frankfurt School critical theory that was developing around the same time (Jeffries, 2016), Talmon's work forces the pessimist into an historical, pragmatic, and ultimately suspicious method of looking for the 'worst aspect of things'. As Talmon's writings about political movements, cosmopolitanism, and nationalism show, there is a political importance to an attitude that deconstructs established orthodoxies, and accepted narratives, about human progress.

In a period of time where intellectuals, scholars, policymakers, and publics are attempting to come to terms with global transformations in the realm of political movements and ideologies – including engaging in questions and arguments about the viability of liberal world order following the rise of global right-wing populist movements – Talmon's work is a potential guide. A guide not just for what a critical, and contemporary political theory should be, but also a guide towards taking apart the myth that such utopias as a liberal, cosmopolitan, world order could exist, or that it ever did.

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## Notes

1. There is excellent work on post-WWII international theory, though much of this is focused on an analysis of realist international relations. See, inter alia, Molloy (2014); Bell (2017); Guilhot (2017).
2. In intellectual histories of 20th century international thought, reliable ‘Cold War Liberals’ are often framed as realist international thinkers. For a taste of this literature, see Cozette (2004) and Hall (2011).
3. An emerging literature on Berlin’s relationship to Cold War intellectual battles exists. For a taste, see Kelly (2002); Anderson (2011); Cherniss (2017).
4. Berlin was not alone in this view. Most prominent were intellectuals like Karl Popper and Raymond Aron. Even American writers, including the southern novelist Lillian Smith, were proponents of a certain value pluralist liberalism developed in the shadow of Cold War totalitarianism. On Popper and Aron, see Müller (2008). On Smith, see Haddox (2012).
5. This is not to say that Talmon and Berlin were wholesale hostile to imperialism. However, as Talmon’s own writings examined below show, there was an ambivalence to this project – his writings on Zionism illustrate this well.
6. Adorno was not a liberal (he was a significant critic of liberalism). However, he was certainly a post-war pessimist.
7. There is an importance in using the term ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ to characterise Talmon’s genealogy. The term ‘critique’, which is more fashionable in discussing a radical historicism in genealogy, misses the pessimism inherent in a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. As Rita Felski (2012) notes, critique is framed around unveiling contradictions and pointing to missed possibilities. In contrast, the hermeneutics of suspicion is positioned towards destroying ideas altogether.
8. Talmon came to understand Jewish nationalism in more pragmatic terms, as a way to protect against extermination. See Dubnov (2008: 236–237).

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