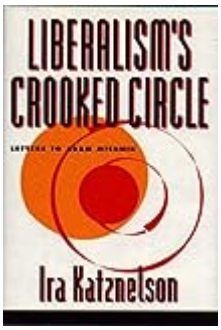
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ira Katznelson. *Liberalism's Crooked Circle: Letters to Adam Michnik.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. xx + 193 pp. $19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03438-6.

Reviewed by Michael Keaney (University of Glasgow)

Published on H-Pol (July, 1997)

A perennial problem for liberal political theory is its relation to historical context. Throughout the history of liberalism, a consistently recurring theme has been the critique of its overly abstracted view of the polity. In recent years the focus of such critique has been the work of John Rawls. However, if we accept the argument of John Gray,[1] liberal political theory has reached the end of the era begun with the publication of *A Theory of Justice* and climaxing with what Gray views as the end of the Enlightenment project: the collapse of Soviet communism. Liberalism is now refocusing upon contemporary circumstance, adopting a more pragmatic manner.

Ira Katznelson is not of one mind with Gray, despite their shared concern with context and relevance, specifically a response to the "end of history" triumphalism and the New Right hegemony which threatens to take hold in the former communist bloc. While Gray has written off entirely the Enlightenment (although careful to salvage his favourites of the period, including Isaiah Berlin), Katznelson is attempting to recapture the hope of a pluralistic, tolerant, economically and socially just society founded upon the principles of rationality or reason. Like Nicholas Rescher,[2] he tries to firmly connect rationality to, if not ground it in, history, so as to avoid the rationalistic excesses which have been the targets of criticism by writers like Gray and Eugene Halton,[3] and thus reclaim the concept of rationality from the advocates of the instrumental reason Max Horkheimer was so concerned to refute.

The volume consists primarily of two long, detailed letters to the Polish dissident author, Adam Michnik, whose attempts to ground a political theory marrying the best of the socialist and liberal traditions Katznelson finds most sympathetic with his own purpose. Michnik is notable among Polish dissidents for not denying the value contained within the socialist tradition, with its stress upon emancipation and economic justice, whilst also trying to engage the socially conservative Catholic Church in constructive dialogue with a view to building a post-communist plurality. What makes this book notable is its profoundly personal resonance, as Katznelson lays bare his effort to reach a deep, empathic understanding of Michnik's project as one typical of a radical democrat, but firmly rooted in the specifically Polish context, and additionally conscious of his Jewish ancestry. For this is also true of Katznelson's own status, with the exception that his radicalism and Jewish consciousness is grounded in the politics of the United States. Can they together build a framework which can satisfactorily meet the simultaneous demands of cultural specificity and universal humanity?

A Jewish ancestry and awareness affords a writer

both perspective and insight not readily grasped nor immediately understood by those, like this reviewer, of non-Jewish descent. It is therefore quite instructive to read of two writers' efforts to marry their personal feelings and desires to a project of wider social and theoretical significance, which in some way continues the perennial Jewish quest for acceptance, if not quite assimilation, whilst retaining both individual and cultural identity. Katznelson and Michnik are concerned to heal past wounds, and to strive to include other, potentially adversarial but nonetheless influential cultural and political influences, in constructive dialogue.

The first of Katznelson's letters is an involved discussion of socialist theory and its democratic potential, married to an appraisal of Michnik's key work *The Church and the Left.* The second letter examines the historical development of liberal theory, again highlighting its democratic elements whilst noting weaknesses which threaten either authoritarianism or ineffectual response. As well as offering a personal understanding of Michnik's efforts to found a Polish liberalism, Katznelson looks back over the liberal legacy, and examines what we might find of use in the canon beginning with Locke, continuing through John Stuart Mill up to the contemporary writings of Berlin. Furthermore, he tries to bring together the mutually sympathetic strands of socialist and liberal theory, parallelling Michnik's attempts to retain use of the word "socialist" as connoting positive ends as against its hijack by a repressive state bureaucracy. As the present Pope himself has noted, not everything under communist rule was bad–people had jobs and were fed, even while their political freedoms were brutally constrained. Hayekian liberalism, on the other hand, promises the converse, and both Katznelson and Michnik are concerned to strike a path between the two apparently opposite but remarkably similar extremes.[4]

It is Katznelson's argument that we ought not to look to Mill for an inclusive liberalism, but that instead Locke offers a potentially fruitful means by which to ground a pluralistic politics. Stressing Locke's own response to contemporary events, Katznelson interprets Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* as being the source which "sets liberalism on the course [Michnik] and Kymlicka value" (p. 136). While admitting shortcomings, such as Locke's support of slavery and English imperialism, as well as the apparent limitation of his plea for toleration as holding solely among Christians, Katznelson argues convincingly that this contextuality should not distract us from important gains made by Locke. Rather than seeing him as restricting liberalism to a set of core exclusions, Katznelson sees Locke as operating from a contrary position, applying a set of general principles to specific problems at hand. For Katznelson, Locke's "is the type of engaged political argument…which oscillates between contextual-historical and theoretical contention and is tempered by an appreciation for complexity, contradiction, and moral ambiguity" (p. 160). This is in stark contrast to the social contractarianism of Rawls and, to a certain extent, Will Kymlicka, whose efforts to formulate a theory of minority rights "exposes the limits of political theory disconnected from history and sociology. Either the theory does not amount to much in the end … or, alternatively, if such standards are to be consistently carried through … they threaten to become instruments of repressive imposition" (p. 158).

Katznelson highlights the fundamentally anti-democratic features of Mill's liberal theory: its elitism, its cultural imperialism, and its restrictive individualism. Whereas Locke's "grounds for exclusion are conventional and historically situated" (p. 142), Mill accomplished "the double feat of simultaneously making liberalism universally applicable yet distinctively European" (p. 140), justifying the exclusion of "barbarians" and their civilization by despots where necessary, while situating the Enlightenment values of autonomy, choice, individuality, liberty, rationality, and progress "either beyond history or … [as] the preserve of only one civilization" (p. 141). Despite Kymlicka's spirited attempt to salvage a pluralistic liberalism from Mill, Katznelson carefully highlights what Hollinger[5] cautions is anti-democratic in Mill.

In fact, while both authors have different audiences in mind, both Katznelson and Hollinger are attempting to square the circle (whatever that means) of liberalism: reconciling elitism and democracy. In this they follow writers such as John Dewey, Karl Mannheim, C. Wright Mills, and C. B. Macpherson, and they agree that while these and other representative writers have struggled to assemble "some combination of the best in liberal and socialist precepts" (p. 57), "[i]n the main, their attempts to develop and sustain liberal socialism have been more appealing as efforts to define attractive ends than successful as a doctrine, a movement, or a durable combination" (p. 58). Katznelson and Hollinger remain committed to the search for durability.

However, both are attempting to scale the same peak from different starting points. Katznelson remains wedded to the promise of the Enlightenment, and brings with him for company Locke, L. T. Hobhouse, and Berlin, re-

jecting both social contractarians and *fin-de-siecle* theorists like Gray. Meanwhile Hollinger wants to move on, and to take with him Dewey and Macpherson together with those who are rather vaguely grouped under the heading "postmodern," but not Richard Rorty. Given the complexity of the task, it is perhaps as well that there is a plurality of approaches to its possible solution. That there is no solution but only glimpses of promising avenues of inquiry and speculation does not detract from either of their works.

Katznelson leaves us with the promise offered by Susan Mendus, in her formulation of a tolerant pluralism founded upon "neighborliness," and Margaret Levi's "contingent consent." And, not unlike Gray in his rejection of the abstract contractarian approach to liberal political theory which has held sway for over a quarter of a century, Katznelson concludes with a warning that we should not forget the importance of institutions.

In circumstances of cultural pluralism, institutions matter because they can shape and cultivate norms of neighborliness, adjudicate conflicts in particular contexts and situations, and induce actors to share standards for self-governance and for their involvement in the public realm. Rather than spend our time in the quest to parse and refine liberal doctrine, we should invest more creativity aimed at developing institutional rules, sites, and arrangements to induce contingent consent and provide locations for the play of a conflictual but peaceful politics of identity and difference." (p. 174)

Given that we are in what Katznelson acknowledges as "a time of deep difficulty and disillusionment for the left," his honest and heartfelt dialogue with Adam Michnik is a significant step in the reorientation of liberal theory towards historical relevance. For that alone we should be grateful.

Notes:

[1]. John Gray, "Autonomy is not the only good", *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 June 1997, p. 30.

[2]. Nicholas Rescher, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism, Volume II: The Validity of Values*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993.

[3]. Eugene Halton, *Bereft of Reason: On the Decline of Social Thought and Prospects for its Renewal*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

[4]. Ilja Srubar, "Neoliberalism, transformation and civil society", *Thesis Eleven* 47 (November 1996), pp. 33-47.

[5]. Robert Hollinger, *The Dark Side of Liberalism: Elitism vs. Democracy*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996.

Citation: Michael Keaney. Review of Katznelson, Ira, *Liberalism's Crooked Circle: Letters to Adam Michnik*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. July, 1997.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1147