

Book Review

Liberty in the Age of Terror: A Defence of Civil Liberties and Enlightenment Values. Grayling, A.C. (2009). London: Bloomsbury, 283 pp.

There is something very frustrating about lazy books. I do not mean books that just do not live up to expectations; I am referring in particular to books that are cobbled together to exploit some market niche. Unfortunately, *Liberty in the Age of Terror*, from leading media-friendly philosophy don, A.C. Grayling, is one such lazy book. The laziness is exemplified by the serial misquotation (in several different versions) of the aphorism found in Benjamin Franklin's notes for a proposition to the Pennsylvania Assembly in 1775, "They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety."

It is not that the arguments presented in this book are offensive or wrong; at least half of the volume is a perfectly adequate summary of the standard western liberal democratic humanist response to the challenge posed by the post-9/11 world. This, briefly put, is to reassert the centrality of the conceptions of liberty, human rights and democracy in the post-enlightenment world. However, the actual content of this half of the book is simply reprinted newspaper columns and op-eds from *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Times*, topped and tailed with some clumsy attempts at producing continuity of argument. Mostly short, the quality of these pieces varies greatly, from a stronger chapter on 'Civil Liberties and Human Rights' to a squib on 'Privacy' that really does little more than reassert a very old-fashioned English domesticity as the basis for private life. A conception such as this does little to deal with the changing nature of privacy in the Information Age, let alone acknowledge the progressive challenges and alternatives to privacy. Too often, in fact, the arguments in these short chapters are posed as clear dualisms between totalitarian security and liberal rights. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with making a strong case for the liberal position, but if in presenting clear answers only the most extreme of questions have been asked, one has to consider the overall value of the answers and of the case presented here.

However, there clearly were not enough of these columns to assemble an entire book, so there is a 'Part 2', which has no real relationship to 'Part 1' except that it features arguments about the legacy of the enlightenment. Part 2 comprises a series of extended book reviews of works by other media-friendly academics from opposing positions or different traditions: John Ralston Saul, Roger Scruton, John Gray, Tzvetan Todorov and Slavoj Žižek. The criticism expressed in these reviews has the tendency to verge on the petty, giving the whole section an air of on-going personal spats.

There are two other major problems with the book; firstly its reading of history, particularly recent history, secondly (and connected to this) the whole rather simplistic liberalism that Grayling advocates. Despite the general sympathy that anyone opposed to the depredation wrought on societies in the name of security and anti-terrorism might elicit, there is little in here in terms of fundamental arguments that have not been said, and said much better, in Lawrence Lustgarten and Ian Leigh's *In From the Cold: National*

Security and Parliamentary Democracy, which was published in 1994. This is not to say that Grayling is derivative, it is merely to ask the question whether the choice of September 11th 2001 as the date for 'when it all started to go wrong' is really a historically valid one. Grayling ignores whole swathes of work, theoretical and empirical, which deal with the way in which the kinds of totalitarian impulses he rightly decries are actually foundational to the enlightenment vision he advocates, or at least as found in modern nation-states. And I do not just mean Michel Foucault and his version of modern subjectivity here; I refer to work on the history of the colonial state, to work on political policing and intelligence and the origins and functions of police in general, and much more besides.

His liberalism too is not very friendly towards any understanding of difference. In fact Grayling objects *in toto* to identity politics of any kind, in favour of a simplistic, ahistorical and apolitical understanding of 'humanity'. But he goes further in his chapter on identity and in fact claims that the same postmodern identity politics he decries in western countries are also behind the Islamic terrorism to which they are reacting. This is altogether too neat. It lacks much in the way of knowledge of the history of Islamic radicalisms and of the quite complex relationships of such radicalisms to the societies from which they originated, and to the colonial, imperial and market forces existing both within and outside these societies. Simply advocating 'common humanity' is not really going to help here. It is the empty and vacuous liberalism of the privileged – the rich white male prerogative.

Grayling prefers in general to engage with variations on his own liberalism (with the exception of the easy target of conservative pessimist, John Gray) and the only instance where he really engages with any possible progressive reading of the situation is in his chapter on Zizek. However, one could argue that the choice of Zizek is also problematic, in that he offers as easy a target for liberal critique as does Gray, sharing much of his pessimism if not his political persuasions. It is perhaps a mark of the rather small white, male, donnish British academic world inhabited by Grayling that there is no serious engagement with any Marxist, Anarchist, Environmental, Postcolonial or Feminist (in fact, women are barely acknowledged as existing) thought, let alone with Muslim responses to the post-9/11 world or all those 'others' who are actually constructed through the kinds of securitisation that has occurred. These people cannot speak; they can only be spoken for.

As many others have noted, not just Grey and Zizek, there are serious problems with the utilitarian, economic legacy of the enlightenment. Enlightenment values provide the basis for justifications of empire, for mass imprisonment, and for the very surveillance and security that Grayling decries as much as they do for rights and liberties. We are living in a world in which the 'bottom line' is not the laws of rights, but the laws of the market. A greater understanding of political economy and history would benefit Grayling's arguments a great deal and make them sound a little less like rhetoric and rather more grounded. Do we have to go back to go forward? This would seem paradoxical. It may be that we need an 'enlightenment', but a new one that does not idealise only particular values of the last one whilst simply eliding its more indefensible aspects.

It might be thought that, in offering this apparently excoriating view of Grayling's work, I do not recommend it. That would not be true. I think that for those unfamiliar with the liberal position, and who need to know why it is, from within the justificatory framework that underpins our system of capitalist nation-states, that the arguments offered by so many recent and current governments have been and are flawed, this book, or at least its first half, is a fine and clear summary. And that is a large number of people who need to read this book. For anyone else, however, it is going to be either preaching to the choir, or so obviously flawed in anything other than the liberal context in which Grayling positions

himself, that it will be of little interest.

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Reference

- [1] L. Lustgarten and I. Leigh, *In From the Cold: National Security and Parliamentary Democracy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.