**History, Democracy, and Political Theory: On Judith Shklar’s Historical Method**

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In recent years, the subfield of political theory has witnessed a renewed interest in political realism. Challenging what William Galston summarizes as “high liberalism,” that is, abstract political philosophy exemplified by John Rawls’s neo-Kantian account of justice as fairness, the realists strive to bring the discussions in political theory back to the arena where they believe real politics takes place.[[1]](#endnote-2) The term “realism” itself, similar to most concepts employed in political theory to encapsulate any type of theoretical movement, is contested.[[2]](#endnote-3) Amongst different approaches subsumed under the title of realism, one of them targets at the alleged ahistorical nature of abstract political philosophy.[[3]](#endnote-4) Drawing on intellectual resources dating back to Quentin Skinner’s historicist approach to intellectual history and British realist political thought exemplified by thinkers such as Raymond Geuss and Bernard Williams, contemporary realists often argue that one of the problems with abstract political philosophy is that it fails to account for the meaningfulness of history in our political philosophizing. This meaningfulness of history can at least be understood in two broad ways: first, past events in our political history inform us of what is and is not possible in politics; second, any theory of politics is always actualized in a specific historical context, and consequently political theorists must be attentive to the historically particular variables (for instance, contingencies) were their theories to be illuminating for our political practice.

Judith Shklar is repeatedly invoked both in the more general debates about realism and the more specific debates about the realist take on the relation between history and philosophy.[[4]](#endnote-5) Shklar’s importance in such discussions is likely a result of the nature of her political theory and the method of her investigation. According to Stanley Hoffmann’s categorization, Shklar’s scholarly writings contain three distinct themes: first, interpretations of prominent thinkers in the intellectual history; second, contributions to the lasting debates about important topics in political theory such as citizenship, justice, and democracy; third, reflections on the nature and history of political theory and political science.[[5]](#endnote-6) Vacillating over these topics, Shklar consciously reflected on her own position as a historically minded political theorist. She placed her political theory in a territory “between history and ethics” that was “less abstract than formal ethics but more analytical than history.”[[6]](#endnote-7) For her, political theories removed from their contexts lose their lives, becoming irrelevant and banal knowledge.[[7]](#endnote-8) Her historical-mindedness played a crucial role in her late career when her interest in the history of political thought and her rumination of democracy—especially American democracy—seemed to converge together. In the classic “Liberalism of Fear,” borrowing terms coined by Ralph Waldo Emerson, she famously identified herself as a member of “the party of memory,” again confirming the importance of history and memory in her political theorizing.[[8]](#endnote-9) Shklar’s attentiveness to real politics in history, especially to the ordinary vices, the various manifestations of injustice, and the omnipresence of cruelty in everyday politics, seems to be an ideal ground for realists to launch attacks at abstract political philosophy’s alleged lack of consideration of these issues.[[9]](#endnote-10)

Meanwhile, the implicit universalist and cosmopolitan tendency in Shklar’s political theory has also been long noticed. From Shklar’s own perspective, the audience of her political theory was never limited to citizens of modern liberal democracies. This can be observed from her general dissatisfaction with multicultural communitarianism. For her, communitarians’ concerns are those of developed and privileged liberal societies, whereas in our world today there are many places where much more fundamental political problems—such as cruelty—have not yet been addressed. It is for this reason that in her prescription of liberalism Shklar asked liberals to speak to the fear of political cruelty, which she took to be a psychological mechanism of the human mind independent of any religious or cultural tradition. Shklar’s insistence on the moral imperative of “putting cruelty first” beyond cultural and national boundaries thus provides an intellectual resource for the discussions about preventing cruelty and defending human rights in the discourse of international political theory.[[10]](#endnote-11)

What emerges in these various uses of Shklar’s political theory, as Kamila Stullerova rightly characterizes, is a dichotomy between “two Shklars.”[[11]](#endnote-12) On the one hand, there is the “historicist” or “particularist” Shklar who emphasized the contribution of history as contextualized knowledge to the enterprise of political philosophy; on the other, there is the “universalist” Shklar who staunchly placed cruelty as the *summum malum* in the political arena. To understand the relation and tension between contextualized historical knowledge and universalist political theorizing in Shklar’s scholarship requests us to look deeper into Shklar’s historical method. Reconstructing Shklar’s historical method is important not merely in the sense of intellectual history. Given Shklar’s profound influence on key topics in contemporary liberalism such as justice and democratic citizenship, the reconstruction of her historical method is directly linked to questions as to how and where her liberalism should be properly applied.

Yet little has been done to probe this issue. Stullerova’s proposal is to formulate Shklar’s principle of “putting cruelty first” as a thread running between history and philosophy. To her, “Putting Cruelty First” navigates the historically minded political theorist through the labyrinth of political phenomena recorded by history. “Putting Cruelty First” when reading history thus generates what Stullerova calls “knowledge of suffering,” but this knowledge is colossal and not readily prepared as a liberal prescription to political vices. Philosophy is needed to structure the historical knowledge of suffering, that is, to frame it in a way that is illuminating for political actions targeting at the prevention of fear and cruelty. This interpretation of Shklar’s historical method centers on the ontology and epistemology embedded in Shklar’s liberalism. In this article I present a different reading that emphasizes the political aspects of Shklar’s method. With my reading of Shklar’s historical method, I claim that this tension between two Shklars have deeper impacts on the application of her theory that cannot be easily avoided. Specifically, I argue that democratic temporality, namely democracy’s relation to time, is a crucial component in Shklar’s historical method. In Shklar’s writings, democratic temporality involves a reciprocal interaction between history (sometimes she used “historical memories” instead), democratic citizenship, and the task of a historically minded political theorist. My conclusion is that the kind of history that Shklar’s political theory requests us to be attentive to is a not a colossal record of past events showcasing all possibilities and limits of human agency in politics. Instead, Shklar’s notion of history is embedded in a regime’s way of governing and its relations to its citizens. This embeddedness of history shed lights on how Shklar’s political theory can be used and also where it may be limited.

I proceed in three steps. First, drawing on Andrew Sabl’s attempt of systematizing a realist approach to history exemplified by Shklar, I summarize Shklar’s concept of history in the eyes of contemporary realists and point to its limits.[[12]](#endnote-13) Then I move on to offer an interpretation of Shklar’s historical method based on the concept of democratic temporality. Finally, I discuss what implications Shklar’s historical method has as to how her theory should be understood and applied.

**Realism and Shklar’s Historical Attentiveness**

The contemporary realist turn in political philosophy is probably best understood as an eclectic family of approaches seeking to correct what realists see as the exceeding moralization of politics in political philosophy, to reclaim the autonomy of the political sphere, and to develop theories of political normativity unique to politics.[[13]](#endnote-14) Not all forms of political realism relies on history. However, when history appears as a pivotal part in the realist discourse, its importance is often proclaimed on its character as a source of political knowledge different from philosophy. Usually epitomized by neo-Kantian (Rawlsian) approaches to political philosophy, “high liberalism” relies on philosophical deduction and construction to develop a set of moral principles that altogether constitute an ideal model for politics. The realists find this problematic because, starting from a philosophical designation of a hypothesized human nature and an abstract theory of right such as John Rawls’s veil of ignorance, “high liberalism” lacks a sufficient recognition of the conditions that make politics both unique and necessary. Their political philosophy thus is removed from the true nature and the concrete experience of politics. For instance, according to John Gray, the problem with Kantian high liberalism is that it “lacked altogether the apparatus of phenomenal world and noumenal selfhood by which the Kantian conception of universalizability, and thereby the political principles it supposedly generates, are accorded a universal authority.”[[14]](#endnote-15) The failure of Kantian philosophical contemplation in recognizing the phenomenal world of politics signifies the importance of history. After all, what is a better alternative than history that records all the rights and wrongs, the possible and impossible, and the successful and unsuccessful of all human deeds in politics?

The dystopian themes, the constant call to reorient our attention to the worst scenarios of politics rather than the best, and the attentiveness to amorphous political phenomena that are not readily prepared for normative philosophizing (such as injustice) in Judith Shklar’s political theory seem to go in accordance with the realists’ ambition of challenging Kantian high liberalism, even though most concerns expressed in Shklar’s writings were not developed as responses to Rawls’s neo-Kantian political philosophy.[[15]](#endnote-16) Shklar’s conscious reflection of the relation between history and philosophy and the way she uses history in her theory, according to Andrew Sabl, exemplifies a “Harvard School” remedy to the pathologies of idealist, right-based, analytical political philosophy epitomized by Shklar’s Harvard colleague John Rawls. Though Shklar herself never affiliated herself with any institution-based school of thought, Sabl characterizes Shklar as one of the few Harvard realists who had offered scattered defense of the realist agenda and one whose commitment to history was broadly shared by members of the school. Specifically there are three aspects worth emphasizing about history in Sabl’s account of Harvard realism. First, history bridges the rift between the “is” realm and the “ought” realm. History can achieve this task by presenting stories coming from perspectives strikingly different from that of the learner of history. By so doing history challenges the learner to face the underlying hypotheses of his own perspective, and thus drives her to understand differences made possible by culture, institutional design, political development, and moral psychology. These elements are crucial to political theory; they together constitute a sphere in between the “is” and the “ought.” With an alertness to history the theorist’s task is no more to develop an ideal system and to adopt it as a standard to judge the flaws in political practice. She starts from the conditions, observed in history, that make politics unique and irreplaceable. Shklar’s treatment of injustice as phenomenologically flexible experience that cannot and should not be simply understood as the absence of justice in *The Faces of Injustice* and her insistence that political theory is an ideal approach to investigate the various and frequent appearances of injustice is probably a textbook example of this aspect. Her efforts to concretize injustice show why philosophical delineations of the concept of justice in the “is” realm is inadequate to address the senses of injury pervasive in everyday politics.

The second aspect that makes history important in the realist project is that it demonstrates the limits of human agency. This can be understood in two senses. On the one hand, the theorist finds in history the sources to combat what Sabl calls “psychic need for system.”[[16]](#endnote-17) The psychic need for system, when driven by an overambitious trust in human reason, may lead to the problem of utopian engineering that Karl Popper famously ascribed to the enemies of the open society—that is, the urge to rationally design a blueprint for a society’s progress with predetermined goals before practical action.[[17]](#endnote-18) Even on a less totalitarian note, realists’ animosity of systematic political philosophy can be understood as a recognition of the human agency’s limit to offer rationalized theoretical schemes encapsulating all complexities of human actions. It is the realists’ belief that confronted by uncategorizable human actions, systematic theory would opt for misrepresentations of reality rather than face where theory falls short.[[18]](#endnote-19) Historically minded realism, in contrast, embraces uncertainty and contingency that are viewed as plagues by systematic theory. In this respect, Shklar has consistently situated herself in a historical context after the era of philosophically rigorous, all-encompassing, grand theories represented by the writings of Plato, Marx, and Nietzsche. Her skepticism of systematic theory and metanarratives dates back to her very first book, *After Utopia*.[[19]](#endnote-20) This is what drove her toward a reading of history marked by a tread of identifying the experience of suffering—or the use Seyla Benhabib’s words, what drove her to adopt “the perspective of the margin”—that is usually overshadowed in grand narratives.[[20]](#endnote-21) But on the other hand, by delimiting the boundaries of human agency history also bespeaks what human beings are capable of. No historical event, after all, can be an event without human actions. The study of history is therefore a study of the interplay between human agency and historical circumstances. Through her study of Montesquieu Shklar argued that historical studies could reveal the common traits of human psychology in various situations of decision-making, thus providing raw materials for an empirically rooted science of man.[[21]](#endnote-22)

That history speaks to both the constraints and the capacities of human agency leads to the third strength of Harvard realism in Sabl’s account. Now knowing the possible and the impossible of the human agency, the realist theorist sidesteps two faults: she does not “mistake repeated, communal speculation for evidence,” and neither does she demonstrate “an inability to let any amount of real-world evidence interfere with speculation.”[[22]](#endnote-23) This places the realist theorist in position where she can challenge the seemingly plausible presumptions in ideal, normative theories with the help of history. Her willingness to accept the existing circumstances of politics as the first premise of political theory provides an inviting alternative to the normative construction of “high liberalism.”

To sum up, in an attempt to flesh out Shklar’s account of history, Sabl tries to rectify a common reading of Shklar’s emphasis on history as a narrow focus on the themes of cruelty and torture that have plagued twentieth-century world history.[[23]](#endnote-24) What he seeks to offer is a broadened reading of Shklar’s notion of history, and the common thread running through all strengths of Harvard realism in his account is an understanding of history as a record of past event tout court. History understood in this sense is a repertoire, a gigantic storehouse hoarding numerous pieces of information and showcasing all kinds of (im)possibilities waiting to be exploited by the realist theorist. In history the realist theorist collects examples that back up their comprehension of the nature of politics, moral psychology, and features of political decision-making. This approach to history resembles what Hegel calls “pragmatic reflective history.” History appears to be openly accessible to the historian of this kind, and “each can think himself able to arrange and elaborate them and inject his spirit into them as the spirit of the ages.”[[24]](#endnote-25) The product of pragmatic reflective history is often a remotely connected series of analogies imbued with the historian’s diagnosis of the present. In the case of realism, the diagnosis is that neo-Kantianism has detached political philosophy from both the conditions and the issues that are crucial to politics. History, indeed, is full of examples in support of this diagnosis. But just as William Galston points out,

Those who fear ambitious politics can point to any number of utopian revolutionary movement since the French Revolution; those who fear caution can cite the social movements of the past two generations, which were undertaken in the face of claims that radical changes in, for example, race and gender relations were impossible.[[25]](#endnote-26)

History, therefore, is full of examples that can lend a hand to plenty of different and sometimes contradictory political appeals. As Hegel reminds us, nothing is shallower than the repeated reference to the general history of mankind. This is because the relation between history and politics or political theory never took place in a sociological vacuum. History’s impact on politics is always embedded in its connections to a political group’s self-understanding and a regime’s way of governing. Without these considerations, what the Harvard realism achieves is establishing a position where the historically minded theorist’s claims about the nature of politics and human conditions seemingly is privileged. This, however, was not the purpose of Shklar’s historical attentiveness. In the next section I will demonstrate how Shklar’s historical method, based on her understanding of democratic temporality, deals precisely with these issues.

**Democratic Temporality and Historical Method**

An ideal entry to Shklar’s ideal of democratic temporality would be her critique of Hannah Arendt’s historical method in *On Revolution*. In Shklar’s eyes, Arendt’s project of reconstructing the history of American revolution was, adopting Nietzsche’s terms, “monumental history.”[[26]](#endnote-27) Nietzsche’s monumental history is a historical method that, by chaining together the extraordinary events and heroic figures in history and by making analogies to these very events and figures, aims at the aspiration of a people.[[27]](#endnote-28) This approach, as Shklar saw it, is a method of history that heavily relied on the cherry-picking of historical events and the historian’s intention to teach a moral lesson. Unlike “the critical historian”—again she borrowed from Nietzsche—who, with scholarly integrity, had to justify his statements about history by pointing to the historical evidence, the monumental historian would find it all too troublesome. Shklar asked, “how many omissions and exaggerations, how many unmentioned qualifications, nuances, ifs and buts can the monumental historian get away with and still avoid total devastation by critical examination?”[[28]](#endnote-29) Monumental history, thus, was not geared towards presenting historical accounts as accurate as possible; instead, its purpose was first to tell a history story that would teach its readers how to praise and how to condemn, and then to prepare its readers for dangers and threats that were actual in the present. Even if her historical construction proved to be a failure, the monumental historian would not care about it as long as there was something in the past that was to be praised. Arendt’s political philosophy, for Shklar, was “passionate thinking” through “word play, textual associations,” and “bits of poetry.”[[29]](#endnote-30) ). She chose not to follow this path of poetic-philosophical storytelling that would lead to a myth of the past as she contended that “political philosophy and history…are neither poetry nor mythology, even if occasionally they use these.”[[30]](#endnote-31)

Shklar’s critical comments of Arendt’s historical method above revealed her deep skepticism toward any historical method that treats history as a storehouse for metaphors and posits the theorist at a privileged position. In the rest of this section I reconstruct Shklar’s historical method and explain why hers differs from the contemporary realists’ interpretation of it. I proceed in three steps. First, I explain Shklar’s understanding of democratic temporality, that is, democracy’s relation to time; second, I present Shklar’s characterization of the two fundamental problems of history; third, I present an account of the relations between memory, experience, and political theory in Shklar.

***Democratic temporality***

Like Arendt, Shklar took seriously the American Revolution and the political thought rooted in it. Unlike for Arendt, the American Revolution for Shklar was not an attempt to reunite history with revolution or to reclaim the lost treasure of history, namely public happiness. Borrowing from Emerson, Shklar recognized that there were two related forces shaping the political thought of the American Revolution: “the party of hope” represented by Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson, and “the party of memory” represented by John Adams and James Madison.[[31]](#endnote-32) Whereas she later revealed herself as a member of the party of the memory, she did not deny the influence of the party of hope in the Revolution, especially in drafting the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.[[32]](#endnote-33) From the perspective of the party of hope, history or tradition on the one hand, and democratic revolution on the other, represents two motivations that are in sharp contrast with each other. The study of history presupposes that past achievements and errors are in some ways illuminating or meaningful to our life today. In this sense, if history does not always mean preservation, at least it means the possibility of learning from the past. Democracy, however, by its definition has unhistorical aspects. It entails that political decisions are to be made by those who are alive present—only they can vote and claim their rights.[[33]](#endnote-34) It is for this reason that any attempt to unite revolution and history—for example, Arendt’s—was almost immediately a failure to the extent that “even its one success, the American founding, proved unkind to the spirit.”[[34]](#endnote-35) The European past, the lost history for Arendt, was something to be voluntarily abandoned by the party of hope. Democracy means the starting of something not just entirely new but also better. In this sense, the party of hope could not learn from the European past, for it was precisely the absence of the European past that made America distinguishably different from the European aristocracies. The narratives of the American Revolution by the founders that were often labeled as American exceptionalism, in Shklar’s eyes, were not expressions of particularistic nationalism but of democratic values. The legacies of the American founders, such as the original Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, should not be read as an authoritative source unalterable even with the changes of society or a commemoration to be celebrated and worshipped. Instead, documents as such are representations of the democratic virtue: the courage and the responsibility to create something that belongs to those living in the present. What reflects this best are the first three words of the Constitution: “We the People;” these words placed the American founders “at an enormous distance from all of classical antiquity.”[[35]](#endnote-36) It is for this reason that she thought Arendt’s project was problematic at the beginning. She wrote,

Their authority was not in ancestor worship, such as Hannah Arendt ascribes to the Romans, who alone had both the sense of hierarchy and the reverence for the act of founding that made their traditions utterly binding on posterity…the efforts to recreate a Roman ideology of authority with the theory of the original intent, is in fact, far from tradition, but constitutes a radical departure from the spirit and outlook of earlier generations, which is a paradox. [[36]](#endnote-37)

But that the European past was not a source of authority for the American founders does not mean that democracy *today* has no past whatsoever. Shklar recognized that the relation between history and democracy was not always antagonizing. Since the Revolution, America had accumulated a history of its own, in which a congruence or a reconciliation of history and democracy seems to emerge. On the one hand, historical writing almost always has an underlying purpose of educating the public; historians therefore are all implicitly teachers. In a democratic society that is constantly changing by its very definition, history “might teach people to acquire those flexible attitudes necessary to live and prosper in a world in flux.”[[37]](#endnote-38) In other words, democracy requires democratic characters of its citizens, and democratic citizens learn to acquire these characters by engaging in a dialogue with the past. On the other hand, Shklar was also soberly aware of the fact that political memories as such were always subject to distortion and manipulation. In a commentary of George Orwell’s famous *1984*, she wrote “[t]he masters of language and of convention are obviously also the lords of historical memory…History is not, as Orwell and we know, raw experience. It depends on authority for its credibility and for us the rules of evidence legitimize that.”[[38]](#endnote-39) In a democratic society, democratic citizens are thus charged with the task to actively defend the political memories. Democracy and history, aside from the long struggle of the two, can actually come to a reconciliation where history informs the characters necessary to the sustaining of democracy, and where democratic citizens, with these very characters, defend history and defend the continuance of American democracy.

Shklar’s democratic temporality, therefore, attempts to avoid treating the American Revolution as a monument, that is, the symbol of a lost spirit whose meaning was to be narrated by the storyteller. For her, the influence of the American Revolution was directly accessible today in American democracy. By opening an age of change, the American Revolution produced a specific kind of citizenship that connected its citizens together by voting and earning—a theme that she later returned to in *American Citizenship*. The self-understanding of democratic citizenship relies heavily on historical awareness; Democratic history’s integrity, on the other hand, depends on a politically active democratic citizenship. But this dualist reciprocal relationships does not adequately sum up Shklar’s historical method. In her eyes, the study of history itself is far from easy.

***The two problems of historical studies***

Specifically, in the essay “Learning without Knowing,” Shklar thought there were two problems internal to the study of history. Historians have to constantly battle with two self-accusations: uselessness and inaccuracy.[[39]](#endnote-40) That history is useless is a challenge that is particularly difficult to face in a democratic setting: if democratization means the creation of political institutions and social norms from scratch, what study history anyway? The creators of democracy need not learn from the history of tyranny, for instance, because history, from this perspective, is little more than a record filled with errors, superstitions, and myths after all. Aside from the radical skepticism of the use of history, historical studies are often troubled by the doubts of its credibility. On the one hand, these doubts come from the fact that historical evidence is not immediately “justification” of historical narratives. It is merely an unreliable source whose power of justification depends on the technique of the interpreter. It is in a persistent danger of being overthrown by the appearance of new materials. On the other hand, history is not written in a moral and political vacuum. It is always written by historians who are deeply rooted in their own historical conditions. Prisoners of their own time and space, historians’ impartiality cannot be fully trusted. As Shklar saw it, these two problems of historical studies were unlikely to be solved altogether by historians themselves. They would always accompany historical studies of any age.

However, at the end of the essay Shklar seemed to be offering a tentative answer. She pointed out that in our age choosing to be ignorant of history was already impossible. “The past and an interest in it will, however, not disappear now that it has become a pervasive part of the cultivated consciousness,” and because of this “historians need not think of themselves as victims of time and circumstances. The setting within which they can work best is strengthened or enfeebled by what they do.”[[40]](#endnote-41) Historians today do have a task. Since a democratic society is often changing, historians have a duty to respond to the more recent alternations of the historical conditions. Specifically, she pointed to democratization and wars of the twentieth century as the significant changes of our era. Shklar’s answer here can be more illuminating if this essay is read against some of her other writings such as *American Citizenship* and “The Liberalism of Fear.” In *American Citizenship* Shklar reminded her readers that rethinking about the past should not overshadow the recognition of recent important changes, because “political theorists who ignore the best current history and political science cannot expect to have anything very significant to contribute to our political self-understanding.”[[41]](#endnote-42) In “The Liberalism of Fear,” written roughly at the same time as *American Citizenship*, she identified “the return of torture” and the escalation of political torture on a large scale as “the most immediate memory” of “the history of the world since 1914.”[[42]](#endnote-43) These statements in her different pieces converge at one point: Shklar asked us to read history, especially democratic history, as a record of changes that bore direct impacts of our everyday politics and life. To understand our everyday politics and life we need not go too far, because going too far to search for the lost treasures in history, as Arendt did, can blind us from noticing those that are closest to us.

Shklar’s emphasis on current history, of course, is not based on an ignorance of “earlier” history, but it does seem to be a tentative answer to the historian’s unending self-accusations of uselessness and inaccuracies. Since we are ourselves subjects of current history, we keep memories of historical events that may suffer less from political manipulation. In this sense, and to go back to an earlier made point, democratic citizens are charged with the task of defending accuracy or authenticity of history. On the other hand, the “usefulness” of current history is manifested in its significant contribution to our political self-understanding. The remaining question, thus, is how political theory is related to the awareness of both history in general and current history specifically.

***Memory, experience, and political theory***

When writing her first book *After Utopia*, Shklar, like Leo Strauss, thought political theory was dead and the decay of political thinking was unstoppable. Soon she discovered that she was wrong. She realized that what was dead was a tradition of all-encompassing, rational, systematic metanarrative that started from Plato and ended with Marx. She also realized that the meaning of historical writings was more than recording the time, space, and participators of certain historical events.[[43]](#endnote-44) With this mindset she moved on to study the documents of the Nuremburg trials, Rousseau, Hegel, social injustices, and ordinary political vices. In these writings she consciously placed her political theory as the aforementioned intermediate between abstract philosophy and raw historical experience. This position allows political theory to present social phenomena that have a variety of forms and that are, as a result, difficult to be expressed through abstract philosophy. Injustice, for example, is one of these social phenomena. Unlike justice, a concept that is based on philosophical reasoning and justification, Shklar found concrete examples of social injustice diversified and permeating. Political theory “can and should raise every possible question about injustice as a personal characteristic, as a relation between individuals, and as a political phenomenon.”[[44]](#endnote-45)

In this sense, Andreas Hess is right in his recent work on Shklar’s intellectual history when he points out that there is an attempt to “bring theory and political practice close together” in Shklar’s political thought.[[45]](#endnote-46) Political theorists need to get up from the philosopher’s comfortable armchair because many aspects of concrete living experience in our current history are not immediately ready to be expressed especially in philosophical language. Political theorists need to interrogate these aspects of living experience with critical eyes even though their studies may consequently be more ambiguous, puzzling, and uncertain than political philosophy. One of the possible starting points, among others, of a political-theory project can be political memories. Memories of suffering, cruelty, or violence are firsthand materials and direct products of current history. By analyzing memories political theorists not only gain a perspective of the present and the past that leads to the present; they can also start a discussion of the future from a realist ground. In this sense, memory “is capable not only of every mood, but also of creativity.”[[46]](#endnote-47)

But the political theorist’s role as an investigator of memories is inseparable from her role as a public educator of the democratic history. This mutual dependence renders the reading of history as a colossal record of past events inadequate. Specifically, Shklar’s historically minded theorist is situated in a context where these memories are generated, sustained, and defended. The authenticity and reliability of the materials of her theorizing, namely memory and experience, are inescapably linked to democracy’s unique way of governing, which involves not only democratic participation of the citizenry as a core element of modern democracy but also a democratic way of looking at its own past. This democratic temporality is demystified. It is a critical interrogation of the often-neglected historical origins of problems in the present democratic society. It is also a collective effort of the historically minded theorist and the democratic citizenry. In the next section I demonstrate how Shklar’s famous idea, “the liberalism of fear,” expressly reflects her historical method.

**“The Liberalism of Fear” and History**

Published late in her career in 1989, Shklar’s realist reconstruction of liberalism in “The Liberalism of Fear” has become one of her most well-known ideas. Shklar’s most famous writing. The liberalism of fear is Shklar’s realist reconstruction of liberalism. She argued that the most pressing issue that contemporary liberals should deal with was the return of torture, namely the repeating appearance of political cruelty, in different ways and different places, throughout the twentieth century. The memories of political cruelty are almost omnipresent; they cultivate in people’s mind a universal psychological response of fear that is rooted in people’s aversion to these political cruelties. Shklar contended that this fear should be considered by liberals as the psychological foundation to structure liberal politics in a direction of limiting state violence.[[47]](#endnote-48)

Shklar’s formulation of the liberalism of fear highlights the fact that this idea is deeply rooted in Shklar’s understanding of the relations between history, memory, and political theory. Shklar identified “the return of torture” as the most pressing issue and “the most immediate memory” of our current history. With the omnipresence of torture or political cruelty, individuals would live with a constant fear, a condition that would make the achievement of personal freedom impossible. The task of political theory for her was to start with the experience of those who were living with a constant fear and to think of possible ways in which this fear could be alleviated. Specifically, Shklar saw fear as both an inhibiting condition of personal freedom and a principle of action: “Because the fear of systematic cruelty is so universal, moral claims based on its prohibition have an immediate appeal and can gain recognition without much argument.”[[48]](#endnote-49) This principle of “putting cruelty first,” an idea that she elaborated in *Ordinary Vices*, is certainly not a panacea that would resolve all problems in political mobilization; but it can be a solid psychological foundation of liberal appeals.

Here, how the fear of cruelty, with its disabling effect, can be a principle of action reflects Shklar’s understanding of the relation between history and democracy, on the one hand, and of the problems in historical studies, on the other. From the perspective of the party of hope (like Jefferson), the history of democracy is a history of new institutions, norms, and culture. But the emergence of new social and political phenomena is often accompanied by new problematics. One of the possible ways to deal with these new problematics—and Shklar indeed followed this path—is to look at the past as a “source of political information and wisdom” and as “the very basis of…political science.”[[49]](#endnote-50) This way of looking at the past must be accompanied by the reminders that the study of history is often troubled by two self-accusations, inaccuracy and uselessness. As aforementioned, one possible way to “dance with shackles on” is to zoom in on current history. On the one hand, current history reflects the most recent problematic in democratic societies; it allows political theorists to soberly recognize and actively deal with the problems of our time (in this case political cruelty). On the other hand, the sustaining of liberal democracy requires a vigilant citizenship, and part of this vigilance is reflected in defending the authenticity of political memories.[[50]](#endnote-51) Historical memories, democracy (and democratic citizenship), and political theory thus form a triangular relationship: Democracy brings new, pressing problematics to history; historical memories presents the pressing problematics to political theory; political theory deals with these problematics for democratic citizens (through teaching); the vigilant democratic citizenship defends the authenticity of memory so that it further presents the next pressing issue for political theory.

However, it must be noticed that Shklar also seems to be modestly taking a step further. The intended audience of the liberalism of fear was never restricted to democratic citizens. Shklar believed that the return of torture was a theme in all regimes. The fear of cruelty is psychological; it does not depend on any social, cultural, or political norms. In this sense, the fear of cruelty can be a psychological foundation not only for liberals in liberal democracies but also for liberals in authoritarian countries. This is why she contended that the liberalism of fear “regards abuses of public powers in all regimes with equal trepidation.”[[51]](#endnote-52) Shklar’s universalism was modest because she was not looking for a universal political project that will transcend the existing national boundaries—a world government, for instance—to alleviate the fear of cruelty. She was not a political cosmopolitan in that sense. But she was a moral cosmopolitan in the sense that she believed in the universality of personal freedom and that hindrances of personal freedom should not be easily exonerated. Hence her enduring critique of Isaiah Berlin’s value pluralism. For Shklar, the problem with Berlin’s value pluralism was that it presupposed an ethical outlook—the incommensurability of different value judgments—that is problematic for the liberalism of fear. Though the liberalism of fear does not presuppose a *summum bonum*, it does make cruelty a *summum malum*. She refused to believe that people of a different culture would willingly embrace this *summum malum*:

Unless and until we can offer the injured and insulted victims of most of the world’s tradition as well as revolutionary governments a genuine and practicable alternative to their present condition, we have no way of knowing whether they really enjoy their chains. There is very little evidence that they do. The Chinese did not really like Mao’s reign any more than we would, in spite of their political and cultural distance from us.[[52]](#endnote-53)

It is for this reason that many have noticed and explored the liberalism of fear’s potentiality as an international political theory and a human rights theory. Interpretations of the liberalism of fear from the perspective of international political theory often emphasize Shklar’s “standpoint of the margins,” her alertness to cruelty in ordinary politics, and the underlying moral cosmopolitanism in her political thought. Catherine Lu, for instance, argues that “Shklar’s appeal to ‘take the victim’s view’ is at least potentially cosmopolitan in enabling us to recognize the suffering of the exile, refugee, enemy and stranger.”[[53]](#endnote-54) Stanley Hoffmann argued that patriotism in global affairs must be mediated by Shklar’s emphasis on empathy of the victims.[[54]](#endnote-55) More recently, Kamila Stullerova, building on Shklar’s political thought, contends that “attentiveness to suffering can invigorate human rights…when justifications for human rights face frequent challenge,” and that “Shklar’s ideas sit much more comfortably with present international political theory.”[[55]](#endnote-56) These interpretations are based on the fact that international politics today constantly encounter cruelty, suffering, and fear. In this sense, they do correspond to Shklar’s modest attempt of universalizing the liberalism of fear.

Nonetheless, when political theorists embrace the liberalism of fear as an international political theory and attempt to apply this theory to nondemocratic countries, they must be attentive to the fact that the liberalism of fear is an exercise of Shklar’s understanding of the task of political theory. It is rooted in a dynamic relationship with both historical memories and democratic citizenship. As she attempted to propose a universal theory that served as a guideline for both democratic and authoritarian citizens, she also seemed to be well aware of the limits of her approach. In her commentary of Orwell, she acknowledged that history was an artifact whose credibility largely relied on authority. The masters of political power monopolizes the interpretations of the past; and the interpretations of the past will strengthen the rule of the present. Hence those who possess private memories that are rebellious to the Party’s narrative would be crushed by it.[[56]](#endnote-57) What we observe here is what Stullerova posits as the tension between two Shklars at the beginning: on the one hand, Shklar was a moral cosmopolitan who treated suffering of cruelty in democratic and nondemocratic regimes equally; on the other hand, the usefulness or significance of politics of memory (for liberals) relies at least partly on the form of regime and the vigilance of citizenship. International political theorists who seek to build upon the liberalism of fear or Shklar’s political thought in general may want to be attentive to this tension especially when applying the liberalism of fear in nondemocratic contexts. Indeed, fear is a powerful political emotion. Whereas it hinders the achievement of personal freedom, it also rises us to a status of heightened perceptibility. For this reason it is considered by Shklar (and Montesquieu) as a principle of political action. However, fear is also an emotion that has many different political uses, and the liberalism of fear is merely one of them. In contexts where liberal democracy is not yet an establishment, the liberalism of fear may have to battle with the state’s exploitation and manipulation of the memory of past cruelties. International political theories that aim at justifying human rights by building on the liberalism of fear need to understand the liberalism of fear in a concrete way by taking into consideration Shklar’s understanding of history, memory, and their relations to political theory.

**Conclusion**

There seems to be two Shklars. The first Shklar is a moral cosmopolitan who is critical of multicultural pluralism, who firmly believes cruelty as a *summum malum* of all political vices, and who holds that fear can be a first principle of political action across the boundaries of nation and culture. The second Shklar is a historical particularist who takes history as a source of political wisdom, who cares deeply about the historical origins of various forms of injustice pervasive in our society today, and who values the experience of suffering as a proper sphere for political theorizing. The first Shklar is often applied in international political theory as an intellectual resource for, for example, human rights theories; the second frequently invoked by contemporary realists in their attempt to battle the predominant neo-Kantianism in political philosophy. But the Shklar that Shklar herself subscribed to is both, and the key item connecting these two together is her understanding of democratic temporality, which involves democratic citizens’ and the political theorist’s roles in dealing with democracy’s past. This makes Shklar not only a theorist of liberalism but also one of democracy. For those who appeals to her universalism, it is a reminder that despite her moral cosmopolitanism, her theory necessitates a vigilant democratic citizenship that is not always present in different socio-political contexts. For those who invoke her value of history, it is a reminder that the role of history in her political theory always involves a real, historical perspective of the self-understanding of a political community and a regime’s way of governing political memories. This is the place where she designated her political theory: the intermediate territory between raw historical experience and normative ethics.

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2. For general overviews of different approaches in the realist movement, see ibid.; Matt Sleat, "Introduction: Politics Recovered—on the Revival of Realism in Contemporary Political Theory," in *Politics Recovered: Realist Thought in Theory and Practice*, ed. Matt Sleat (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears, "Introduction," in *Political Philosophy Versus History?: Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought*, ed. Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Alice Baderin distinguishes between two types of realists, detachment realists who attack political philosophy’s abstractness and infeasibility and displacement realists who attack political philosophy’s disrespects for real politics. This approach would belong to the detachment type. See Alice Baderin, "Two Forms of Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 13, no. 2 (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. See for instances, Mathias Thaler, "Hope Abjuring Hope: On the Place of Utopia in Realist Political Theory," *Political Theory* 46, no. 5 (2018); Andrew Sabl, "History and Reality: Idealist Pathologies and ‘Harvard School’ Remedies," in *Political Philosophy Versus History? : Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought*, ed. Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stear (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Bonnie Honig and Marc Stears, "The New Realism: From Modus Vivendi to Justice," in *Political Philosophy Versus History?: Contextualism and Real Politics in Contemporary Political Thought*, ed. Jonathan Floyd and Marc Stears (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Stanley Hoffmann, "Judith Shklar as a Political Thinker," in *Liberalism without Illusions: Essays on Liberal Theory and the Political Vision of Judith N. Shklar*, ed. Bernard Yack (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Judith N. Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Judith N. Shklar and Julian H. Franklin, review of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, by Quentin Skinner, *Political Theory* 7, no. 4 (1979). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Judith N. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. *Ordinary Vices* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984); *The Faces of Injustice*; "The Liberalism of Fear." [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Catherine Lu, "The One and Many Faces of Cosmopolitanism," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 2 (2000); Robert Meister, "The Liberalism of Fear and the Counterrevolutionary Project," *Ethics & International Affairs* 16, no. 2 (2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Kamila Stullerova, "The Knowledge of Suffering: On Judith Shklar’s ‘Putting Cruelty First’," *Contemporary Political Theory* 13, no. 1 (2014): 24. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Sabl, "History and Reality: Idealist Pathologies and ‘Harvard School’ Remedies." [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Sleat, "Introduction: Politics Recovered—on the Revival of Realism in Contemporary Political Theory," 1-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. John Gray, "After the New Liberalism," *Social Research* 61, no. 3 (1994): 719. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. For a detailed account of the intellectual background of Shklar’s writings and her theoretical adversaries, see Katrina Forrester, "Judith Shklar, Bernard Williams and Political Realism," *European Journal of Political Theory* 11, no. 3 (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Sabl, "History and Reality: Idealist Pathologies and ‘Harvard School’ Remedies," 162. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 1* (London: George Routledge & Sons Ltd., 1947), 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. For a general discussion of skepticism toward systematic theory, see Jonathan Allen, "The Place of Negative Morality in Political Theory," *Political Theory* 29, no. 3 (2001): 354. For a comparison of Shklar’s and Bernard Williams’s doubts of systematic theory, see Forrester, "Judith Shklar, Bernard Williams and Political Realism," 258-59. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Judith N. Shklar, "A Life of Learning," in *Liberalism without Illusions: Essays on Liberal Theory and the Political Vision of Judith N. Shklar*, ed. Bernard Yack (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 272. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Seyla Benhabib, "Judith Shklar's Dystopic Liberalism," ibid., 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Judith N. Shklar, *Montesquieu* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987), 66, 68-69. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. Sabl, "History and Reality: Idealist Pathologies and ‘Harvard School’ Remedies," 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. For evidence of this reading in Shklar’s writings, see Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," 9; "Torturers," review of *The Body in Pain*, by Elaine Scarry, *London Review of Books* 8, no. 17 (1986). For examples of this reading, see Bernard Williams, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn (Prinecton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Robert S. Hartman (New York, NY: Liberal Arts Press, 1953), 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," 401. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
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27. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 68-71. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Shklar, "Rethinking the Past," 354. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. "Hannah Arendt as Pariah," 365. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. "Rethinking the Past," 360. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. "Politics and the Intellect," 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. It is in “The Liberalism of Fear” where Shklar revealed her “affiliation” with the party of memory, see "The Liberalism of Fear," 8. However, a careful reading of Shklar’s political thought would suggest that this revelation should not be read as her fundamental rejection of the theme of “hope,” that is, the possibility of creating something new and better and the need of political activism. For discussions of the theme of hope in Shklar’s political thought, see John Dunn, "Hope over Fear: Judith Shklar as a Political Educator," in *Liberalism without Illusions: Essays on Liberal Theory and the Political Vision of Judith N. Shklar*, ed. Bernard Yack (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996); Katrina Forrester, "Hope and Memory in the Thought of Judith Shklar," *Modern Intellectual History* 8, no. 3 (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. Shklar, "Learning without Knowing," 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. "Rethinking the Past," 359. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. "A New Constitution for a New Nation," in *Redeeming American Political Thought*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann and Dennis F. Thompson (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. "Democracy and the Past: Jefferson and His Heirs," in *Redeeming American Political Thought*, ed. Stanley Hoffmann and Dennis F. Thompson (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. "Learning without Knowing," 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. "Nineteen Eighty-Four: Should Political Theory Care?," 346. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. "Learning without Knowing," 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. Ibid., 127-28. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. Judith N. Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. "The Liberalism of Fear," 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. "A Life of Learning," 272-74. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. *The Faces of Injustice*, 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Andreas Hess, *The Political Theory of Judith N. Shklar: Exile from Exile* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. Shklar, "*The Education of Henry Adams*, by Henry Adams," 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. "The Liberalism of Fear," 3-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. Ibid., 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. Shklar, "Politics and the Intellect," 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. That Shklar’s political theory relies on a vigilant democratic citizenship has been noted. See for instance, Stullerova, "The Knowledge of Suffering: On Judith Shklar’s ‘Putting Cruelty First’," 41; Benhabib, "Judith Shklar's Dystopic Liberalism," 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. Ibid., 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
53. Lu, "The One and Many Faces of Cosmopolitanism," 256. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
54. Stanley Hoffmann, "Thoughts on Fear in a Global Society," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (2004): 1031. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
55. Kamila Stullerova, "Rethinking Human Rights," *International Politics* 50, no. 5 (2013): 686-87. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
56. Shklar, "Nineteen Eighty-Four: Should Political Theory Care?," 346. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)