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# The Profession

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## Judith Shklar and Fearless Liberalism

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In electing Professor Judith Shklar President of the APSA, the Association is paying tribute not only to an extraordinarily learning, probing, and incisive political theorist, but also to a great teacher, and to the contribution made to political science in America by the victims of Hitler who had to uproot themselves and to start new lives on this continent.

As she explains in *A Life of Learning*, her recent Charles Homer Haskins lecture



JUDITH SHKLAR

delivered on April 6, 1989, and published by the American Council of Learned Societies, she was born in Riga—then the capital of independent Latvia—from parents who had left Russia after the Bolshevik revolution but “were essentially German Jews.” The family left Riga just before the Soviets’ annexation of Latvia—a consequence of the Hitler-Stalin deal of 50 years ago. They went to Sweden, then, fearing that the Germans would invade that country after the Nazi occupation of Norway, they left Europe through the Trans Siberian railway. They got first to Japan, then to Montreal, where Judith Nisse went to a school she describes as dreadful, and to McGill University, where she met her future husband. She married him at the end of her junior year. After graduation, she went to graduate school at Harvard, in the Department of Government, while her husband, Gerald Shklar, pursued his medical studies.

In her lecture, a characteristic blend of candor and reticence (one needs the French word *pudeur*) she describes herself as a bookworm. Indeed, the most striking aspect of her work, or of any conversation with her, is the overwhelming depth of her scholarship. On any subject that she has handled—and as we shall see her intellectual curiosity and restlessness are unbounded—there doesn’t seem to be a book or article she has not read. Her familiarity with philosophy and literature is as great as her knowledge of politics and political theory. The voracity of her mind, the ability to speak it with utmost clarity and disregard for cant, the gift for going to the heart of an issue and to throw new light on even very well explored questions and authors, the art of being tartly trenchant without ever being disrespectful or dismissive of differing opinions (as long as they are based on solid work), all of this made her, in the early 50s, probably the most remarkable graduate student in a

group that counted among its members such diverse figures as Henry Kissinger, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Samuel Huntington, Harvey Mansfield Jr., Suzanne and Lloyd Rudolph, Paul Sigmund, Nicholas Wahl, Fred Holborn, etc. . . .

In her ACLS lecture, Shklar explained that she had first been attracted to philosophy and to economics—for its rigor. A course, at McGill, with Frederick Watkins, on the history of political theory, changed her orientation and set her future. It was he who inspired her to apply to Harvard, where she worked with Carl Joachim Friedrich. Her portrait of Harvard in the 50s is far from flattering; she found too much boorish conformity, and too little willingness to explore and to face what had happened in Europe between 1940 and 1945, too much of a desire to exorcise fascism “as an aberration.” Nor did she find the climate very welcoming to academic women. However, her brilliance as a teacher and writer were such that the members of her department offered her an instructorship after her Ph.D., and so she “more or less drifted into a university career.” She was promoted to assistant professor. By the time a decision had to be made about tenure, she had published two books and many articles. As she puts it, diplomatically, her “Department could not bring itself to say either yes or no.” The solution became a tenured, allegedly (but never really) part-time lectureship. Some years later, it was finally turned into a regular professorship, and she became the first female member of the department. Her experiences, she explains, have not made her into a feminist, because “the idea of joining a movement and submitting to a collective belief system strikes me as a betrayal of intellectual values”; but she notes that the atmosphere for women in academia remains “far from ideal.” She has always insisted on being appreciated for her work, not for her gender.

Like so many transplanted Europeans, coming to terms with the European catastrophe of the first half of this century has been her life-long concern. She “took up political theory as a way of making sense of the experiences of the 20th century.” Her Ph.D. thesis, *Fate and futility*, which became her first book under the title *After*

*Utopia* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), tries specifically to “make sense” of what she saw as “a general political fatigue,” the exhaustion of the radicalism of the Enlightenment, of its social optimism and intellectualism. It is an exploration of the “prophets of cultural despair” who took over in

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the 19th century, and of the rise of the “unhappy consciousness,” the “alienated soul” that “has lost all faith in the beliefs of the past.” Her main targets are romanticism, whose policies she saw as un- or anti-political—the aim is to protect non-political man from the encroachments of public life—and whose ethics she described as unconcerned with society, being the ethics of genius; also, Christian fatalism and the “fatalistic” liberal conservatism of Hayek et al, with their total faith in the market. She concluded that the success of despair is largely “due to the absence of a satisfactory secular social philosophy,” and that what was needed was “a new justification of some form of politics as culturally valuable and intellectually necessary.” But she was writing at a time when “speculative theorizing” seemed to have stopped, when political scientists were either fascinated by the model of the natural sciences or by the “linguistic turn”—the (hopeless) attempt to clarify the vocabulary of politics, to purge it of its ideological encrustations and distortions. And therefore she concluded that “a reasoned skepticism is . . . the sanest attitude for the present.” This was going to be both a permanent stance, and a very temporary resting place. She later criticized the book for having never reached her “main topic”—the calamitous ideas of the European 20th century—because she got absorbed in their

history; but the sweep of the book is breathtaking.

Her next book, *Legalism* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1963) can be read as another attempt at salvaging the importance and specificity of politics and of the ethics of public life—this time by taking on "legalism," "the ethical attitude that holds moral conduct to be a matter of rule following, and moral relationships to consist of duties and rights determined by rules." Legalism as an attempt to separate law from morals and customs, as if these

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were distinct psychological blocks, she found deficient, and indeed she analyzed it as the political ideology of the legal profession. Her book included a sharp critique of natural law theories, whose endurance she attributed to the persistence of a quest for consensus. Legalism she accused of wanting to replace politics (she went especially after Kelsen and Oppenheim); insofar as justice is "the policy of legalism," she pointed out that it must always compromise with other social demands. She did not deny that the law and its rules play an important role in social life, and can help avoid arbitrariness in liberal constitutional politics; but legalism can also be at the service of repression. Her book included a searching and balanced discussion of the Nuremberg and Tokyo war criminals' trials, in which the Nuremberg ones receive a qualified approval after an exhaustive examination of the issues. In the last page, the note struck goes beyond the "reasoned skepticism" of the earlier book; she explains that her exploration of the flaws and virtues of legalism was inspired by "the liberalism of permanent minorities"—a second major concern that was going to pervade all her subsequent work.

Her next two books are quite different. They are exegeses of two giants of political philosophy, of two thinkers whose ideas both come out of (even when they react against some aspects of) the Enlightenment and have profoundly influenced all subsequent political thought: Rousseau and Hegel. In *Men and Citizens* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969), she produced one of the most scrupulously probing studies of Rousseau's social theory. She saw him as the last of the classical utopists (whose aim is to "picture the awful distance between the possible and the probable by showing in great detail how men *could* live, even though they *always* refuse to do so"). His originality lies in his offer not of one but of two models: the "Spartan city" of the social contract and the general will, the "tranquil household" of the *Nouvelle Heloise*. Shklar was attracted to Rousseau

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not only by the scope of his genius and the elegant lucidity of his style, but also by his extraordinary insights into the psychological foundations of politics (she had already, in her preface to a volume on *Political Theory and Ideology* she edited in 1966 for MacMillan, criticized Mannheim for his insufficient understanding of "the psycholog-

ical mechanisms by which social conditions are translated by groups and individuals into doctrines"). The last chapter of her book contains a remarkable essay on the issues a writer faces when she tries to interpret Rousseau.

*Freedom and Independence* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976) is a different kind of exegesis; it studies only one of Hegel's works, the *Phenomenology of the Mind*. Once again, the connection between politics and psychology is stressed: Hegel's work is "an historical psychology of the conscious mind, and also a justification for such a science"; his task is "to create a dynamic psychology of the thinking mind as it suffers defeat and renewal through the ages." Two of the merits of this exacting book are her emphasis on "Hegel as the successor of Rousseau and Kant rather than as the precursor of Marx and Nietzsche," and her pedagogic concern to make Hegel's difficult work intelligible by striving for simplicity in presentation and style (without sacrificing any of the nuances of Hegel's complex arguments). This may well be the only work on Hegel in a style of utter clarity.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when she was working on these books, political philosophy, which her first work had deemed exhausted, experienced a startling revival. There was the colossal effort represented by Rawls' *Theory of Justice*; there were all the reactions to and ripples from his book. Interested by the rise of practical ethics ("engaged with the political choices imposed by new technologies and administrative institutions"), unimpressed by hermeneutics—the attempts to read cultures as texts, which often "amount to little but an outspoken conservatism," irritated by the frequent longing for community, which she finds conceptually fuzzy and politically unrealistic, she has herself gone way beyond exegesis and the critique of past and current ideologies, and developed a set of works in which her two constant concerns—her love of history and her will to make sense of the present—as well as her particular emphasis on the psychological roots of political attitudes are brought to bear on the elucidation of the requirements for an original form of liberalism.

It is what she calls the liberalism of fear—no longer the liberalism of hope and progress that propelled the constitution builders of the 18th and 19th centuries, but the liberalism that tries to protect citizens from oppression and tyranny. It is a liberalism of rights, and "the first right is to be protected against the fear of cruelty." *Ordinary Vices* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), her most original work, an extraordinary blend of public philosophy and literary

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analysis, examines five vices that "have both personal and public dimensions": cruelty, hypocrisy, snobbery, misanthropy, betrayal. Her purpose is not just to see what great writers have had to say about them, it is also to see what evils may result for the polity both from these vices and from zealous attempts to stamp them out, and above all to decide what qualities (or indeed, what vices) would best fit a modern liberal policy. Hypocrisy, without some of which no social order can quite function, comes out best. Betrayal is a vice, but "a liberal order that is too determined to avenge itself upon its betrayers" courts self-destruction. Snobbery she treated fiercely, because it violates the "simplicity" of manners democracy needs, and inflicts pain on its victims (her strong moral equalitarianism shines through these pages). And the inflicting of pain is the chief enemy; this is why she "put cruelty first," why the hero of the book is the man

whose horror of cruelty was most eloquent: Montaigne; this is why, she concluded, "the liberalism of fear concentrates so simple-mindedly on limited and predictable government." It is not surprising that this elegant and rich volume, in which Moliere appears as much as Machiavelli, and Montaigne as Montesquieu, should have been the first of her books translated into French.

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Her most recent book is a short study of Montesquieu, for the Past Masters series of Oxford Press (1987). Again, she emphasizes the decisive role of fear in his conception of politics, both in the *Lettres persanes* and in his analysis of despotism. She celebrates in him "the father of Constitutions."

Her more recent work is connected to what has become a major part of her teaching: American political history and theory. At Harvard, a gap had been left in this field by the tragic disappearance of Louis Hartz. Judith Shklar, like Hartz, is keen on showing the originality of American thought, but whereas he saw it in the existence of a liberal consensus—the absence of feudalism, and of both socialist and reactionary thought—she finds everywhere the deep mark of a unique and still

unliquidated experience: slavery. She has become as intimately acquainted with the thought of Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, John Quincy Adams, Emerson, Thoreau and Lincoln as she is with the figures of the Enlightenment in France and England. She has written articles and lectures about the origins of the U.S. Constitution, about Hamilton as the father of American political science because of his conviction that the citizens, in order to express their interests intelligently, needed to be well informed. Above all, her concerns have led to two sets of lectures, to be published soon. The Storrs lectures of 1988 at Yale deal with the vast and unexplored topic of political injustice—not, she points out, the opposite of justice, nor the same thing as ordinary misfortune, but the all too frequent effect, not only of deliberate acts of cruelty or unfairness, but also of indifference to such acts (what she calls passive injustice). The lectures contain a strong defense of rights, against both the champions of the view that the good ought to come before rights, and against charges that a philosophy of rights is too abstract (her *Montesquieu* is dedicated to Rawls). Rights, she says, are not claims for shares of goods but protests against abuses. They are, she explains in a new lecture, a highly American blend of positive and negative liberties (a distinction she finds irrelevant to the American experience).

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The Tanner lectures of 1989 deal with the American conception of citizenship, and its two components: voting and earning. She reviews here the originality of the American Republic—based not, as Montesquieu's ancient republics were, on vir-

tue, but on the expression of personal interests, on the right of independent people to take part in public life. Therefore, any exclusion from it is a denial of social dignity, and the two greatest barriers have been color (not wealth) and the denial of income-producing work.

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The intellectual ferment of Judith Shklar in recent years can only be described as awesome. The way in which she brings together the analysis of past thinkers and her concern for the contemporary liberal polity, her mix of liberal radicalism and rejection of ideological conformity, are unique. A liberalism of fear can only be a liberalism without illusions, but if history tells us what happens to illusions, it also instructs us about the evils we have to guard against, and the fate of people who avert their eyes or capitulate or condone. It is not surprising that she will soon, in Harvard's core curriculum, teach a course on political obligation—on the relations between the individual and the state.

Teaching has been a constant and consuming concern of hers. She has taught undergraduate courses on the history of political thought, on law and politics, on American thought, on modern political ideologies; she has supervised undergraduate theses with the same rigor as she has directed the Ph.D. theses of generations of graduate students specializing in political theory in a department where it still is a required field for the Ph.D. Among her graduate seminars, the most constant have been a "field seminar" that examines the basic concepts of political philosophy, and a seminar on the Enlightenment. It is among the figures of the Enlightenment, in Europe and in America, that she is most at home; and from the confrontation between their wisdom (or the wisdom of a Montaigne) and the tragedies of the 20th century springs her work.

Her career gives the lie to those who repeat the cliché that Harvard professors care only about their research. She has been one of the University's great teachers, and it is because of her gifts as a teacher as much as for her writings that she has been invited to All Souls College at Oxford, to be the Pitt Professor of American History and Institutions at Cambridge, to come to Hebrew University and to the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, and soon to lecture—in French—at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Among the awards she received, none was more deserved than the fellowship of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, which she held from 1984 to 1989.

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It is difficult for an old colleague and close friend to have the distance necessary to write even a short profile. Suffice it to say that I have never had a conversation with Dita Shklar that did not make me admire the breadth of her knowledge, the originality and penetration of her insights, the independence of her mind, the depth of her concern for her students, the scope of her interests even in fields far remote from her profession, her caustic, sprightly humor, her passion for her family and for friendship, the warmth that lies behind her formidable candor, and the abhorrence of petty and personal conflicts hidden behind an addiction to strong views. Knowing her is an inspiring privilege. It is also, I must add, a profoundly humbling experience. From 1951 on, when I first met her, she has never ceased being the most devastatingly intelligent person I ever knew here.

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### About the Author

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## The Profession

University, and chairman of the Center for European Studies. He is author of *Duties Beyond Borders* (1981), *Decline or Renewal: France Since the Thirties* (1974), and *Primacy or World Order* (1978).

### Uncle Wuffle's Advice to the Advanced Graduate Student\*

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A Wuffle

University of California, Irvine

1. In looking for a Ph.D. topic, there is only one rule; if you aren't excited about it, don't do it. The only person who can motivate you for the long grind that is a Ph.D. is you.
2. In writing a Ph.D., there is one near-guaranteed piece of good advice: write your literature review chapter last. I've seen numerous graduate students endlessly spin their wheels trying to decide when they'd reviewed all the literature they needed to write their dissertation. Literature is endless; a graduate student's life is finite.

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After the dissertation is written, with hindsight, you'll see what literature actually was critical and how it influenced the questions you asked and the answers you came up with. However, this doesn't mean that you don't read and read and read before writing. There are no rewards in academic life for re-inventing the wheel.

3. Every scholar must steer a line between the Scylla of trying to hold onto work until it's perfect (which guarantees zero output) and the Charybdis of submitting work that ought not to see the light of day (which guarantees zero acceptances). Learning to do this steering isn't easy, and the best tutor

is trial and error, and a lot of help from friends and faculty advisors.

4. An academic is known by the articles he/she writes; but it is better to have written and gotten into a minor journal than never to have gotten published at all. (However, also see rules 5, 9, 10, and 11.)
5. One article in a major journal is worth two or more in a minor journal; hence, patience pays for an article that you really believe in. However, some articles *belong* in minor journals.

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6. Take manageable bites. Section book-length work into chapters and chapters (articles) into sections, and write a chunk at a time. If you don't, you run the risk of being overwhelmed. Also, it's amazing how rapidly a page a day, say, mounts up.
7. At least when you're starting off, the single most important thing to do to increase the likelihood of writing a good research paper is to write a good outline.
8. In looking for research topics the question is, "What's the question?" If the question you are asking isn't an interesting one, it won't matter that yours is the definitive answer. Every empirically minded social scientist must steer the path between what is doable and what is really worth doing.
9. It is better to be the second author of a first-rate article than the first author of a second-rate one.
10. Articles are almost never accepted without further revisions, and only rarely accepted by the first journal to which you submit them (especially if it is a first-rate journal); hence, when at first you don't succeed, try and try and try again.