Walzer's Paradox

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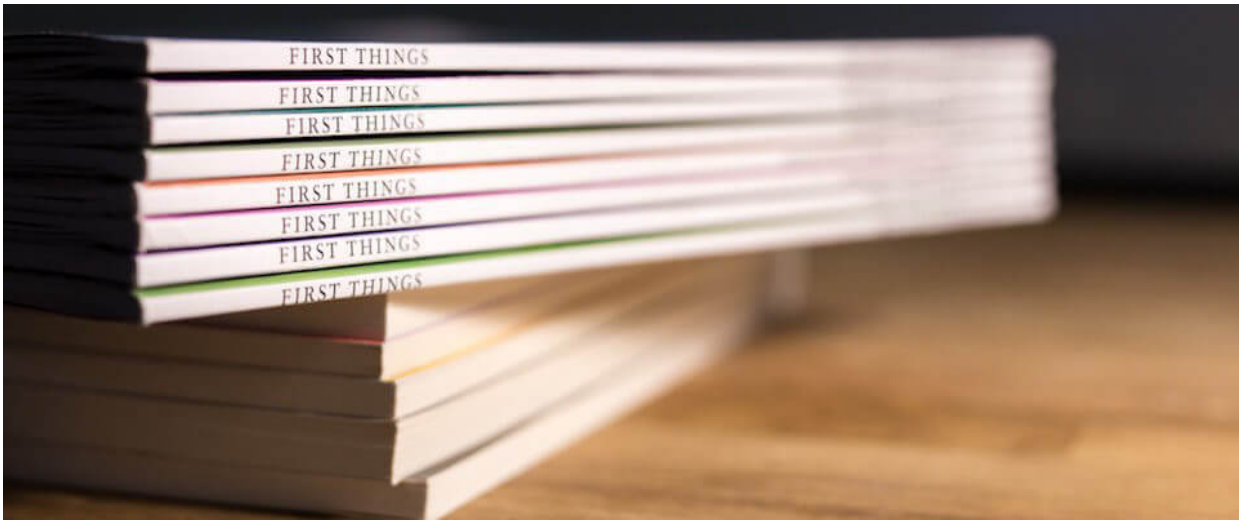
1. A review of *The Paradox of Liberation* by *Peter Berkowitz* August 2015



The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions
by michael walzer
yale, 192 pages, $26

Michael Walzer's name is associated with the summons to undertake social criticism that is engaged: that is, rooted in actual circumstances; cognizant of real people's wants, needs, and desires; and respectful of the diversity of beliefs, practices, and forms of association by which groups of men and women organize their moral, political, and spiritual lives.

The paradox of his work is not that it seems to partake of the conservative sensibility. The admixture of a conservative suspicion of high theory and a conservative emphasis on historical circumstances and cultural particularities has long given the emphatically leftist outlook of this political theorist and public intellectual its distinctive heft and hue.

Rather, the paradox is that while he is committed to understanding alternative viewpoints from the inside and exhibits intellectual proclivities associated with the conservative spirit, Walzer rarely engages with conservatives and conservative thought. In his political theory, he scarcely mentions Leo Strauss, Michael Oakeshott, F. A. Hayek, or Alasdair MacIntyre. In his writings on American politics, Walzer seldom takes up Whittaker Chambers, William F. Buckley Jr., Norman Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, Richard John Neuhaus, Leon Kass, or George Will. A political theorist and public intellectual dedicated to reaching beyond his parochial perspective to comprehend people in faraway cultures and distant historical epochs, Walzer all but excludes from his purview conservatives and conservatism in the here and now.

The paradox illuminates the strengths and weaknesses of *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*. A revised and expanded version of the Henry L. Stimson Lectures that Walzer gave at Yale University in 2013, his new book seeks to explain how secular national liberation movements, which built independent states in Algeria, India, and Israel following World War II, eventually spawned "religious movements that challenged the achievement roughly a quarter century later."

According to Walzer, the principal problem with what he calls "the liberationist project" has been its arrogance and absolutism. The liberators' laudable purpose was to "improve the everyday lives of the men and women with whom" they shared a heritage. But in seeking "to create new men and women," secular nationalists failed to appreciate the grip of traditional faith on the people they sought to emancipate. And the liberators misunderstood their own needs and those of their movement's members: "The culture of emancipation was apparently too thin to sustain these people and enable them to reproduce themselves; the radical rejection of the past left, as it were, too little material for cultural construction."

Take the case of Israel, which Walzer knows best and examines in greatest detail.

The late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century leaders of Zionism rebelled against the political subjugation of the Jewish people and the passivity and fearfulness that they believed political subjugation ingrained. In their eyes, political subjugation went hand in hand with religious tutelage. The most influential stream of Zionism—the political Zionism of Herzl and Ben-Gurion—tended to scorn Jewish faith as both an adaptation to dispersion among the nations and a rationalization of political weakness. The political Zionists blamed religion for perpetuating political subjugation by teaching Jews to defer to the established authorities and to place their hopes in prayer and a world to come. Accordingly, Zionism sought to liberate the Jewish people from Judaism as much as from foreign rule. In their quest to make a new kind of Jew, the Zionists went so far in the early years of the state as to seek to strip the hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees from Arab countries of their traditional beliefs and practices in order to transform them into good secular and progressive Zionists.

On the political front, Zionism succeeded spectacularly. Within twenty-five years of Israel's 1948 declaration of independence, and despite unending security threats and the formidable task of integrating a variety of minority populations, Zionism had created a bustling democratic and Jewish state pledged to the protection of the rights of all of its citizens.

Yet also within a quarter century of the state's establishment, a right-wing religious movement had arisen to challenge the political hegemony of Israel's secular left-wing founders. Walzer is right that this religious countermovement is fraught with political significance, but he crudely characterizes it as "militant," culpable precisely because it opposes the secularism of the state.

It is true that religious Zionism in Israel today thrives while the secular variant suffers from loss of popular support, guilt for its achievements, and uncertainty about its purpose. Moreover, since Menachem Begin led the Likud to victory in the 1977 elections, conservative or center-right governments have been the rule in Israel. And whereas once the socialist kibbutz movement produced a disproportionate number of military officers, today an outsized proportion comes from Modern Orthodox communities.

But Walzer's supposed paradox—that secular national liberation movements generate religious countermovements—is actually not that surprising. From the perspective of James Madison's observations about factions and freedom in *Federalist* No. 10, for example, the respect for tradition and the flourishing of faith is not a glitch but a feature of a free society, which encourages the development of a variety of human types. Moreover, the ascendancy of the right in Israel since Begin broke the left's hold on state power almost forty years ago has coincided with a substantial expansion in Israel of individual freedom and democratic government.

The countervailing observation and disconfirming trend do not appear to trouble Walzer. Instead, he confines himself to answering objections to his paradox thesis that are posed by his fellow leftists.

Marxists and postcolonialists, he notes, deny the paradox and instead see a deplorable dynamic. According to the Marxists, secular liberation movements and the religious countermovements to which they give rise are cut from the same cloth: Both take for granted the repressive nature of the modern nation state, with its supposedly hypocritical promise of rights for all. Postcolonialist theory maintains that the narrow and chauvinistic religions generated in opposition to secular liberation movements—as opposed to premodern religion, which postcolonialists fancifully regard as inclusive and pluralistic—reflect the pathologies of modernity.

Walzer sees more merit in the Marxist critique than in the postcolonialist, yet he rejects both because they repudiate the liberationist project entirely, while Walzer wants to save it.

Central to Walzer's "reform of liberation" is abandonment of the aspiration to aggressively remake fellow citizens in a secular and progressive mold. Or rather, the progressive cause, he thinks, will be better served by seeking to remake believers more adeptly. The left must undertake a "project of critical engagement" with tradition and faith. Only by recognizing the power that faith exercises in the lives of real people and working within and through it, Walzer concludes, will the left advance the cause of emancipation.

Walzer is correct about the need to engage with tradition and faith and to temper leftist arrogance. But he cannot quite escape that arrogance's powerful gravitational pull.

First, Walzer reinvents the wheel. Without realizing what he is doing—or realizing but choosing not to acknowledge it—his critique of the liberationist project recapitulates one of the great critiques of the ages, Edmund Burke's writings on the French Revolution. But to recognize that precursor would have posed an awkward question for Walzer: Are the liberationist project's flaws merely a matter of means and attitude, or are they also rooted in its conception of human nature, its principles, and its goals?

Second, Walzer's partisanship deforms his analysis. The major characters in the history he recounts are "liberators"—men and women of the left—and "zealots" who are religious and conservative. He leaves little room for opponents of the excesses of the liberationist project who are prudent, honorable, and cogent preservers of tradition. Walzer's own analysis, meanwhile, suggests that the liberators with whom he identifies lost the support of the people because of a zealotry of their own: the absolute certainty of their authority and total faith in their ability to mold fellow human beings in their image.

Third, Walzer exhibits a tendency to transform tradition into an instrument of political advantage. While he briefly holds open the possibility of learning from tradition, his advocacy of engagement with it seems largely driven by the ambition to co-opt its progressive elements and enlist them in the progressive cause.

The flaws in Walzer's analysis of the liberationist project stem from his inclination to see religious and conservative countermovements as problems to be solved rather than as expressions of genuine and worthy human aspirations. If he were to heed better his own forceful admonitions about engaged criticism, he would find in traditional resistance to secular liberation reasonable opinions that make a critical contribution to a democracy devoted to protecting individual rights.

Walzer, however, seems reluctant to respect a modern political identity that does not view traditional religious commitment as a handmaiden to progressive goals. And he appears disinclined to credit the contribution to liberal democracy made—starting with the provision of a counterweight to progressive excesses—by those who cherish tradition.

Walzer's determination to use rather than learn from tradition is bound to undermine the tolerant curiosity on which genuine engagement depends. It is also fated to foreclose access to a sensibility that could enliven the leftist imagination and deepen its capacity for the empathy to which it proclaims its devotion.

To carry forward the valuable inquiry that Walzer has undertaken into the connection between national liberation and religious revival, it is necessary to go beyond his aversion to conservatism. He and his many devoted followers on the left would do well to think through more thoroughly and take to heart more fully the eloquent strictures about the need for engaged social criticism—criticism that first seeks to understand people on their own terms and in light of their own standards—that Walzer has woven into his voluminous writings.

This will help them to overcome the intellectually debilitating and politically destructive conceit that the left can, with sufficient care and ingenuity, purge itself of error and partiality so that it comes to embody the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about moral and political life.

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