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be liberals. The same holds of monists for whom the *summum bonum* is a core liberal value.

By the book's end, tempered liberalism is revealed to be a species of perfectionist liberalism, complete with prescriptions for how society could educate citizens so that they internalize pluralism (201). Sensing trouble, Cherniss denies that his view is perfectionist, claiming that it is "not a comprehensive ideal, but a specifically *political* ethos" (208). Yet this is belied by his earlier depiction of pluralism. There, pluralism is "a certain relationship to the moral life" (190) and is "connected to existential and epistemological/methodological pluralism," which denies that there could be "one infallible method of intellectual framework" to make sense of human experience; Cherniss also claims that pluralism rejects the idea that "life can be rendered meaningful by reference to some single ultimate good" (201).

Oddly, *Liberalism in Dark Times* ends where the later Rawls begins. The lingering question is whether there is a viable conception of liberalism that can accommodate the fact that liberal citizens will disagree persistently over fundamentals concerning the structure and content of liberal values. Ultimately, tempered liberalism stands as nothing more than another liberal doctrine that one hopes can join an overlapping consensus on specific institutional arrangements. That said, Cherniss is correct to think that the political project of liberalism would be on firmer ground amid the social turmoil we are currently experiencing if all liberals were committed to the same way of understanding how core liberal values fit together. But that is no response to the liberal predicament. Rather, it is simply another formulation of it.

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S. D. Chrostowska: *Utopia in the Age of Survival: Between Myth and Politics*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021. Pp. 215.)

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S. D. Chrostowska's thought-provoking new book invites several interpretations. The one I privilege in this review focuses on the book's potential to change our reading habits as political theorists. There will be other ways in which readers may benefit from these densely argued reflections on the promise of utopianism today.

On the face of it, *Utopia in the Age of Survival* intervenes into a debate that has recently gained traction, in the form either of discussions about the demandingness of moral principles in analytical political theory or of controversies around the relationship between realism and utopianism. Political theorists from different intellectual traditions are once again grappling with key questions of the utopian canon.

Curiously absent from most of these engagements are the willingness and ability to enter into a dialogue with neighboring disciplines raising similar questions. Utopian studies—a field of scholarly activities with fuzzy boundaries, crossing disciplinary frontiers between the social sciences and the humanities—has in the meantime developed into a thriving forum for debates ranging from radical social experiments to science fiction and fantasy writing. Historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and architects too have done much to deepen our comprehension of utopianism. To anyone interested in the actual study of utopian thinking and acting, it is obvious that political theory would have a great deal to learn from these vibrant arguments.

Impressively, Chrostowska is among the few theorists who acknowledge this fact and are open to speaking to a great variety of disciplines researching utopianism today. Her vastly ambitious book thus seeks to explore what the place of utopian thinking and acting might be in a world under siege from numerous systemic crises, from right-wing insurgencies to global warming.

This interdisciplinary orientation allows her to make three original points: the first concerns the complicated relationship between critique and utopia. While it is evident that all forms of utopianism have some kind of critical thrust—the ideal serves as a positive model in relation to which one may assess the sorry state of reality—it is far from clear whether its specific mode of critique has beneficial or nefarious effects for actual social change. Against this backdrop, *Utopia in the Age of Survival* makes the case for recovering the multilayered notion of “myth” to infuse socialism with new energy. In a thoughtful reading of Roland Barthes, Chrostowska shows that there is much to be gained from deciphering dreams of a brighter future as mythical in nature.

The book’s second insight turns around recentring the body as a central preoccupation for utopian thinking and acting. Highlighting the continued importance of Charles Fourier for the surrealist movement, and later the Situationist International as well as the revolutionaries of May ’68, Chrostowska asks whether somatic passions should play a vital role in reigniting the left-wing desire for transformation. While she stops short of giving an unequivocally affirmative answer, the book reminds us that all hopes are embodied, thus going beyond the abstract stipulation of a perfect commonwealth.

Chrostowska’s third thesis relates to the historical juncture within which she situates the current resurgence of utopianism: we live, she claims, in an age of survival, dominated by the neoliberal state’s power to control our

everyday lives. In this context, one needs to carefully examine the contradictory potentials of life and death so as to inaugurate a utopian politics of survival that is liberated from an overly narrow focus on biopolitics.

Although these are, on my analysis, the central lessons we can extract from this book, they are not easily identifiable as such. This openness to various, perhaps even conflicting, readings seems intended, as Chrostowska states that “those interested in a systematic, comprehensive review of available conceptions of utopia and a thorough treatment of individual themes united in this book will be better served elsewhere” (23).

Instead of striving for systematicity and comprehensiveness, the book is written in the poetic register of aphoristic reflection. Broad statements of partisan support (usually for left-wing causes) are interspersed with close readings of important writers from the utopian canon (mostly Ernst Bloch and Miguel Abensour, but also Ruth Levitas). Moreover, the argument is sometimes articulated with the help of rather heavy jargon, in ways that might deter some readers. Many of Chrostowska’s ideas therefore reveal themselves in the space between what is being openly stated and what is merely being assumed and left unspoken.

*Utopia in the Age of Survival* will, I believe, remain mostly inaccessible to anyone who does not already know a great deal about the topics discussed therein. This propensity for elliptical presentation makes for an unusual, but potentially still rewarding, reading experience for many political theorists. The rewards will be the greater the more one is willing and able to embark on the extra interpretive work of connecting the dots between observations that are illuminating in themselves, but not necessarily integrated into an overarching framework.

I have three general concerns about this theorization of utopianism. The first pertains to the author’s reluctance to openly locate her standpoint in the wider discussion on the merits and perils of utopianism. Since a concise, workable definition of utopianism is missing from the book, the reader will have a hard time holding on to Chrostowska’s voice within the chorus of intersecting positions that she draws on. This strikes me as problematic because, without an authorial banister, the material surveyed in this relatively short book is rather difficult to grasp and evaluate.

My second worry touches on a related issue: Chrostowska appears to take it for granted that readers will share her starting point. This is especially challenging when it comes to understanding the role of utopian thinking and acting for the sake of social change. An implicit assumption throughout this book is that utopia has always been the prerogative of the Left. Through her powerful invocation of mythmaking, Chrostowska attempts to ensure that this remains so, especially in the face of melancholic and nostalgic trends in contemporary socialism. But this move occludes the undeniable fact that both left- and right-wing projects can be fueled by utopian aspirations. Since Chrostowska does not elaborate on utopia’s normative status, the reader is subsequently left without the conceptual tools to separate modes

of utopian thinking and acting that can help us in this “age of survival” from those that might lead us astray.

Third, the density of the prose sometimes overwhelms the substance of the argument. This is counterproductive because, once again, Chrostowska’s interpretive range is remarkable and admirable. In times of academic (over-)specialization, we need books that start from precisely the premise that this book does. Inward-looking engagements with utopianism, such as the ones dominating ongoing discussions in political theory, by default reduce the complexity of the phenomenon under scrutiny. This book does not. The problem remains, however, that the text’s audience is addressed as “already in the know.” This leaves the wider ramifications of Chrostowska’s arguments unexplored—a missed opportunity.

What I am lamenting, in sum, is not so much the lack of systematicity and comprehensiveness, which Chrostowska fully owns. Rather, upon finishing the book, I wished that it had been more geared toward those political theorists who (a) do not have a definite sense of utopianism’s promise and danger, nor (b) feel confident to adjudicate between different formations of the utopian desire.

These qualms notwithstanding and considering its many insightful observations, I am convinced that students of utopia across different disciplines as well as political theorists more specifically will benefit from dealing with *Utopia in the Age of Survival*. At the very least, it will challenge, and perhaps even expand, their established reading habits.

—Mathias Thaler 

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