



## BOOK REVIEW

# Hess: The Political Theory of Shklar

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Hess, Andreas (2014) *The Political Theory of Judith N. Shklar: Exile from Exile*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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Judith Nisse Shklar was born as Judith Nisse in Riga in 1928, she died in Cambridge Massachusetts at the age of 63. During her early years she was marked by the anti-Semitism which prevailed in Latvia, and affected both her and her family. Shortly before the Russian occupation of Latvia, to be closely followed by the Nazi invasion, she was exiled with her family for the first time, when they moved to Sweden. But an invasion of Sweden seemed imminent and, after a long drawn-out flight via Russia and America, Shklar and her family arrived in Montreal.

Throughout this intellectual biography Andreas Hess emphasizes the link between Shklar's private life and her intellectual production, arguing, for example, that this double exile, the discrimination which affected Shklar during her early years and the ambiguous attitude towards her and her family encountered on arrival in Canada brought her to consider herself as an "outsider". This outsider-status, he suggests, was considered by Shklar as an advantage; forwarding her intellectual development and founding an attitude of self-reliance as she went on to become an independent and free thinker. It was to bring a unique flavor to her intellectual contribution: "Her conscious turn to political theory and the way she saw political theory as a way of making sense of her own refugee experience is the most important hint we have that from early onwards Shklar began to develop a habit of thought which distinguished her way of thinking from that of others" (p. 36).

Not only did exile affect Shklar's intellectual development, but her status—as a Jew exiled from Europe—also limited the institutional opportunities open to her throughout her academic career. In 1950, with her newly wed husband, Gerry Shklar, Judith moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts to study in the graduate school in Harvard. She was later engaged in that same university to teach political sciences. As a teacher she is remembered as extremely conscientious working out during her teaching programs the ideas that were later to be published in books and articles. But career progress was slow, and the staid anti-intellectualism of Harvard, particularly during the McCarthy era, did not leave much place for those whose approach was original or different. The difficulties encountered were compounded by the fact that she was a woman, though Shklar never became a feminist and did not make an ideological issue of the setbacks she encountered (p. 64). Indeed, Hess affirms that, though hard to accept on a personal level, they were in some sense stimulating intellectually.

In her extensive intellectual production, Shklar discussed the political ideas of philosophers such as Rousseau, Hegel, Montagne, Montesquieu or Tocqueville among others, bringing their theories to bear in a reflection on American politics. She developed a theoretical analysis of the modern state and the type of citizenship necessary to maintain it. Hess describes this progression in detail. As from her earliest writings on Rousseau, for example, Shklar combines the development of her own “intellectual agenda” (p. 85) with a discussion of the contribution brought to political thought by the author under study. Over time, her own voice came to the fore as she developed her own personal style and reinforced her original contribution to political theory. This remained based on a thorough investigation of the works of the author she was discussing and of the historical context in which the ideas emerged. Her reflection on citizenship involves discussion on the relationship between democracy, liberty, justice and individual rights. In particular, she developed an analysis of victimhood, particularly relevant in view of her own experience.

Despite the belated official recognition extended to Shklar, in the form of her nomination as John Cowles Professor of Government in 1980, her election as President of the American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy in 1982, and, in 1983, as Vice-President of the American Political Science Association, she did not achieve a success equivalent to that of political scientists such as Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin or John Rawls. Indeed, Hess suggests that her ideas were more often cited by others in support of their own arguments than subjected to analysis in their own right. In particular, she seems to have remained in the shadow of Arendt. Hess points out that on several occasions Shklar engaged in a discussion with Arendt, feeling, though she admired her, that something was missing in her work. Though the two women met on several occasions, this discussion, at least as it appears in print, does not seem to have been reciprocal. Shklar, who emphasizes certain liberal democratic trends in American politics, vehemently criticizes Arendt, the staunch republican, affirming that she remained turned towards Europe and never firmly got to grips with America and American ideals.

In the last pages of his book, Hess resumes some of the post-humus reflections and comments on Shklar’s work, many of which put the accent on the originality of Shklar’s position. He argues that as an ““exile from exile”” she acquired a unique vantage point (p. 201). It is this point that Hess has described, drawing our attention to an intellectual who has until now remained relatively far from the public eye.