

Gertrude Himmelfarb (1922-2019): A personal tribute **João Carlos Espada**

Thank you, Dear Rita, and thank you, and Dear Marc, for your very kind and touching words.

I am honoured to be part of this session paying tribute to the memory and the legacy of Gertrude Himmelfarb.

Gertrude Himmelfarb, Irving Kristol, Raymond Plant, Ralf Dahrendorf and Karl Popper have been the five persons who have most vividly marked my intellectual adult life and who have strongly helped me with no material interest whatsoever. All of them I have known first through their books, only after that have I had the privilege of knowing them personally. In the case of Gertrude Himmelfarb, it was Karl Popper who first told me about her (it was through Popper too, incidentally, that I had discovered Dahrendorf).

In the now distant years of 1990-1994 (when I was doing my D. Phil at Oxford under the supervision of Dahrendorf with regular visits to Popper, at his home in Kenley, South of London), Karl Popper told me that I should read a book by a certain Gertrude Himmelfarb on Lord Acton (a 19th century liberal Catholic of whom I had never heard). I then went to my College Library, but the book was not there. As an alternative, I found another book by Gertrude Himmelfarb: *Victorian Minds: A Study of Intellectuals in Crisis and Ideologies in Transition* (original edition from 1952). I read the book in one stroke and next day I decided to go to Blackwell's Bookstore, where I ordered all the books by Himmelfarb. And the books started gradually coming in, and I read them all, with immense delight.

I then went to America, in 1994-96, where I taught at Brown and later Stanford universities. It was from there that I started writing letters to Gertrude Himmelfarb (only later did I discover that she was married to the famous 'founding father of neo-conservatism', Irving Kristol, who founded and edited the excellent journal *The Public Interest* — which, incidentally, Dahrendorf had the full collection at his office at Oxford and that he very kindly gave to me later on).

In those letters to Gertrude Himmelfarb, I insistently begged that we met. Finally, Gertrude Himmelfarb and Irving Kristol arranged a dinner with me in Washington, DC — I believe it must have been on 2 May 1996, because this is the date of Bea's kind inscription on my edition of *Victorian Minds*, which I made a point of taking with me to the dinner.

It was an unforgettable dinner, but I only remember two things: first, that I very unusually did not touch the wine; second, that after a long conversation, in which I spoke too much and too nervously, they asked me ‘how would you define yourself in political terms?’. I thought I was going to faint. I only recall that, after a long silence, I must have said: “I don’t know... perhaps a Victorian liberal?” I believe I recall a sweet and large smile from them, almost paternal.

After this dinner, Bea and Irving started inviting me to several conversations with several of their friends in DC. It was through them that I met their son, William Kristol — who became and remained a good friend since then, and I am delighted he is with us at this session — and later Michael Novak, George F. Will, Christopher de Muth, Charles Krauthammer, Walter Berns, and many others.

And it was after that first dinner in DC that Gertrude Himmelfarb accepted the invitation to give a lecture in Lisbon, within the lecture series ‘The Democratic Invention’, that I was coordinating at the kind invitation of former President Mário Soares — the founding father of the Portuguese democracy in 1974-75 — as the launching event of his recently created presidential Foundation.

It was a memorable evening, at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, on 23 May 1997. Gertrude Himmelfarb was eloquently introduced by the Portuguese historian Maria Filomena Mónica. After this introduction, Bea gave a powerful speech on ‘Democracy and Modern Values’. She criticised Marxism and especially post-modern relativism, recalling that Nietzschean nihilism, together with materialistic Marxist relativism, had been associated with the intellectual atmosphere that had undermined Western democracy. And she concluded recalling the role that the Victorian sense of duty and the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition have played in sustaining the standards of decency and pluralism in those democracies that had been able to resist against the communist and fascist avalanche in the 1930s.

The speech was listened to in total silence. At the end, though, a flow of hostile questions took over the stage. I remember one very young girl taking the floor and saying that she had never heard such a reactionary speech since the times of Salazar (the Portuguese dictator from 1932 to 1968, whose times she obviously could not have known). Gertrude Himmelfarb was absolutely surprised. She kindly responded to each and every criticism, recalling that she was defending the English-speaking democracies that alone had resisted against the nazi-communist coalition.

The next day, over lunch at the York House in Lisbon, Bea kindly told me that she was sorry that she could have had created some embarrassment — to me, and

especially to former President Mario Soares, a democratic socialist. But she also made clear that she was very surprised by the radicalism of the reaction to her presentation — a reaction that strongly expressed the classical francophone misleading identification of conservative liberalism with reactionary anti-liberalism.

Following Bea's conference, I submitted my resignation to Mário Soares, stating that I did not want to make him uncomfortable in a lecture series that marked the launch of his own Foundation. Soares reacted with his classical composure and told me something along these lines: 'Well, that Professor Himmelfarb is much more conservative than I am is something that is beyond any doubt. But the last thing that could happen is that I would now restore the Salazarist or the Communist censorships against which I have fought all my life. Do continue, therefore, with this pluralist program which has been of the highest quality'.

I am delighted to recall that the same lecture series was later repeated in Washington by the National Endowment for Democracy, by the kind initiative of Carl Gershman, Marc F. Plattner and Larry Diamond; Mário Soares in fact gave the first lecture of the series and received a distinction by the American Senate.

Mário Soares was, in his own manner and even though he did not like to admit it, an admirer of the great democracies of the English-speaking peoples that had resisted alone against the nazi-communist barbarianism. Gertrude Himmelfarb was above all a distinguished historian of Victorian Britain and of the subtle combination between liberty and a sense of duty that has underpinned the so-called "English mystery".

As she wrote in *Victorian Minds*, 'the true miracle of modern England (Elie Halevy's famous expression) is not that she has been spared revolution, but that she has assimilated so many revolutions — industrial, economic, social, political, cultural — without recourse to Revolution'.

This was possible because the political culture of the English-speaking peoples had learnt to avoid what Dahrendorf used to describe as 'unfortunate dichotomies': between past and future, tradition and change, faith and reason, patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Gertrude Himmelfarb has put this art of avoiding 'unfortunate dichotomies' at the very heart of the British and American Enlightenments, by contrast with the French and continental Enlightenments.

'The British and American Enlightenments were latitudinarian, compatible with a large spectrum of belief and disbelief. There was no *Kulturkampf* in those countries to distract and divide the populace, pitting the past against the present, confronting enlightenment sentiment with retrograde institutions, and creating an

unbridgeable divide between reason and religion... And for both [British and American Enlightenments], religion was an ally, not an enemy.’ (*The Roads to Modernity: The British, French and American Enlightenments*, 2004, p. 19).

This is just a brief quote from one of Himmelfarb’s books that I have found most crucial to the *Enlightenment* of the political culture of the European continent: *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French and American Enlightenments*, which was published in 2004. I vividly remember having attending the book launch at the British Academy in London. And I am delighted that we have published a Portuguese edition of this book, even though it was published only in 2015. And, as Marc Plattner has kindly just conjectured, the book has indeed ever been in the readings list of my course on “The Tradition of Liberty”.

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Now, please allow me to conclude by recalling a personal conversation with Karl Popper in Lisbon, back in 1987, when he told me that I should — in fact he said ‘you must’ — do my doctorate in England. I then had a relatively comfortable position in Lisbon as political adviser to President Mario Soares, and was a junior fellow at the University of Lisbon. I was very surprised, and asked Karl Popper ‘why should I go to Britain? Couldn’t I study the British authors staying in Portugal?’

Popper then told me in a very intensive manner: ‘there is a British Mystery — a Mystery of the English-speaking peoples, as Churchill called it — of uncompromising attachment to orderly liberty. You cannot really understand that Mystery just by reading books. You must experience at least a bit of the daily life of the English-speaking countries, especially Britain, but also America.’

Popper then talked about ‘the mystery of the spirit of gentlemanship’, which he thought was at the core of the political culture of the English-speaking peoples, the political culture that had hosted him as an exile (first in New Zealand, later in Britain) and that he admired so intensively. By ‘the spirit of gentlemanship’ Popper meant the attitude of someone ‘who does not take himself (or herself) too seriously but who his prepared to take his (or her) duties very seriously, especially when most people around them talk only about their rights’.

It was on this mystery of the political culture of the English-speaking peoples — its association of liberty with a sense of duty — that the distinguished historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has given us an unforgettable work.

I am tremendously grateful to her work and to the rare privilege of having known her personally.

Thank you.