

Connolly, Andy. *Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition*. Lexington Books, 2017.

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The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in November 2016 has been a happy time for fiction. Not only because of the amount of insightful and innovative literature that is being published since his inauguration, but also because of the prominent role that fiction has been awarded in the communal effort—admittedly, mostly by the liberal sector of the American public—to make sense of the present. The recovery of classics of counterfactual and dystopian fiction and their spike in sales during the early days of the Trump presidency—for example, George Orwell's *1984*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, Sinclair Lewis's *It Can Happen Here*, or the popularity of the adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* to television in early 2017—attest to the role that fiction can have as potential primer for a dreaded future and, thus, for navigating the present. Among these literary greats that were put back in the spotlight, Philip Roth was a usual household name. In particular, much was made of his “prescience” in *The Plot Against America* (2004) to anticipate the Trump administration, even though at the time of its publication that foresight was claimed for the post-9/11 world during the Bush administration (and despite Roth's repeated denials, then and now, that the novel were intended as a political roman à clef). Of course, Roth's “prescience,” like DeLillo's, cannot be attributed to a single work of fiction, but is rather the result of a whole oeuvre—including non-fiction—dedicated to understanding and explaining the United States. That this is at the heart of Roth's task, together with his exploration of the boundaries between aesthetics, fiction, and factual history, is a well-established fact, and this was another reason why Roth's essay from 1961, “Writing American Fiction,” was repeatedly quoted in the early days of the Trump presidency. In that essay Roth addressed the challenges faced by the American writer “to understand, describe and then make credible much of American reality” at a time when “the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist” (Roth 1961). Roth's lamentation sprung from watching the televised debates between Kennedy and Nixon in 1959 and observing that politics was turning, more than ever, into spectacle, and that American reality was “preposterous” (Roth in McGrath 2018). Moving from the 1960s to 2016, the process of politics turning into spectacle and the blurring of the lines between the “real” and the staged seem very close to completion, with a president who is a reality-TV star and who takes advice from TV pundits, in a United States where “truth isn't truth” and where objective falsehoods can be defended as “alternative facts.” Roth himself admitted in his last interview in 2018 that he was “naïve [...] in 1960 to think that I was an American living in preposterous times! How quaint!” (Roth in McGrath 2018). He also didn't spare epithets for the current state of American politics, or for the man who leads them.

In this context, Andy Connolly's volume *Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition*, published in 2017, is a timely contribution to the larger field of American Studies and—perhaps unwillingly and unexpectedly—to this cumbersome process of trying to make sense of the contemporary United States. Bringing together the disciplines of political and literary analysis, Connolly's volume explores the intrinsic tension in Roth's oeuvre between the aesthetic, the historical, and the political, in particular as regards that conceptual view of the United States as a liberal democracy that is now perceived as under attack, as being in the process of potential dismantling by the Trump administration. But is it? And what is/was “the American liberal tradition”? This is the question that this volume aptly answers, by means of an interdisciplinary approach to Roth's fiction.

In order to unpack the meaning of liberalism in America, Connolly offers an innovative approach that interweaves close reading of the literary text with a theoretically-grounded political analysis of the United States' political history after the 1930s, offering context and meaning for the background of Roth's texts. Drawing on a solid understanding of politics and on a number of theoretical and cultural backgrounds that are used to approach Roth's work—progressive liberalism, trauma theory (Felman, Caruth), formalism, dialogism (Volosinov, Bakhtin), theories of story-telling and desire (Brooks), among others—, Connolly's study enacts that same tension between the factual and the fictional that is so central to Roth's work, and which is the product of exploring the boundary between the "real" and the "fictional" and how these two spheres are inevitably interlinked. In reading Roth's texts through the lens of the development of American liberalism, Connolly is also attentive to Roth's repeated rejection of the label "political writer," or that his writing sought to reflect on historical processes. And yet, it is difficult not to conclude that Roth's work is insightful as regards the state of American politics and society. But as Connolly warns, it would be reductive to dismiss Roth's aesthetic view of fiction and his "continued exploration of themes of authorship" (Connolly 22) in favor of contextualized readings that focus exclusively on the historical content of his novels.

Precisely because of the centrality of this concern, Chapter 1, the "Preamble: Zuckerman's Agonies in the Earlier Novels," offers a necessary meditation on Nathan Zuckerman, a pivotal figure in Roth's literary universe that appears in nine of his novels—either as tangential or main character and/or narrator—and that is essential to understand Roth's literary project. Zuckerman is an aesthete, an idealist of formalism who believes in the autonomy of the literary text and that fiction can be and is, indeed, independent of "the facts," of the influence of history and context. But, as Connolly points out, Zuckerman repeatedly contravenes this ideal by getting embroiled in heated and repetitive arguments about the limits between "the facts" and his fiction (Connolly 37). This aesthetic ideal is weaved into a more personal struggle related to Zuckerman's Jewish American identity and his desire to break free from "my life"; that is, an identity that he perceives as predetermined by history and family origins. In this way, the Zuckerman texts (*My Life as Man*, *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, *The Prague Orgy*, *The Counterlife*, *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, *The Human Stain*, and *Exit Ghost*) play out—whether centrally or at the margins—a writer's lifelong exploration of the contours between the fictional and the factual and, ultimately, of the influence of history and contextual circumstances on an individual's character. As Connolly notes, Zuckerman embodies an author's "efforts to relate the private world of authorial imagination to the strange experience of American public life after the Second World War" (Connolly 58). After the introduction of this central figure in Roth's fiction, the next five chapters offer an analysis of five of Roth's later novels, through which Connolly traces the development of American liberalism from the 1930s to the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 2, "'Redface.' Liberal Politics and Literary Style in *I Married a Communist*," takes the reader to the 1950s and explores the development of progressive liberalism as the result of anti-Communist liberal trends in the post-war era—stressing how leftist politics come under attack not just by McCarthyism, but through reevaluations from within. In his analysis of *I Married a Communist* (1998), Connolly suggests that the novel deals less with the politics involved than with the cultural project undertaken, among others, by what came to be referred to as the "New York intellectuals," a group of critics "during the Depression, the Second World War, and the early post-war years" (Connolly 64) that articulated ideas regarding their shifting perceptions of Marxism and Stalinism and that led to a more centrist type of American progressivism, or what Anthony Hutchinson called "chastened liberalism" (Hutchinson in Connolly 99). Connolly's analysis hinges on how, through the dual narration by Zuckerman and Murray (a second narrator in dialogue with Zuckerman), Roth dramatizes "a sense of an imagination that is in constant dialectical tension with

itself, and for which there is ultimately no comforting bedrock of moral or aesthetic authority” (Connolly 100).

Chapter 3 offers an analysis of one of Roth’s most acclaimed novels, *American Pastoral* (1997), a poignant narrative that offers a compassionate yet piercing portrayal of the demise of the American Dream—especially of its overly optimistic stance—and which, together with *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000), came to be grouped as Roth’s “American Trilogy.” Connolly focuses in this chapter on how the liberal consensus achieved in the postwar period helped, in a way, “to foster a new exceptionalist myth of America as a place in which historical tensions were largely kept at bay” (Connolly 114), and which Seymour “Swede” Levov, the main character of *American Pastoral*, embodies. This period saw the concatenation of the welfare structures of the New Deal with a new period of economic prosperity that fostered individualist capitalism, resulting in an optimistic belief in inevitable progress and that prosperity would by itself erase class tensions and racial inequalities to ultimately produce a classless society. But just as is becoming evident in the tribal America of the twenty-first century, where the “democratizing effects of American capitalism” (Connolly 116) have been exposed as an inadequate fiction at best, the narrator of *American Pastoral* (Zuckerman) exposes how under the main character’s idealized existence lie “certain buried sources of pain [that] have rotted away at his subject’s trumpeted concept of life in America” (Connolly 114). Set in the “demythologizing decade” of the 1960s (Roth 1985, 86) that would cause the collapse of “the mythic sense of itself the country had” (Roth 1985, 89) as a result of the rise of “the student Left, the counterculture, militant forms of racial protest, new wave feminism, and the gay rights movement” (Connolly 123), the novel traces the demise of the postwar liberal consensus and offers insight into the conservative counter-mythology that was to emerge after it (Connolly 115), the development of a New Right that relied, as Connolly notes, on a catastrophic view of the sixties and on pushing “the politics of nostalgia” (Connolly 122).

Chapter 4, “‘Nothing lasts, and yet nothing passes.’ Race and Ethnicity in *The Human Stain*” moves forward to the last decade of the twentieth century, where Zuckerman comes into contact with an aged African American professor named Coleman who, having started his professional career before the era of Civil Rights and racial affirmation, has decided to pass as white. The plot is deeply ironic because Coleman, now at the end of his career, is accused of politically incorrect racial comments, which causes him to quit his job in a fury. He decides to hire Zuckerman to help him write his autobiography as a means of retribution and revenge, while at the same time keeping his secret safe. Connolly’s analysis of this work focuses on how Roth dramatizes the inconsistencies “between prescribed notions of social origins and acts of self-authorship” (Connolly 168), and how strategies that were formerly effective come into clash with “a heightened awareness of the social facticity of the racial subject” (Connolly 168) at the end of the century. Thus, his analysis of the novel centers around “how Coleman’s effort to redefine himself is placed in dialogical tension with certain *impassable* traumas of class and race” (Connolly 168; emphasis in the original). The chapter deals with the culture wars at the turn of the century, notions of political correctness, citizenship, and racial identity, to ultimately focus on Roth’s despair at the “shortcomings involved in this once-dominant liberal ideal of an inclusive American commonwealth,” “the impoverished status of old-fashioned liberal dreams of social progress at the end of the twentieth century,” and “the various failures of American liberalism to live up to its once-exciting promise of a more equitable and democratic society” (Connolly 201-202).

Chapter 5, “*Exit Ghost*. ‘A book about knowing where to go for your agony,’” focuses on the 2007 novel in which an aging Zuckerman comes out of his self-imposed exile to go to New York for a medical procedure and gets involved, once again, in old arguments about a writer’s autonomy from the autobiographical “fantasies [...] extrapolated from fiction” (Roth, *Exit Ghost* 254). The novel is

dialogical in its conception, offering adversarial views on fiction as, on the one hand, a mimetic representation of reality and, on the other, and as Velichka Ivanova suggests, as “the art of presence, of a subjective mind with its view on reality” (Ivanova in Connolly 216). For Zuckerman—who many read as Roth’s authorial alter ego—the art of narration is rather “rumination in narrative form” (Roth, *Exit Ghost* 200), but the struggles to sustain this view eventually lead Zuckerman to his final retreat from public life. Thus, through an analysis of the novel’s strong focus on aesthetic matters, Connolly also traces the retreat of liberalism into its current “damning image [...] as ineffectually detached from the wider American public” (Connolly 225) and, even more so and as George Packer describes it, “as the creed of the weak, the soft, the guilt-ridden, the hyperintellectual, the privileged, the out-of-touch, the hypocritical—all those who don’t want to see the world as it is” (Packer in Connolly 225). This characterization resonates deeply with the current image of American liberals that is consistently pushed by the most reactionary Right, which sustains that American liberals—and Democrats by extension—are mostly arrogant coastal elites and privileged intellectuals who have lost touch with, and do not represent, “real Americans.”

Chapter 6 goes back—at least in historical terms—to the beginning, which Connolly also understands as the end: *The Plot against America* (2004), a counterfactual novel about the latent fascist and authoritarian tendencies of the late 1930s in the United States, and that many are reading in today’s politics, as I mentioned at the beginning. The novel is narrated by an aged “Philip Roth” who looks back at his childhood in the late 1930s Newark, and at how his sense of security in a sheltered Jewish American community is shattered to pieces as a result of the anti-Semitic policies pushed by the isolationist and Nazi sympathizer US president, Charles Lindbergh (who in the fictional universe of the narrative, beats Roosevelt in the 1940 elections). As Connolly suggests, old Philip’s narrative, with its emphasis on a bygone era of a caring nuclear family and a protective federal government, can be juxtaposed to “Zuckerman’s fatalistic despair [in *Exit Ghost*] over trends in national public life during the turn of this century” (Connolly 233). But, as the second half of the novel makes clear—through the development of its counterfactual scenario and an overwhelming sense of dread—these two narratives are not “ultimately as distinctive as may first appear” (Connolly 233). Connolly’s analysis focuses on how the recovery of Philip’s traumatic memory reflects on the “shared experiences of history as a source of catastrophe and confusion” (Connolly 235), and how the traumas of the past persist in a sense of unsettlement, despair, and loss. Again, Connolly stresses the dialogic nature of Roth’s narration in its examination of the policies of the New Deal, the “‘epic’ stories of the national past” (Connolly 256), and the “temporarily stalled anxieties about the harmful effects of Jewish social exclusion” (Connolly 234), in a “backward glance of affection” that, he argues, also runs through Roth’s oeuvre (Connolly 257).

To conclude, *Philip Roth and the American Liberal Tradition* offers an insightful journey into the rise and transformation of American liberalism through an interdisciplinary analysis of Roth’s dual strains, focusing on the “historical turn” in the American Trilogy onwards but remaining attentive to Roth’s persistent investment in themes of literary and authorial self-examination. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, the volume is a valuable contribution for anyone seeking to understand key issues in Roth’s oeuvre like formalism, narrative experimentation, aesthetic distance, and the limitations of context vs. historicist criticism while, at the same time, —and even if the author does not make any reference to the immediate political present—, a very informative panorama for anyone trying to make sense of the United States of Donald Trump, especially of the challenges facing American liberalism today, and how these came to be.

Works Cited

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