

Liberalism, Autonomy, and the Open Mind in Philip Roth's Drama of the 1960s

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It has been suggested that a discourse of open- and closed-mindedness rose to prominence in America between the end of the Second World War and the late 1960s.¹ This discourse pitted a flexible, autonomous, and ultimately desirable “open mind” against an ideologically affiliated and rigid “closed mind.” The open mind, as Jamie Cohen-Cole (2014) puts it, “meant a respect for individuality, tolerance of difference, appreciation of pluralism, and appreciation of freedom of thought” (2). The closed-mind, by contrast, “rejected new ideas and people, and, because of compulsive adherence to ideology, lacked his or her own thoughts” (4). The valorization of the open mind, in Cohen-Cole’s account, was essentially a liberal response to a selection of anxiety-producing historical events: the rise of fascism in early twentieth-century Europe; the emergent stories of life in Stalin’s Soviet Union; the inquisitions of McCarthyism; the homogenizing potential of rampant consumerism. Defining and fostering the “open mind” was enlisted, “on the one hand, to help keep the Communists without, and on the other, to eradicate the racists and conformist robots of the crowd within” (4).

Reading Philip Roth’s little-known drama of the 1960s alongside key works in this discourse of open-mindedness, this chapter rethinks Roth’s relationship with mid-twentieth-century American liberalism. The last few decades have seen a great deal of critical and cultural debate about Roth’s perceived liberalism. Much of this criticism has focused on readings of Roth’s later work as evidence of his adherence to a mid-century liberalism that privileged individual autonomy over group identity.² But there is also a body of critical literature which emphasizes Roth’s limited interest in the liberal project—his position as a writer for whom sociopolitical and ethical concerns were always secondary to the challenges

and pleasures of putting twentieth-century American life into fiction.³ Across the literature, Roth's association with mid-century liberalism is rarely in doubt. The debate, though, seems to converge on whether Roth's writing is open- or narrow-minded in its engagement with liberalism. Some suggest that Roth's writing was, for the main part, inhibited by mid-century liberalism, that is unable to see beyond its narrow confines. Others highlight Roth's capacity to stand outside the crowd and think beyond the dominant assumptions of mid-century liberalism.⁴

Much of the critical literature on Roth's liberalism is insightful and persuasive, but the existent debate on the topic is a little overly reliant on the novels that Roth produced from the late 1990s onwards, particularly the American trilogy of *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000). This is understandable. These are important works in Roth's oeuvre that reflect upon some of the key moments in twentieth-century politics. But the focus on these novels, at the expense of the earlier work, can give the impression that Roth's concern with mid-century liberalism was primarily retrospective.

Building on the work of Patrick Hayes (2014), this chapter reveals how Roth's writing interrogates the discourses of mid-century liberalism as they were emerging in the early 1960s. Equally, the degree to which the critical literature is weighted towards the American trilogy can belie the diverse ways in which Roth wrote about liberalism. Much has been said about the extent to which Roth engages with liberalism through realist fiction structured around significant historical events and figures; the engagement with liberalism that we encounter in his more formally experimental work needs further consideration. With this in mind, the following chapter illustrates how liberalism figures in two of Roth's dramatic works of the 1960s: "Buried Again" (1964) and "The National Pastime" (1965). These little-known plays emerge in close historical proximity to the discourses of mid-century liberalism

and engage with these discourses in a way that is more abstract than much of Roth's other work. Thus, they are well positioned to add to our understanding of Roth's liberalism.

Roth's archives contain drafts of plays written for theater and television as well as scripts for television series and films, revealing his interest not only in drama but also televisual and filmic adaptations of his own works (particularly *The Prague Orgy*) and the works of other literary writers, specifically Anton Chekhov. Roth attempted original dramatic writing most frequently in the early part of his career, the early 1960s being the highpoint of his creative entanglement with drama. The plays under consideration in this chapter were written in these years, as was "The Nice Jewish Boy" (1965) one of the failed projects out of which Roth later suggested *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) emerged (Roth 2001, 36). In the middle and later part of his career, Roth was more occupied by work on dramatic adaptation, but there were still forays into original drama in the 1980s (1988's "Journey into the Whirlwind", for example), and drama emerges as a key theme in later novels such as *Sabbath's Theater* (1995), *I Married a Communist* and *The Humbling* (2009). In short, Roth's interest in dramatic writing was strong and longstanding.

However, little of this writing has been published or produced.⁵ Generally, as Mike Witcombe (2014) has noted, Roth's dramatic works are "shrouded in obscurity" (108). With the exception of Witcombe, no other critic has discussed Roth's dramatic works in any detail, and I wager that most general readers would be surprised to learn that Roth devoted so much energy to the writing of drama.

In some ways, it is unsurprising that little attention has been paid to Roth's plays. They are strange and uneven in places, and the fact that most were written in the early years of Roth's career may lead some to see them as apprentice pieces that paved the way for more polished and successful works of literary fiction. However, there is good reason for placing a spotlight on Roth's drama. Rowdy, provocative, and ambitious, the plays can entertain us and

inform our thinking on Roth's writerly practice, particularly, (as Witcombe has argued) regarding his formal experimentation (110). They can also help us to place Roth in relation to the political, sociocultural, and academic developments of his day.

This chapter juxtaposes Roth's plays with two works that are key to the mid-century liberal discourse of open-mindedness: David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and Milton Rokeach's *The Open and Closed Mind* (1960). Roth's plays, I suggest, share with these works of social science a preoccupation with the individual's capacity to adapt to a changing environment whilst exhibiting a sense of autonomy. The works of both Riesman and Rokeach construct an ideal open-minded subject who can adapt to new situations, whilst showing the capacity to think independently about them. Roth's plays interrogate these idealizations by focusing upon stubborn, middle-aged men as they respond to sudden, dramatic, and often surreal changes to their lives. In the first part of this chapter, I suggest that the tribulations of Harold Weingast in "Buried Again" serve to scrutinize the model of autonomy that Riesman sets out. The next part of the chapter considers "The National Past Time" alongside the experiments described by Rokeach. Like Rokeach, Roth is interested in the capacity of the open-minded subject to "play along" with emergent worlds that are governed by novel rules and belief systems. But, Roth's plays, I argue, are less willing to valorize this "playing along" than are the experiments of Rokeach. Ultimately, then, the chapter aims to better define Roth's liberalism by determining the degree to which his plays participate in the valorization of autonomy and open-mindedness that took place in mid-century liberal America.

Scrutinizing Autonomy in "Buried Again"

Cohen-Cole suggests that autonomy and its inverse, conformity, were key terms in discourse about American life in the middle of the twentieth century. Pointing to texts written by "elite"

social critics such as David Riesman, as well as mass-market magazines such as *Readers Digest*, he identifies a widespread anxiety that the “corporatization of work and suburban homogeneity” was producing “conformity and therefore weakness in American culture” (38). Roth’s theater of the 1960s, and particularly 1964’s “Buried Again,” can be seen to scrutinize this cultural desire to rescue the autonomous individual from the conformity of all things corporate and suburban. The play is concerned with the potential reincarnation of one deceased Jewish male, Harold Weingast, a middle-aged Newark businessman who died of a heart attack on the golf course. After an unspecified amount of time deceased, Weingast is presented with the opportunity to return to Earth in a new form. However, this return depends on his being successfully “processed” by a committee of four anonymous specialists (Roth 1964: 5). The play presents a single scene in which the four specialists, occupying high wooden booths and dressed in different-colored academic robes, interview the confused Weingast about the form he wishes to take on his return to Earth. The key subject of this interview is whether Weingast’s new form is going to occupy the same identificatory categories as he did (heterosexual, male, American, Jewish). Weingast’s continued existence will depend on his making genuine and considered choices about his future identity. As one of the specialists puts it, “I want you to be what you want to be, but I want to be sure you want it, after having given full consideration to the other choices open to you” (9). If he is incapable of making these choices, he will be “buried again.”

The specialists, thus, ask Weingast to showcase the kind of autonomy that much of the mid-century discourse identified by Cohen-Cole advocated. In particular, the autonomy that the specialists attempt to elicit from him resounds with that advocated by Riesman, Roth’s one-time college professor,⁶ in his influential work, *The Lonely Crowd* (written in collaboration with Reuel Denney and Nathan Glazer). Riesman takes as his starting point the observation that certain people will be more-or-less suited to the societies in which they exist,

considering this in relation to three key terms: adjustment, anomie and autonomy. For Riesman, adjustment is about being endowed with a character structure that is well suited to your society and social place. The “adjusted”, as he puts it, “are those who reflect their society, or their class within the society, with the least distortion” (2001, 242). At the other extreme, there are those who Riesman labels anomic (people who are incapable of conforming to the ideals of their society). But Riesman is particularly interested in the autonomous—“those who on the whole are capable of conforming to the behavioral norms of their society [...] but are free to choose whether to conform or not” (242). In Riesman’s account, autonomy involves having a strong sense of self but also an openness to the possibility of self-transformation. On the one hand, Riesman’s autonomous person makes an effort “to recognize and respect his own feelings, his own potentialities, his own limitations” (259); on the other, “he is aware of the possibility that he might change, that there are many roles open to him, roles other people have taken in history or in his milieu” (246). Thus, the autonomous person can play along with the ideal of a certain place and time, but also think beyond them.

Like Riesman’s model autonomous subject, Weingast **is being asked** to consider “that there are many roles open to him” (Riesman 2001: 246) and decide on a role that accords with “his own feelings, his own potentialities, his own limitations” (259). In a sense, the play can be seen as a thought experiment structured around Riesman’s model of autonomy.

Much of the dramatic and comedic impact of “Buried Again” rests on the hopelessness of Weingast’s attempt to understand his situation and make the required decision. He is unable seriously to consider unfamiliar roles and identities and seems more interested in making the decisions that please the authorities before him than in contemplating change or satisfying his own desires. However, “Buried Again” does not simply satirize the narrow-minded obedience of Weingast. It also places scrutiny on those

who attempt to elicit autonomy from the befuddled protagonist. There is undoubtedly something seductive about the specialists' desire to make sure that candidates for reincarnation carefully consider their options before choosing their new identity. Roth's play, though, scratches at the gloss of this rhetoric in three main ways.

First, the play is mindful of the contradictions inherent in the attempt to coerce an individual into autonomy. Even if one recognizes inherent value in the autonomy that Weingast is asked to show, the set-up still forces him to adopt this autonomy on pain of death. Second, there is an almost comic rigidity to the way in which the committee ask Weingast to choose between a narrow selection of discrete identities. In the case of gender and sexuality, for instance, Weingast is told: "You may choose one of the following: Male, or man; Female; Male homosexual; Female homosexual" (Roth 1964 8). Third, as the play goes on, it becomes apparent that the specialists are nudging Weingast in particular directions with regards to his choices. One is peculiarly keen for Weingast's reincarnation to come from the north of Canada (18–9); another seems to steer Weingast towards womanhood (9–10); and, most troublingly, one insists that Weingast choose a non-Jewish identity because "mankind has had enough of Jews" (41). "Buried Again" imagines a systematic process that works to elicit Riesmanian autonomy, but characterizes it as contradictory, inhibited, and vulnerable to the whims and biases of its executors. The play, thus, shows the degree to which Roth was steeped in Riesmanian ideals of autonomy and understood their appeal. However, the play ultimately emphasizes the problems inherent in the attempt to elicit autonomy. The systematic attempt to bring about autonomous decision-making is cast as flawed and violent.

Experimenting on the Open Mind

As we have seen, "Buried Again" presents a world in which an individual's continued existence depends on their playing along with a rigid, if mysterious, set of rules structured

around notions of autonomy derived from mid-century social science. The connection between Roth's drama and social science becomes tighter, though, when one turns to 1965's "The National Pastime," later titled "The Penetrator".

"The National Pastime" has a more familiar setting than "Buried Again." We are taken into a contemporary suburban American living room in which Al, a "strongminded husband," turns on the television. Things take a strange turn, however, when Al discovers that all the channels on his television transmit the same pictures: a man and a woman fornicating to the accompaniment of Rachmaninoff's "Piano Concerto No 2" (Roth 1965: 16). Horrified by this, he tries to hide the footage from his young son Gregory. Eventually, Al's wife, Isabel intervenes. She is afraid that Al's horror at televised sex will make Gregory frightened "about you-know-what" and eventually explains to her son that "two people are having intercourse on television" (54). At this point, a "nice young couple from next door" appear at the door. Their television is showing the same images, and the group speculate on the reasons for this, deciding to continue watching in the hope that all will be explained (54–5).

When the intercourse ends, the much-anticipated explanation arrives. A voice emerges from the television set and a "distinguished-looking man" appears (56). Speaking from the corridors of a "scientific building," as scientists move back and forth behind him in white jackets, he explains that the television-viewing public have just been given a "front-row seat at a history-making scientific experiment" (56). The experimenters have found that if "trillions of microscopic dots" are presented at an appropriate frequency "then a vast storehouse" of sequential images will be "placed at the disposal of each and every television viewer" (56). This will effectively mean that those looking at the television screen will see whatever they want to see. This scientific innovation

serves the democratic dream, we think, by penetrating beyond fad and fashion, beyond what the sponsors believe the public wants, and what those rating systems believe they may be willing to watch—penetrates right down through the dangerous layers of me-tooism and conformity to the true and genuine television needs of every man, woman and child in this land. (56)

Here, Roth's play undoubtedly continues the work of "Buried Again" in scrutinizing social scientific notions of autonomy. Roth's fictitious experiment aims to enable individuals to transcend the norms and expectations of their society—"me-tooism and conformity"—and to seek cultural experiences that fulfill their "true and genuine" needs. However, the problems with the experiment are clear. If it was aiming to elicit individual autonomy rather than conformity, the experiment seems to have been unsuccessful; as AI points out, all its subjects seem to have seen the "same thing" (18). Equally, it is difficult not to question the experiment's assumption that an individual's true and genuine needs can be met without careful consideration. How much stock can we put in an autonomy that elides conscious decision-making?

"The National Pastime," though, is not merely a critique of social scientific understandings of autonomy. It also engages with the experimental approach to open-mindedness that developed within social psychology in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in the work of Milton Rokeach. In the experiments documented in *The Open and Closed Mind*, Rokeach and colleagues investigated the way that individuals respond to a "world wherein the rules of the game are in contradiction" to those of their "everyday world" (Rokeach 2015: 171). Rokeach's experiments relied on scales used to measure levels of rigidity, opinionation, and dogmatism. In the case of dogmatism, for example, subjects were asked whether they agreed with a series of statements that the experimenters judged to be dogmatic, with a

particular score being derived from their answers. Someone who tended to agree with the “dogmatic” statements would score highly on the Dogmatism Scale. Experimental groups were then asked to participate in a range of complex and unfamiliar experimental tasks, with the performances of those that measured highly on the scale being compared with the performances of those with lower scores. Those whose views were adjudged dogmatic, the experimenters hypothesized, would be less willing and able to adapt to novel environments. Essentially, then, the experiments set out to show a link between dogmatic opinions and inflexible performance in order to distinguish between the “closed-minded” person and the “open-minded” one.

Many of the experiments described in *The Open and Closed Mind* are structured around a specific “fictitious world wherein the rules of the game are in contradiction to those of our everyday world” (Rokeach 2015: 171). This is primarily the world of “Joe Doodlebug.” Joe, subjects are told at the beginning of experiments, is “a strange sort of bug” whose physical capacities do not conform to familiar rules. For example, Joe does not have to “face” food in order to eat it and is “trapped facing north” (172–3). Rokeach and his colleagues tested the capacity of their subjects to adapt to the rules of this fictitious world by asking them to solve a range of problems involving Joe’s attempts to move around and eat. They also continually tweaked the rules that governed Joe’s “miniature cosmology” to see whether subjects could repeatedly play along with new belief systems (171). In general, the results of the “Joe” experiments accorded with the hypothesis of *The Open and Closed Mind*. Those whose beliefs scored highly on the Dogmatism Scale were less able to adapt their minds to the novel rules of Joe’s fictitious world (398). The experimenters concluded that those who scored highly on the Dogmatism Scale were less able to quickly understand and “play along with” new systems of belief (398).

“The National Pastime” is comparable to the “Joe” experiments in the degree to which it is concerned with the ability of its protagonists—as well as a potential audience—to play along with the unfamiliar rules and belief systems that govern fictitious worlds. As the voice of the scientist explaining the experiment makes clear, in the everyday world of the characters in question, television viewing is governed by things like social convention, advertising revenue, and ratings systems. The experiment asks the characters of “The National Pastime” to understand and play along with a new system of television viewership in which the programming will recognize and conform exclusively to the deepest desires of the individual viewer. Here, it is important to note the divide between the characters in terms of their responses. Most of the individuals represented in the play are able to understand and “play along” with this new system. The “nice young couple” accept that what they have seen reflects their own desires. Bradley, the husband, even deems the experiment “the most exciting advancement in decades” (17). Similarly, Isabel grasps the idea behind the experiment, drawing an interesting, if comically partial conclusion from its results: “it means that down deep in our subliminal souls, all of us have a deep unsatisfied desire to have more semi-classical music on TV” (18).

The play, though, offers an alternative response through the figure of Al. Al has voiced his disgust at the broadcast from the outset of the play and, on hearing the explanation, refuses to play along. For Al, sex on television is simply wrong, and so are those who watch it—regardless of how “true and genuine” their needs. He has loosely grasped the conceit behind the experiment—that they have all seen what they wanted to see—but cannot accept a world of television viewing in which individual desires are privileged over established norms and values. Al would sooner “live without television” than watch it on the terms of this experiment; the play concludes with his throwing out the television set in a fit of anger (17–19). Like Rokeach’s experiments, Roth’s play seems to draw a division between open- and

closed-minded subjects. Those who are open to a new set of rules are separated from Al who is, in the words of Isabel, “against new things” (18).

Roth’s play, though, strays from the ethos that drives Rokeach’s experiments in terms of the degree to which it valorizes the open-minded subject. Rokeach’s experiments clearly assume that we should want to stand on the “open” side of the open/closed divide. “Closed” persons are defined in terms of their incapacities—by having “greater difficulty than open ones in forming new conceptual and perceptual systems” (Rokeach 2015: 284). “The National Pastime” constructs a different, less hierarchical relationship. Certainly, Roth’s closed-minded subject is not very sympathetic. Al is violent towards his son, dismissive of his wife’s opinions, and seemingly unable to confront his own desires. He denounces the others as “rot-ridden” for what they have seen on the television whilst glossing over the fact that he has seen the same thing (17). At the same time, though, he is the one who articulates the evident problems with the experiment: he points out the problem that all the subjects of the experiment have seen the same thing, and he asks the reasonable ethical question of whether “those people down in Washington” have a right to conduct this sort of experiment “without warning the public” (17). Where the others seem inclined to play along with the experiment because, as Bradley says, “it’s science” (18), Al offers a valid critique. Roth’s play, then, seems to perceive a value in closed-mindedness that is lost amidst the idealization of “playing along” that characterizes *The Open and Closed Mind*.

Conclusion

Roth’s plays put significant pressure on the rhetoric of open-mindedness that was valorized in American culture in the middle of the twentieth century. And Roth would continue with this project in his most famous prose work of his early career, *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969). There is, for instance, a critique of the mid-century valorization of open-mindedness in the way in

which Alexander Portnoy derides the “Jewish narrow-minded minds” (PC 76) of his local community, whilst harboring, in the words of Jacques Berlinerblau (2018), “cringingly illiberal sentiments about women, minorities, and just about everyone else” (99).⁷ Like that of the specialists of “Buried Again” and the scientists of “The National Pastime,” Roth’s presentation of Portnoy asks us to be skeptical of the discourse of open-mindedness—able to see that an excessive tendency to privilege and foster autonomy and open-mindedness has the potential to bring about hypocrisy, cruelty and, indeed narrow-mindedness. This has consequences for perceptions of Roth’s later writing. Certainly it troubles the view, put forward most notoriously by Norman Podheretz, that works of the late 1990s such as *American Pastoral* marked Roth’s sudden turn away from an enthusiastic adherence to mid-century liberalism. Instead, considering the plays alongside liberalist social scientific theory, allows us to see the degree to which later works extend Roth’s sustained interrogation of liberalism. The mooted identity shifts of “Buried Again”, for example, might allow us to see an interrogation of Riesmanian liberalism in Coleman Silk’s attempts to “achieve a greater level of personal autonomy by passing as white” (Connolly 177) in *The Human Stain* (2000).

This is not to say that Roth completely transcended or defied the mid-century liberal discourse of open-mindedness. Here it is useful to return to where we began, with Cohen-Cole’s (2014) description of this discourse as one that privileged “a respect for individuality, tolerance of difference, appreciation of pluralism, and appreciation of freedom of thought” (2). There is nothing in the plays (or *Portnoy*) to suggest that society should not celebrate individual autonomy, difference, pluralism, or freedom of thought. Indeed, the outlandish and abstract fictitious environments of Roth’s early works demand an audience able to “play along with” what may be peculiar and different. The plays ultimately further highlight the complexity of Roth’s relationship with liberalism. They interrogate the way in which liberal ideals of open-mindedness are valorized and elicited by certain institutions (those in

academic robes and white coats); they also, to a large extent, ask us to appreciate the open mind and be open-minded.

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Notes

¹ Thanks go to Mike Witcombe for making me aware of Roth’s plays and sharing materials with me.

² Anthony Hutchinson (2007), for instance, outlines Roth’s defense of a “paleoliberalism” that placed emphasis on “the relationship of the individual to the republic or broader national collective rather than any ethnic subgroup” (167). Similarly, though in more hostile terms, John Carlos Rowe (2011) views Roth’s later work as “neoliberal” in the degree to which it

defends individualism, attacks post-1960s identity politics, and attempts to revive the “middle class liberalism” of mid-century writers such as Lionel Trilling (189–90).

³ Patrick Hayes (2014) and Andy Connolly (2017) both produce studies that foreground Roth’s departure from Lionel Trilling’s liberalism. In particular, these studies highlight the degree to which Trilling and his followers endorsed literature’s capacity to cultivate a particular type of mind—one that, in Hayes’s (2014) words, has a “refined breadth and many-sidedness” (12). In the accounts of both Hayes and Connolly, Roth had little interest in this project; he was a writer for whom sociopolitical and ethical concerns were always secondary to the challenges and pleasures of putting twentieth-century American life into fiction.

⁴ This is particularly evident in the obituaries written for Roth. Eric Homberger (2018), for example, notes that Roth was “in theory an upper West Side liberal,” before concluding that he “declined to fit himself into predictable categories, liberal or otherwise.” Similarly, Laura Tanenbaum (2018) suggests that Roth’s works “could only have been written by someone who came of age in the heyday of postwar liberalism” but also “recognized many of its limits, hypocrisies, and, especially, its ultimate fragility.” Even Norman Podhoretz, who characterized Roth as a long-time adherent to the “old-time liberal religion,” suggested, in a 1998 *Commentary* article, that works such as *American Pastoral* “changed sides” to offer a neoconservative critique of received liberal wisdom.

⁵ Looking to the texts considered in this article, “Buried Again” has not been published or staged. “The National Pastime” was published in *Cavalier* magazine but has never been staged or produced.

⁶ In the middle of the 1950s, as a postgraduate student at the University of Chicago, Roth audited a series of social science classes given by Riesman on mass culture. Roth describes these classes in a 2006 radio interview with Christopher Lydon (Radio Open Source 2018).

⁷ Some readers have been inclined to conflate the perspectives of Portnoy and Roth. In a 1972 *Commentary* editorial, for instance, Norman Podhoretz (1972) deemed Roth the “laureate” of an emergent “professional and technical intelligentsia” for whom the majority of Americans (Jew and gentile alike) were “vulgarians, materialists, boors, and bores.” For Podhoretz, “the authorial point of view in the work of Philip Roth claims for itself a singular sensitivity to things of the spirit” and looks down at the rest of America with derision. Portnoy, Roth, and the “intelligentsia” are seen as one in their complacent contempt for the narrow-minded American crowd. The ire of Roth’s novel, though, is clearly as much directed at the hypocrisies of the “open-minded” Portnoy as the narrow-mindedness of his compatriots.