



Book Reviews

From Pluralist to Patriotic Politics, Putting Practice First

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Like so many books in contemporary normative political theory, this takes as its departing point the fact of pluralism, the existence within any modern liberal democratic society of deep-lying, persistent and intractable disagreement. Like many other books on the subject, the author thinks he has a solution. The interest of the book is that the proposed solution lies not so much in any particular political arrangement or set of institutions, as in the adoption of the appropriate mode of practical reasoning about political matters. A ‘hermeneutic’ approach to the conflict between ways of life and goods does not display the pessimism of an orthodox pluralism that is resigned to conflict at worst and grubby compromise at best. Instead, it sees these ways of life and goods as practices or activities rather than conceptual understandings. Moreover, it is thereby able to see conflicting goods as already to some extent sharing something in common, as being parts of a greater whole. The aim of a ‘patriotic polity’ is to overcome the conflict by an understanding achieved ‘through a conversation-produced reconciliation, thus bringing the whole of a society’s parts closer together by strengthening the purposes that all its citizens may be said to share’ (p. 120).

This is all very laudable. However, a lack of any concrete examples from the real world of politics leaves one unsure whether the author is providing a plausible description of existing practices or a normative recommendation of how things might be done. I am sceptical it can be the former, and the latter needs supplementing with a realistic account of how the ideal might indeed be realized. I am also unclear whether the hermeneutic reconciliation of difference is effected conceptually, that is by means of *a priori* argumentation, or practically, that is by means of a real political conversation. His idea of a conversation-produced reconciliation bears some comparison with models of deliberative democracy. However, he does not himself draw out the comparison. The use of the term ‘patriotic’ suggests an appeal to the thick, historically rooted, unifying social and cultural ‘imaginary’ of the nation. But, again, the author does not avail himself of any of the familiar work in contemporary political theory on nationalism. At most there is a hermeneutic rendering of classical republicanism.



Much of the book adopts the ‘washing line’ strategy of argumentation whereby appropriately titled theoretical approaches are suspended alongside one another. The author’s preferred solution is then contrasted favourably with the alternatives that are hung out to dry. Thus, there are weak pluralists (Dahl, Raz, Walzer), neutralist liberals (Rawls) and strong pluralists (Berlin, Hampshire, Galston). The washing line approach is only profitable so long as very disparate authors and theories display contrasting commonalities. At its worst it merely oversimplifies and offers rhetoric rather than careful argumentation.

Here is one small but revealing example of where I think things can go wrong. In a discussion of rights, it is said that talk of rights generating duties ‘is already to assume a particular approach to rights, one known as the ‘interest theory’ approach, it being particularly favoured by pluralists’. Raz is instanced as a prominent defender of pluralism and of the ‘interest theory’ (p. 186). Now, in fact, most rights’ theorists think rights generate, that is correlate with duties. Raz does indeed defend the interest theory of rights but this theory is not alone in defending the correlativity of rights and duties. The alternative theory of rights is the ‘will theory’. H.L.A. Hart was the most prominent defender of such a theory. He believed rights generate duties and he was also surely a pluralist *avant la lettre*. A footnote to the book’s discussion concedes that not all pluralists who write about rights adhere to the ‘interest’ approach. Steven Lukes is cited as a pluralist attracted to Nozick’s conception of rights as side constraints and Dworkin’s rights egalitarianism (p. 259, fn. 3). However, the will and interest theories are theories of what it is to have a right, Nozick’s is an account of how rights function and of their strength, and Dworkin’s is a theory of the ultimate warrant for rights. In short, this is a badly compressed discussion of a complex concept and ideal that suffers from being treated according to the washing line strategy.

That said the book contains many interesting discussions — of the role of the heroic in politics, notably. The author is impressively wide ranging in his sources and command of material. But, at the end of the day, this book ‘solves’ the problems of pluralism by conceptual fiat and not, as it promises, by arguments from the priority of political practice.

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