Review Essay

The Elusive politics of radical democratic philosophy

Adventures of the symbolic: Post-marxism and radical democracy
Warren Breckman
Columbia University Press, New York, paperback edition, 2016,
xix+354pp., ISBN: 978-0231143950

Thinking radical democracy: The return to politics in post-war France
Martin Breaugh, Christopher Holman, Rachel Magnusson, Paul Mazzocchi,
and Devin Penner (eds)
University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2015, vi+277pp.,
ISBN 978-4426-5004-6

Contemporary Political Theory (2018) **17,** S43–S50. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0098-y; published online 31 March 2017

Warren Breckman's *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* is a magisterial history of the co-developed ideas of the symbolic and theories of radical democracy and their culmination in post-War, post-Marxist French thought. The book's narration is marked by thoughtful philosophical exegeses, historical and biographical insights, keen contextual reflection, and patient accounts of how ideas mutate over time and occasionally return to their roots. Whether measured in terms of its overarching philosophical argument – which recasts our understanding of radical democratic theory within the longer history of the symbolic – or in terms of its historical narration of the complex interwoven history of the two fields, Breckman's work is a resounding success. Not unimportantly, Breckman has written a lucid book, a notable accomplishment when examining two fields that revel in abstruse exposition. The book's breadth of coverage will make it an indispensable launching point for students of radical democratic theory, while its critical and philosophical depth will be plumbed by specialists for some time to come. It will, no doubt, become a touchstone for historians, political theorists, and philosophers.

By expanding the philosophical and historical horizons of his analysis to 19th century philosophy, Breckman revises a long-accepted claim regarding the importance of the early 20th century's linguistic turn in radical democratic theory. This wider scope of inquiry prompts Breckman to prefer the term "symbolic turn" to characterize a range of critiques of the "noncorrespondence of words and things,

the nontransparency of language, and the power of signs to constitute the things they purportedly represent" (p. 11). Breckman's arguments are persuasive. At the core of his thesis are two interwoven claims. The first regards the pre-Marxist foundations of symbolic theory, its occlusion by Marxist materialism, and its incremental re-emergence as dogmatic Marxism was first philosophically undermined, then historically and politically delegitimized in French intellectual culture post-Stalin. This brings Breckman to his second claim, which posits that the "return to the political" occurred alongside the re-emergence of the theories of the symbolic. Hence, while the perspective of the linguistic turn sees radical politics as part of the shift away from Marxism, Breckman shows that the wellspring of these political philosophies were, in fact, pre-Marxist.

The first chapter surveys the history of symbolic theory up to Marx. It begins with an account of classicism, romanticism, and Hegel, but focuses primarily on the Left Hegelian critique of the Romantic interpretation of the symbolic in Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach. The narrative is compelling, and the specific scholarly contributions – often tucked away in footnotes – are important and interesting. The chapter allows Breckman to establish the indeterminacy (*contra* philosophical universalism) at the core of radical democratic thought did not emerge from within the tradition of *political* thought, but was transposed from the philosophical-symbolic tradition. Additionally, Breckman establishes symbiotic benefits of the particular conjunction of these two fields. Early indication of the radical critique to come was already signaled in the critique of religion afforded by the conjunction of these ideas. As Breckman writes of the Left Hegelians' critique of religion: "It is not just that they confronted a deeply rooted system of religious heteronomy with the most radical claims for human self-sufficiency that had yet been uttered; rather, it is the fact that they confronted an age-old system of meaning with a philosophical guarantee of their own historical victory" (p. 55). That is to say, even in these early precursors of the radical democracy/symbolism conjunction, there appeared a realization that this particular blend of politics and philosophy could provide a measure of enchantment through its perpetual rejection of the universal and the staid, which Breckman calls "the possibility of a constant activation of the quest for autonomy" (p. 56).

Chapter Two moves this history of the symbolic from pre-Marxist Romantic socialism to the post-Marxist/post-War era in French radical thought. Pierre Leroux is singled out as an important precursor to these debates, taking a strong stance against the inevitable historical closure of the Hegelian system and the vulgar materialism of many of the socialists. Against those claims, Leroux asserts the necessity of the mediation of the unbridgeable gap between the visible and the invisible by way of the symbol, a mediation that for Leroux afforded a productive space for individual and collective freedom. Marx is given a surprisingly brief review, and quickly gives way to accounts of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Louis Althusser, and Jean Baudrillard. Breckman does a remarkably good job in giving an account of these three challenging philosophers exactly because he does not shy

away from the political and philosophical tensions pulling their thought in incongruent directions, toward both radical autonomy and totalizing domination, anarchic symbolic revelry and oppressive regimes of symbolic stasis. Ultimately, the chapter reads as a critical account of their philosophies, most especially the pessimism of Althusser and Baudrillard. Here, as in the conclusion, there are points where Breckman's sympathies as a historian seem to fray as the political implications of the claims become overbearingly hopeless. At many of these points, Breckman turns to long quotations instead of interpretation or criticism, seemingly to allow their convoluted claims to fend for themselves.

Chapter Three tracks Cornelius Castoriadis' rejections of Althusser's attempts at re-grounding Marxism in search of an account of radical political action. The importance of Castoriadis, Breckman shows, stems not from his reflections on the limitations of Althusser, but his thoughts on the political insignificance of the post-War Marxist philosophers in either prefiguring the revolts of 1968 or in fostering their continuation. This is an excellent chapter, of which I cannot here give an adequate account. Breckman weaves together the history of the social imaginary and Castoriadis' intellectual biography in a way that clearly enunciates the content of the ideas, their contextual significance, and their limitations, making it essential reading for those interested in Castoriadis. Chapter Four complements the third, bringing the period to a close with studies of Claude Lefort, Marcel Gauchet, and François Furet, as read through the prism of political theology. The study of Lefort is especially strong.

The final two chapters take up studies of Ernesto Laclau, Chantel Mouffe, and Slavoj Žižek. There is much to recommend here, and the chapters profit particularly from their historical and biographical insights, brought to bear on the general analyses of their respective political developments and theoretical claims. These chapters also allow Breckman to posit – without further developing – a series of problems that will already have been tallied up by readers concerned more with democratic theory than the genealogy of the symbolic. Radical democratic theorists have anointed themselves both "radical" and "democratic," but it is rarely clear why others should follow suit. For, having prioritized "constant activation" and "the quest for autonomy," radical democracy also invites concerns that it is also post-solidarity, post-collective action, institutionally naïve, and seemingly post-empathy for those whose daily grind forecloses so much of what these philosophers celebrate as democracy. Breckman does not toil over these concerns, because that is not is intention. But he gestures toward them. Most obviously, near the conclusion of the final chapter, he compares the falling out of Laclau and Žižek with the schism between Eduard Bernstein and V.I. Lenin. As Breckman notes, however, the similarities are philosophically interesting, but politically daft in crucial ways:

> If the first revisionist crisis played out on the public stage of western European socialist politics on the eve of the First World War, this latest revisionist controversy unfolds mainly on an esoteric theoretical theater

> constructed by Žižek himself. If it takes only the slightest historical imagination to see the resemblance to the first revisionist crisis, it takes only the slightest skepticism to recall Marx's maxim that history happens twice, first as tragedy, then as farce. (p. 218)

The point is well made, and it certainly does not apply only to Žižek. To some extent, the great success of Breckman's scholarship is bringing into clear resolution the singular weakness of his subject matter; one becomes quite convinced that theories of radical democracy are elementally tied to theories of the symbolic, but is left wondering what any of it has to do with either *kratos* or the *demos* today.

With these expressly political theoretical concerns in mind, I turn to *Thinking Radical Democracy: The Return to Politics in Post-war France* edited by Martin Breaugh, Christopher Holman, Rachel Magnusson, Paul Mazzocchi, and Devin Penner. This edited volume focuses on various aspects of contributions to radical democratic theory. Where Breckman reads radical democratic theory through the tradition of the symbolic, Breaugh et al. triangulate it against post-War liberal democracy, deliberative democracy, and Marxism. As such, these collected essays set off where Breckman's book ends.

Part I turns to the roots of the radical democratic tradition, with essays on Arendt and the council system, Merleau-Ponty and Machiavelli, and Pierre Clastres and Hobbes. Mazzocchi's contribution on Merleau-Ponty makes a strong case for Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Machiavelli and Marx and, ultimately, as a critic of the political limitations of their works. It is a challenging and fruitful piece of scholarship. Miguel Abensour's contribution on "The Counter-Hobbes of Pierre Clastres" (translated by Breaugh and Penner) is a forthright engagement with the generally unacknowledged fact that in dismissing liberal institutionalism, the radical democratic tradition will ultimately have to come to terms with Hobbes and the problem of war. The three chapters making up Part II – by Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, Brian C.J. Singer, and David Penner – are all excellent surveys of the thought of Lefort, Castoriadis, Guy Debord, respectively. The essays in Part III turn to new developments in radical democratic thought. Rachel Magnusson's contribution on the idea of the equality of the intelligences in Jacques Rancière's thought is a clear explanation of a concept that is difficult to defend. James D. Ingram's piece on Étienne Balibar is a typically strong example of his critical studies of various aspects of radical democracy. Lastly, Breaugh's account of Abensour's thought is nuanced, attentive and subtle theoretical explication.

What are we to make of these various critiques? As a series of surveys into discrete theories of radical democracy, this collected volume excels. The ideas of each thinker are defined and explained. They are, however, strikingly siloed accounts and there is rarely any attempt at general critique, let alone criticism. To be fair, at times this is expressly the purpose of the collected edition, which the editors write is "not to engage with specific contributions… Rather, the

chapters introduce to readers a political tradition of thought" (p. 7). But this assertion is quickly swept aside by the editors, who juxtapose radical democratic theory against liberal and deliberative democratic theory. Each essayist does the same, and throughout the book we are reminded, again and again, that what we are reading is not "theory" or "philosophy," but rather "interventions" and "provocations." Here we arrive as a recurrent problem with radical democratic theory. For these provocations are rarely subject – either by the editors or by the authors – to the same level of reflexivity and critical engagement that radical democratic theory otherwise celebrates. One exception to this is Ingram's chapter on Balibar, who exactly because of his nuanced critiques of Marxism and liberalism, comes to criticize radical democracy: "by reducing politics to this hyperbolic demand, it loses sight of the fact that this demand needs to be institutionalized if rights are to have any social and political reality" (p. 220).

The editorial introduction facilitates the avoidance of criticism by framing radical democratic theory against strawman accounts of liberalism and deliberative democratic theories. The ur-strawmen of radical democratic theory are John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. Rawls is described by the editors as defending an "ideologically pure theory grounded in absolutely valid or axiomatic truths of human behaviour and organization" (p. 15), and liberalism is cast as an institutional arrangement intended only to temper democracy. Deliberative democratic theorists are described as concerned with devising institutional arrangements for the manifestation of "a potential universal political will insofar as people are seen as capable of moving towards agreement founded on mutual understanding." This is then described as entailing that "each person's original uniqueness is gradually stamped out through a fixation on deliberative interactions aiming at universality" (pp. 6–7). Consequently, what Habermas and the deliberative democratic traditions necessarily end up reproducing, we are told, is the "liberal idea of perfect human rationality" (p. 5). In what world is Rawlsian liberalism based on uncovering an "ideologically pure" theory and deliberative democracy aiming to stamp out individuality? In one sense, this is not a criticism of the editors, as they've done a fine job in summarizing the tenor of much of the radical democratic theory surveyed in this collected volume.

Strawman arguments are problematic, but the more important problem is that accepting those strawman arguments forecloses a whole series of important questions. A serious engagement with Rawls – or at least with the core problem that Rawls addresses – could have been a good place to start. This is because Rawls begins with a basic question: how do we go about living together? Either normative political philosophy is minimally addressable to the "political, social, and economic institutions" (Rawls 1985, p. 224) of our world, or it is not. If it is not, fine, but that position must be defended instead of elided. If it is addressable, then the rudiments of Rawls's project must be honestly addressed. Rawls wants to uncover a political conception of justice: "such a conception must allow for a

diversity of doctrines and the plurality of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable, conceptions of the good affirmed by the members of existing democratic societies" (Rawls, p. 225). It is a question of solidarity and the stakes are high: "The only alternative to a principle of toleration…" Rawls concludes, "is the autocratic use of state power" (Rawls, p. 230). Presumably, the task of radical democratic theory is twofold: to express what radical democracy is or could be, and then to defend that claim. As the collected essays in this volume all attest, the former has been done with significant philosophical refinement. The essays under review are generally reticent regarding the latter.

The closest we get to a response to Rawls's basic concerns are passages found in Abensour's article on Clastres, Hobbes, and war. Abensour flirts with Clastres's account of the domination-destroying role of war in primitive societies as potentially contributing to conceptions of radical democracy. The foundation of this discussion is the striking continuity between what the editors called radical democracy's "particular preoccupation with indeterminacy, difference, or division" (p. 4) and Clastres's observation that "War by its very texture implements or develops a unique form of sociability – a social being that operates through the dispersion, partition, fragmentation, the reign of the multiple – which is directly antithetical to the form of sociality that institutes the state" (p. 111). While scandalous implications are clear, they are avoided by Abensour's assumption of the role of provocateur: "We are still far from praising war. It is, rather, about casting a legitimate suspicion on the very idea of peace" (p. 115). It is therefore curious, to say the least, that Abensour concludes by praising, by way of Rousseau, the (paraphrased) "cruel wars, flowing blood, murders, banishments, and civil wars" (p. 115) that did so much to augment good republican (not democratic) virtues and, ultimately, state power. It is likewise perplexing that it goes without comment that Machiavelli, whom Abensour also cites, advised (not as provocation, but as policy) in his *Discourses on Livy* using these tumults *instrumentally* in the service of colonial expansion and, again, to institute the state (p. 115). One can begin to see the virtues of not having to respond to Rawls.

The lack of critical evaluation of radical democracy does a disservice to the task of critique. Consider Holman's strong account of Arendt. Holman treads well-known ground regarding the importance of council democracy in Arendt. Towards the conclusion, Holman quotes Arendt's claim that "The councils say: We want to participate, we want to debate, we want to make our voices heard in public, and we want to have a possibility to determine the political course of our country." (p. 232) Holman's task is to prove Arendt's radical democratic chops, and this quotation clearly falls in line with radical democratic focus on indeterminacy and action. However, the quotation stops at exactly the point where Arendt considers what this would look like, and it is there that a whole series of real theoretical concerns arise. Arendt continues:

> Since the country is too big for all of us to come together and determine our fate, we need a number of public spaces within it. The booth in which we deposit our ballots is unquestionably too small, for this booth has room for only one. The parties are completely unsuitable; there we are, most of us, nothing but the manipulated electorate. But if only ten of us are sitting around a table, each expressing his opinion, each hearing the opinions of others, then a rational formation of opinion can take place through the exchange of opinions. There, too, it will become clear which one of us is best suited to present our view before the next higher council, where in turn our view will be clarified through the influence of other views, revised, or proved wrong (Arendt 1972, pp. 232–233).

This is Arendt's substantive exposition of the council system in action: it involves deliberation, the creation of a miniature rational overlapping consensus, and institutionalization. It is a privileged field of actions for the few who Arendt calls the "true political elite in a country" (only episodically the workers, not the poor, the foreigner, those affected, or the far-off), and it is necessarily hierarchical. If this is radical democracy, then for Arendt radical democracy is a highly elitist practice entailing something like the rationality-discovering procedures and institutions that the editors rejected out of hand in the introduction.

Consider also Magnusson's discussion of Rancière's anti-expertise "equality of intelligences" claim, and its relationship to the radical democratic criticism of institutions. Again, it is an excellent contribution, strengthened by its validation of Rancière's claim and repudiation of radical democracy theorists who have tried to temper the claim or distance themselves from it. That is the right approach to explicating the idea, and we learn more about radical democratic theory because of it. As Magnusson shows, for Rancière this was "a *literal* presupposition" (p. 205). Magnusson proves her point, but unfortunately recedes to – or perhaps uncritically accepts – Rancière "provocation" disposition. Why not address the provocations? One could ask, for example, if expertise is really anti-democratic? Arendt didn't think so; the esotericism of the radical democracy literature is an immanent disavowal of this claim. But consider a mundane example (examples, by the way, are few and far between). I'm writing from The Netherlands, which exists in large part because of robust institution of dykes and levees. This system is complicated, needs to account for local variation, and requires a large institutional apparatus to keep it functioning over time. It is also supported by a remarkably long history of representative democracy. The system must address, today, problems of ocean levels that will rise long after our time, which it does with some success. What would a radical democrat say (substantively) about this "oligarchic" "police order" (to use Rancière's terminology) of dykes and levees which is planned and controlled by experts at the direction of local representatives? The answer to this question is not at all clear. However, there are good reasons to hold that it would be

radically *anti*-democratic to open this system to aleatory "acts" of politics, whether based on suppositions of equal intelligence or not.

This is not a limited example. There is an anti-institutional critique that pervades these chapters, an escapism supported by a rarely persuasive world or French philosophy. Are the health care systems which guard people from physical and economic destitution, the sanctuary cities which protect illegal immigrants from arbitrary state powers, and the labor organizations which lend their weight to defending workers "police"? Is the ACLU? Are garbage removal services, and the multiplicity of urban institutions that constitute the nuts and bolts of quotidian non-domination part of the "police"? One assumes that radical democrats would somehow support these sorts of politics and these institutions, and there are some gestures in that regard. The closest we get is in Breaugh's essay on Abensour, where he remarks that "For Abensour, insurgent democracy is selective in its choice of institutions, and its basic criteria for accepting an institution is that of non-domination. As long as an institutional framework allows for the promotion of non-domination, it is potentially compatible with insurgent democracy" (p. 244). *Potentially*, that's the rub: not only is radical democratic theory roundly unwilling to take up the difficult questions of institution building, radical democratic thought privileges radical political action to such an extent that it is willing to undermine domination-minimizing institutional arrangements. As with many authors in this volume, Breaugh does a quite admirable job in explicating the underlying philosophy that informs radical democratic ideas. Nevertheless, the original concerns remain, and one does look forward to the day when radical democratic philosophy will come down from the clouds.

References

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