DEMOCRACY AND CONSENSUS: REVIEW ESSAY OF LESZEK KOCZANOWICZ'S *POLITICS OF DIALOGUE*

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In his 2015 book, the full title of which is *Politics of Dialogue: Non-Consensual Democracy and Critical Community*, Leszek Koczanowicz deals with a question that is critically important for democratic theory, a question that has to do with how democracy may properly accommodate the individual and the community. This question invariably raises other issues, specifically the liberalism/communitarianism divide, the question whether to understand democracy as a formal procedure or as a substantive form of life, and the split between deliberative and consensus building on the one hand and the management of inevitable conflict on the other.

These questions are, at least at the theoretical level, as close to the heart of the matter as one can get. Koczanowicz addresses these questions in a novel way, which is one of the reasons that this book is as important as it is for dealing with the philosophical issues surrounding democratic theory. Specifically, he draws on pragmatism, Mead and Dewey primarily, largely in that the pragmatists give us a way to cut through the liberal/communitarian, and individual/community, divide. They are not quite as helpful with respect to the question of deliberation and consensus versus the prevalence of antagonistic interests as definitive of the democratic situation. To fill out the picture, then, Koczanowicz turns to the Russian philologist, philosopher of language, and literary theorist of the 1920s through the early 1970s, Mikhail Bakhtin. The appeal to Bakhtin is the most original aspect of the book's approach to democracy and its problems, and the thorough and creative analysis that Koczanowicz applies to these intellectual sources constitutes the book's significant philosophical value.

I would like first to provide a brief and necessarily inadequate overview of the argument of the book, and then raise some questions that we might consider as we think through it all.

The Problem

There are three common ways of thinking about democracy:

- A system for distributing political power and authority, and for enabling the making of decisions and the exercise of power;
- A form of social and political life that rests on and requires communication. This does not require consensus, but yet leans in that direction in that communication leads to community, which is characterized by common interests, which suggests ever-greater consensus. This is the pragmatist approach, and Dewey and Mead are the most important sources. The emphasis is on the inherent sociality of the individual and the centrality of communication for individual and social life;
- A way of living characterized by antagonisms that can be managed without needing to be eliminated, primarily because they cannot be eliminated. The theoretical source for this approach is Chantal Mouffe.

For the purpose of this review let us simply stipulate that Mead and Dewey's conception is of democracy as a form of life that rests on communication and community, and that they understand the individual as informed by that context, and I will simply assume that we can all imagine how that account goes. Even those familiar with Dewey and Mead, however, are likely to be less familiar with Bakhtin and the other sources on which Koczanowicz draws, so I will focus the description on those.

Koczanowicz wants to develop the pragmatist approach through the lens of dialogue, especially as understood by Bakhtin, about whom a few biographical words are in order. Bakhtin was born in 1895 in Oryol,

Russia, and died in 1975 in Moscow. He early ran afoul of Stalin and spent some years in internal exile in Kazakhstan before returning to Moscow during the war. He later moved back to Kazakhstan for some years before returning to Moscow. He was active throughout these decades, though many of his works were published only in the later years of Soviet times. Though there were small groups of scholars around him, what were called 'Bakhtin Circles", from the 1920s, the depth of his intellectual accomplishments did not become widely apparent until the 1960s. Many of his works have been available in English and in other languages for quite a few years now, so he has entered into the world's intellectual milieu in ways that we are still only beginning to explore. This book is a significant step in that process.

Bakhtin and his circle developed a dialectical theory of language and linguistic meaning, dialectical in the sense that an utterance is a complex constituted by its elements in relation to one another. The elements include semantic theme, general social and linguistic context, speaker's intentions, etc. This approach constitutes a break in linguistic theory from some approaches that rely heavily on rule following as the source of linguistic meaning. Koczanowicz says that something like Bakhtin's dialogical approach allows us to accommodate the pragmatist concept of democracy as rooted in social interaction, and he says explicitly that "I am going to reconstruct his (Bakhtin's) concept of language and dialogue as the foundation of a social theory of democracy." (p. 44)[1] Part of what enables this is the idea that verbal utterance is always a result of complex social interactions, so that consciousness itself is a consequence of social interactions, a very pragmatist-sounding proposition.

Neither Bakhtin nor Koczanowicz put it this way, but one could say that language is ordinally structured in the

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[1] All page references in the text are to Leszek Koczanowicz, *Politics of Dialogue: Non-consensual Democracy and Critical Community*, Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

sense that its elements prevail as elements of utterance and linguistic meaning only in their relations with one another. This means that their relations are constitutive, which is the basic idea of ordinality. This feature of Bakhtin's view is, one might say, the very thing that points in the direction of Dewey and Mead, because they also worked with the idea of constitutive relations.

For Bakhtin and the people influenced by him, one of whom discussed by Koczanowicz was Valentin Voloshinov, one important ingredient or element in the social generation of language and linguistic meaning is ideology, for the simple reason that ideology in one or more senses is inevitably an element of social life. This idea gave Bakhtin' thought a Marxist hue and facilitated a dialogue with Marxism. (pp 46-48) There was also, Koczanowicz points out in some detail, a similar connection with Soviet psychology of the time, especially Lev Vygotsky, a brilliant psychologist who died at aged 37 in 1934.

The importance of ideology in the construction of meaning is, as Bakhtin saw it, one of the respects in which language, meaning, and context are social phenomena and social constructions. Another sense in which this is the case is in Bakhtin's account of utterance, as opposed to sentence. Here Bakhtin comes close to Mead's idea of 'taking the role of the other', though Bakhtin is more interested in meaning, while Mead more in the construction of shared action. (p 50) In the end Koczanowicz is interested in Bakhtin's idea of 'hybridization', by which he means mixing different social languages in one dialect. Specifically, he is interested in how it is "a means of creating a new social language...which fits a new social situation through the resolution of conflicting tendencies already residing in the language." (p 60) He refers here to a strategy he will need to deploy in his treatment later on of non-consensual democracy.

One other concept for which Bakhtin is justly well known is his idea of 'carnival'. He developed this idea in a work on Rabelais, for which he received his Candidate degree at the Institute of World Literature in Moscow in

1949, after some controversy. His idea, as I understand it, is that while we can expect ideology and other features of the social landscape to influence meaning, and therefore consciousness, it does not follow that meaning and consciousness necessarily conform to prevailing social ideology and mores. Bakhtin's account of how meaning as resistance is possible is through the idea of carnival. As Koczanowicz puts it:

> …a carnevalesque potential can be regarded as incorporated in human relations – i.e. in dialogical relations. Carnival is a perfect incarnation of one of the moments of human existence, with its capacity to build authentic bonds, despite the prevailing social and political obstacles (p 78)

Another way to put this, we might say, is that carnival represents the condition in which the various aspects and dimensions of language and the communicative context generally enable the generation of meaning, individually and communally, that is capable of breaking through dominant forms of meaning and constituting creative expressiveness. As Koczanowicz puts it, "Carnival comprises all the features of free communication. Heteroglossia, hybridization, mixing languages of different social origins – all phenomena so thoroughly explored by Bakhtin – find their embodiment in carnival…Thus, carnival and communication are inextricably intertwined, as carnival demarcates the borders of a free and equal dialogue." (pp 84-85)

Koczanowicz worries about the split or duality between "individualized existence and objectified culture", or between "language as system and language as action." (pp 66-67) The reason this concerns him is that these 'splits' have to be understood properly if we are to develop a workable and valuable understanding of democratic politics. Bakhtin's ideas provide a way, he argues, to understand how various aspects of our social, communicative, and political environments hang together in mutually constitutive ways, so that a theory of democracy may be developed that does justice to our circumstances without requiring unrealistic expectations:

> First, Bakhtin's notion of dialogue gives us the possibility to build a non-consensual model of democratic society. In such a model, democracy does not require a consensus, but rather a certain kind of understanding...Second, his concept of dialogue assumes that there is a continuation between everyday life and politics...Third, Bakhtin's concept of carnival entails that democratic society is an activation of the potential embedded in all human relations. (p 85)

Individual and Community

With Mead, Dewey, and Bakhtin in the background, Koczanowicz can turn directly to the issues in political theory and the theory of democracy that concern him. The main issue is that societies and polities consist of individuals and communities. Individuals can be expected to have diverse ideas, values, commitments, etc., while a community requires common principles, law, and institutions. Liberalism has handled this divergence by relegating the diversity to the private sphere, and by creating institutions that are intended to manage individual diversity and produce a common public or community life.

The problem is that liberalism's way of handling the issue is not adequate. First, it removes the richness of individual life from politics, by making the content of social life and meaning irrelevant to the political process, and this appears unsustainable. Second, as Dewey and Mead have it, democracy is anyway a form of life, in the Wittgensteinian sense, in which case the shared commitments of the community cannot be divorced from the diversity of individual values because to do so would be to divorce the form of life from people's lives, an evident absurdity.

If the traditional liberal solution to the problem of the individual and the community is in the end no solution at all, what do we do? As Koczanowicz puts it, there is a right wing and a left wing alternative to liberalism. The traditional right wing is rooted in romanticism and in the reaction to the enlightenment and the French Revolution, which is that the individual has her identity and defining traits by virtue of the

community, and that community is grounded in nation and ethnicity. The nation state on this view constructs the individual. The 20th century right wing alternative is best expressed in Carl Schmitt, who dispenses with the romantic grounding in blood and soil and emphasizes instead the exercise of power in a perpetual friend/enemy conflict.

On the left wing side, the traditional view is Marx's, according to which the economic structure of a society frames an individual's identity and general character. Thus class divisions and class struggle define both community and individual life. The 20th century left wing alternative is best expressed in Gramsci, specifically in his idea of hegemony. Hegemony is ideological, and therefore cultural, and the emphasis on culture moves Gramsci away from the more economically determinist directions in which some Marxism developed. Its upshot, though, is that individuals are rooted in the hegemonic power of culture and ideology as articulated by those with the power to do so.

If the romantics are wrong, and Koczanowicz thinks they are, and if community formation is not an automatic function of nation and ethnicity, or 'blood and soil' as it has been put, then we have to look at the actual mechanisms of community formation, and this involves the state.

Neither of the two most prominent forms of recent and current political theory and practice, totalitarianism and liberalism, can handle community. The totalitarian state attempts to build community on ideologically framed values, and to the extent that it succeeds, it subsumes the individual into the state. The liberal state, by contrast, cannot accept any developed sense of community because it prioritizes the individual, which is the reason that liberal democracy tends to divorce procedure from substance so that democracy becomes a set of rules to determine the exercise of state power. (p 104)

And the question of freedom folds into this discussion. On the liberal side freedom is an individual achievement and condition. On the other side, freedom can be realized only in community. This dispute played out in the 20th century struggles among fascism, communism, and liberalism, and, I might add, it continues to play out in what some describe as an east-west divide, or a struggle between religious fundamentalism and secularism. We may be able to avoid those two unhappy dichotomies if we can accept Koczanowicz's argument that at bottom this is a debate about the political dimension of social life.

Koczanowicz works through several different generally communitarian approaches to the problem - Sandel, MacIntyre, Taylor, Nancy, and Agamben - but finds none of them satisfactory. (pp 108 - 118) Traditional approaches to community, like much other philosophy, have tended to divorce our understanding of it from its material and socio-historical constitutive elements. Because of this, the standard concepts of community tend to run up against the lived realities of both individuals and communities. So one feature of our conception of community has to be its materiality. The pragmatists have been good on this, and Shusterman has been indispensable. There are also important connections with other figures who understand the complexity, including the materiality, of individuals and communities, specifically Helmuth Plessner and Pierre Bourdieu. (pp 118-130) Rorty and Habermas have also tried to deal with this question, but their ideas tend to make a public/private split, which in the end is untenable.

Koczanowicz says that there are four criteria that an adequate conception of community requires:

1) bringing together the public and private spheres;
2) promoting critical identification with tradition and, at the same time, fostering openness to other traditions so that particularist identities can always be negated;
3) providing a basis for democracy and reacting flexibly to democratic transformations; and
4) combining universal regulatory principles with specific ways of realizing them through reliance on emotions and bodiliness. (p 136)

To meet these criteria he proposes the concept of 'critical community', drawing on Bakhtin, Dewey, and Mead. The pragmatists are important because of their understanding of how interaction and communication shape individuals, and through Mead's idea of taking the perspective of the other. They are supplemented by Bakhtin because of his account of how language acts to enable social relations. In particular there are four reasons Bakhtin is important: 1) language is language in action, 2) dialogue is an ongoing effort to achieve understanding, not consensus, 3) the communicative context is one characterized by ideological struggle, and 4) language and traditions undergo continual revision. (pp 137-138) Moreover, critical community requires critical dialogue, and the possibility of successful critical dialogue depends on three factors: 1) the size of the community, 2) the form of political institutions that shape dialogue, for example the nation state, or 'supra-nations' like the EU, and 3) immediacy, i.e. direct dialogue.

Community and Democracy

In the book's final chapter Koczanowicz poses the question how we should understand community? A more specific question we may ask is whether there are such things as political communities? Koczanowicz's answer is 'yes', and they are, he says, "a system of habits or forms of life that make up a structure superimposed over a critical community." (p 150) What, we may further ask, is the mechanism that ensures the functioning of the political community? There are, he says, two possible approaches: the first is that conflict is inherent in politics, and the second is that compromise is possible, and pursuing compromise distinguishes democratic polity from other sorts. In the end, he argues, "the political form of critical community is provided by non-consensual democracy." (p 153)

Chantal Mouffe is the foil here. She presents two senses of democratic politics. The first is dialogic, deliberative, and consensual, which treats democracy as a way of reconciling competing interests, and the second is agonistic, which holds that conflict is inherent, and so consensus is illusory, and therefore democratic politics looks to establish hegemony rather than consensus. (p 156) Koczanowicz's view is that non-consensual democracy is a third way between Mouffe's two alternatives because it allows for the achievement of understanding without necessarily agreement and consensus. His 'critical community' "adopts a critical and reflexive attitude to its own tradition, whereby a self emerging within the community is a dialogic self..." (p 158) This dialogical understanding of the self and community requires not shared identity formation, as for example would communitarianism, but merely similarities, and it contributes to the formation of similarities. (p 160)

This is the alternative to liberalism, communitarianism, totalitarianism, and antagonism, and it is made possible by the philosophical conceptions of self, society, meaning, action, language, and dialogue of, above all, Dewey, Mead, and Bakhtin.

Comment

That, in an overview, is the position of the book and the argument for it. As it happens I tend to think that Koczanowicz is pretty much on the mark here, for several reasons:

1) The constitutive relationality that he locates in Dewey, Mead, and in Bakhtin, is, I would argue and have argued elsewhere,[2] the approach to things that is more fruitful than the alternatives;

2) He is right to argue that traditional liberalism does not properly account for the sociality of individuals, and traditional communitarianism cannot adequately take account of the fact that meaning and consciousness

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[2] See for example John Ryder, *The Things in Heaven and Earth: An Essay in Pragmatic Naturalism*, New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2013.

are socially constructed in the interaction of individuals, and not simply socially grounded;

3) Traditional liberal conceptions of democracy indefensibly cut political processes off from the lived circumstances of individual and social life by treating them as merely procedural;

4) Many attempts to understand democracy by taking seriously the social context of political relations and the construction of meaning have tended to overplay the possibility of consensus;

5) Attempts like Chantal Mouffe's, and more radically Carl Schmitt's, to emphasize the inherent antagonisms in political life are not acceptable alternatives to theories of deliberative consensus because they underestimate the possibility of building community on partial agreement rather than on consensus.

6) Drawing Bakhtin into the conversation is immensely valuable.

At the Central European Pragmatist Forum meeting in Turda, Romania, in 2012, Koczanowicz and I discussed some of these issues in one of the sessions. I made a couple points then that I would be inclined to repeat here. One of them is that another way of positing the contrast to Mouffe's emphasis on the inherent antagonism of interests is to bring to bear Dewey's emphasis on common interests, and the pursuit of common interests across community borders, as a defining characteristic of a democratic polity. As an empirical matter both Dewey and Mouffe are right, up to a point. Dewey is right that members of any given community have some interests in common, and I am convinced that Mouffe is right that in any healthy society, and certainly in any democratic society if such a society is characterized at least by free expression, there will invariably be a plurality of views, some of which will be antagonistic. As a speculative matter, Mouffe is

probably also right that there is no good reason to think that any amount of dialogue and deliberation will overcome the plurality of opinion and points of view, including some that are antagonistic. In other words, she is probably right that consensus is an unlikely result of political dialogue. So we may conclude that if democracy is possible, it must be able to accommodate the fact of common interests and the fact of pluralism and antagonism.

We might understand Koczanowicz as arguing that avoiding an insistence on consensus in favor of the idea of a critical community, through the exercise of the construction of meaning *a la* Bakhtin, provides the account of how a democratic polity can have it both ways. My approach has been, following Dewey more directly, to say that a non-consensual democratic polity can be built around the fact of common interests. We do not even need to agree on a theory of anything else, for example a theory of the self, or of society, or of language, or of community, or even of democracy. The simple facts that we have interests in common, and that we tend to favor the fulfillment of our interests, are the social conditions that enable us to develop a society that can legitimately be called 'democratic'. More is required, as Dewey also pointed out, which specifically is the need to pursue common interests across community borders. If he is right, then to the extent that we do that our social conditions will better meet the conditions of democracy.

As a theoretical matter, it remains an interesting question whether in the end Koczanowicz and I are saying basically the same thing, or whether there may be better reason to talk one way or the other. In either case, his analysis has enriched our understanding of the issues considerably.