



Platonic Noise

J. Peter Euben

Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2003, xiii + 210pp.

ISBN: 0 691 11400 5.

Contemporary Political Theory (2004) 3, 346–347. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300142

Early on in his marvellous new book *Platonic Noise*, Peter Euben observes that much contemporary American political and social thought is united by what Peter Dews calls a ‘deflationary’ tendency: the urge to reduce the complexity of social and political life to reductive formulas, be it analytic philosophy, new pragmatism, the proceduralism of Jürgen Habermas, or John Rawls’ ‘thin theory of the good.’ Such work, says Euben, represents ‘a retreat from, if not a repudiation of what Sheldon Wolin has called the ‘Epic’ dimension of political theory’ (pp. 33–34). If ‘Epic’ theory — the ‘attempt to redeem in thought what is denied in practice’ (p. 95) — has indeed been in retreat, Euben’s work seeks to rally and revive the tradition with a series of discrete but simultaneously connected essays on diverse topics. These include the use and abuse of the ancient Greeks in contemporary political thought; Hannah Arendt’s Hellenism; Aristophanes and contemporary political comedy; and the politics of nostalgia and loss.

Although the deflationary tendency of contemporary political thought takes many forms, Euben’s central concern is what he calls ‘Presentism:’ the ‘proclivity to analyze contemporary culture and politics using only contemporary texts, theories and methods’ (p. 7). By bringing contemporary political concerns into dialogue with the past, Euben seeks to overcome this potentially disabling condition and thereby to revive the political life of the American polity, much of which is he says, ‘pervaded by an often justified yet politically disabling cynicism, passivity and resentment’ (p. 95). In his essay on Aristophanes, for example, Euben seeks to engage with the somewhat sententious and commonplace claim that television is an anti-political form of education that corrupts democracy. Contextualizing this criticism with an account of the Greek responses to comedic theatre, Euben argues that much of what now passes for informed thought is simply an echo of the criticism that was made against Aristophanes. Euben notes, with delicious irony, that what Plato thought of as the depth of low culture is now regarded as ‘classic’ and, as such, part of high culture. There is more here, however, than clever recontextualization: Euben offers an extended and enlightening reflection on the role of comedy in political thought and practice, ancient and modern. His conclusion that if Aristophanes ‘were to find himself in New York or



Los Angeles, he would be a writer for *The Honeymooners* or *The Simpsons* (p. 66) is at once plausible and shocking.

Paradoxically, however, it is in his account of the relationship between death, mourning and political theory that Euben's work achieves the Nietzschean goal of a life-enhancing philosophy. Noting that the death of Socrates is a presence throughout the Platonic corpus, Euben suggests that 'Plato invented philosophy as an act of mourning' (p. 152). Death, he suggests, leads us to try to make sense of a world that suddenly appears out of joint in much the same way that (Epic) theorists emerge in times of political crisis to offer guidance, or hope, or solace to a citizenry. Quoting Isak Dinesen's assertion that 'all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them' (p. 43), Euben examines the stories that Americans tell about death, identifying what he calls 'a prototypical American way of dealing with loss' that is, 'not dealing with it at all.' Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that America 'is not a nation that understands loss publicly' (p. 111). Although he does not discuss America's most recent public losses — both those it has suffered and those it has inflicted on others — Euben's account could not be more timely. His essay illustrates the importance of engaging with death and loss for the health of a polity, citing Hannah Arendt's observation that a crisis only becomes a disaster 'when we respond to it with preformed judgments' (p. 171). By connecting the issues of the present back to those of the past, Euben shows us ways of avoiding precisely that fate. As Euben has argued elsewhere, however, the tragedy of political theory is precisely that it is too often the road not taken.

Epic theory demands a heroic theorist, and Euben positions himself here as one who is raging against the dying of the light, *personal* and political. The tone of this work is often elegiac, and the book is infused with Euben's reflections on his own mortality. These essays suggest, however, that this is a theorist at the peak of his powers.

Simon Stow
The College of William and Mary, USA.