

## DEMOCRACY AND VISION

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Philip Green, *Retrieving Democracy: In Search of Civic Equality*. Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985; pp. ix 278. Notes, index, no bibliography.

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*... the true lawgiver aims only at that on which some eternal beauty is always attending ...*

Plato

In a well structured, tightly reasoned argument for genuine, as opposed to "pseudodemocracy," Philip Green expands his earlier exploration of the dichotomy between equality and inequality found in *The Pursuit of Inequality* (1981) in *Retrieving Democracy: In Search of Civic Equality*. Green's idea of an appropriate democratic theory for today is based on an "uneasy amalgam" of Rousseau, Marx, Mill, and Paul Goodman (p. 266). Overly concerned with appearing to be too utopian in his proposals for creating a democratic society, Green's amalgam offers not so much an imaginative, idealistic theoretical construct in support of democracy as a solid discussion of the feasibility, practicality, and eminent reasonableness of a more democratic life. This, moreover, is both the book's strength and ultimately, its fundamental weakness.

Green opens his essay by observing: "We live in a pseudodemocracy." Pseudodemocracy is defined as

... representative government, ultimately accountable to "the people" but not really under their control, combined with a fundamen-

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tally capitalist economy — is thus preferable to most of the immediately available alternative ways of life of the contemporary nation-state. But it is not democracy; not really . . . My effort is to retrieve “democracy,” a term with radical historical origins, from those who have made it into a prop for social stasis (p.3).

To accomplish this retrieval, Green argues that a coalition of interests must be constructed to produce a majority of citizens. Since no single class or “caste” interest comprises a majority by itself, he sets out to incorporate three sets of interests into his coalition: (1) the interests of the traditional and new white collar working class in increased material equality, full employment, work place democracy, and social mobility; (2) the interest of many citizens, although primarily women but also males and females of ethnic and racial minorities, in the completion of liberal claims for equal rights; and (3), the interests of the educated elite, professionals and skilled white collar workers, in fuller participation in political decision making (p.4). By linking elements of the traditional socialist, liberal, and radical democratic agendas, Green believes a viable social force can be constructed around the common, primary demand for civic equality.

The second, most intriguing section of the book, concerns social equality. There are three basic components to achieving social equality: (1) the principle of “constrained inequality;” (2) a “democratic division of labor;” and (3), “equal access to the means of production” (p.8). Each component is fully developed in a separate chapter.

The central notion behind constrained inequality is “that whatever work people do should receive roughly the same standard reward at similar phases of their life-cycles (p. 57).” That is not to imply that there will be absolute equality, for it is structured power, rather than wealth, that must be controlled. Green candidly admits that this will add to something less than a classless society.

It is only with hesitation that I have come to advocate the relatively rather than the absolutely classless society. The simple truth, however, is that strategic reflections about what most people really do desire aside, I do not see how any of us now can meaningfully advocate the creation of what Marx would have considered a truly classless society . . . (pp. 57-58)

Green justifies his position for “relative classlessness” on pragmatic and historic ground. “We must start from where we are. There are certain fundamental...historically confirmed presuppositions that...compel us to adopt a much less demanding version of relative...classlessness...” The presuppositions are five categories of mediation between: “people and nature” that require “complex and rarefied technologies;” “organs of distribution and valuation;” “people and their neighbors;” “people and the objects of their knowledge or esthetic appreciation;” and, “people and the cultural milieu”. From this pervasive need for mediation and mediators, Green

somewhat hastily concludes "that the elimination of the social division of labor, and thus the variable monetary reward for varying tasks, is impossible" (p. 58). And yet, Green believes that his principle of constrained inequality, where society creates "a secure floor above which everyone has the material resources adequate for citizenship," combines "in one standard" Marx's two famous formulations of just distribution — "'From each according to his/her ability, to each according to his/her work;' and, 'From each according to his/her ability, to each according to his/her need'" (p. 67). While constrained inequality may meet the first standard, it is difficult to see how it can begin to reach the second.

The principle of constrained inequality needs a democratization of the division of labor, "the essential core of social equality," to make the principle more than merely a plea for "equal" wages. In "The Democratic Division of Labor" — the most creative chapter of the book — Green deftly elaborates on Marx's distinctions between "mental" and "material" labor, and between the "realm of necessity" and the "realm of freedom." He appreciates the necessity of ending the mental/material divisions of labor, and the feasibility of collapsing the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom by eliminating "the separation of 'education,' 'home,' and 'work,'" through an imaginative blending of Marx and John Dewey (pp. 86, 93). But more importantly, he extends this argument to the historically appropriate conclusion that a truly egalitarian society, one that demands a democratic division of labor in production, must also include a "democratization of the division of labor in reproduction" (p. 99). He persuasively concludes:

There is a democratic theory of the division of labor in reproduction as well as in production. Its essence is that the work of its reproducing humans is not merely an uncontrollable fate visiting happiness or despair on individual women, but is also cooperative, communal work; just as much as the work of producing vital goods (p. 102).

Green completes the discussion of social equality calling for equal access to the means of production. This will be accomplished by creating a "pluralist political economy" with a combination of public and private ownership, requiring ownership of large-scale means of production" (pp. 132, 134). To further ensure public control of the economy, Green cautiously argues for democratic planning: "I have made no claims that democratic planning would work. I have claimed only that it is in principle workable: that rational decision making is impossible among people who are committed to treating each other as equals" (p. 164).

Green then proceeds to the third section of the book to examine political equality. He initiates the discussion by calling for a return to "democratic, egalitarian representation," where representatives are directly and immediately accountable to those they represent. This can occur only when the life styles of the representatives and the ordinary public are in some

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meaningful sense shared. Political equality necessitates greater participation in decision making through a "process of mobilization from below" (p. 182). Continual and frequent rotation in office is also essential to keep a separate class with political power from developing. Although "some kind of genuinely centralized policy making is inevitable," Green reasons that the creation of "constituency building blocks" modeled on the Paris Commune or the ward and councils that Marx and Arendt advocate, could limit the anti-democratic tendencies of centralization (p. 187). Lastly, Green presents a compelling case for democratic citizens having "actual access to the means of communication" (p. 219). This will require "the dismantling of the entire structure of monopolized mass communication" (p. 220).

Green purposefully constructs his own theory of egalitarianism, because he is "dissatisfied" with the efforts on behalf of democratic socialism, economic democracy, and market socialism.

That is because a reading of the best expositions of those programs — expositions to which in many ways I am obviously indebted — always ends on one crucial note of dissatisfaction; and not just dissatisfaction, but immeasurable dissatisfaction (p. 7).

This "immeasurable dissatisfaction" results from a failure on other theorists part to present "a *vision* of a different society operating according to fundamentally different rules" (p. 8). Ironically, this is the fate of *Retrieving Democracy*: it too lacks a *vision*.

In his enormously influential *Politics and Vision*, Sheldon Wolin discusses two senses of vision: the first is an act of perception, a "descriptive report;" the second is that of "aesthetic" or "religious vision." In this latter sense, it is the imaginative and creative element, not the descriptive, that is foremost. It is, moreover, what makes political theory unique: it provides for the fundamental, "architectonic role" of the political theorist, who "projects" not simply a description of alternative public policies, but an aesthetic vision of a more beautiful political form. It is Wolin, furthermore, who recalls Plato's precept that political theory must offer an aesthetic goal — an ideal pattern — to serve as the polestar by which to set our sights.<sup>1</sup> It is this aesthetic sense of vision that is absent from Green's political theory. It is not, as Green fears, that his theory is too utopian, but rather that it is not "utopian" enough.

The difficulty with Green's approach may stem from his uncertain ambivalence over the role of political theory. He prefaces his book by recalling Lord Keynes' statement that "The ideas of economists and political philosophers...are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else...Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back" (p. viii). Green concludes his analysis echoing this theme by paraphrasing and presumably correcting Marx's third thesis of Feuerbach: "The philosophers can only interpret the world in various ways; someone

else will have to change it" (p. 266). Here, Green places himself in the realm of pure idealism, awaiting others to act upon his ideals. However, he also informs us that what is ultimately required for a democratic society, and for which he is ultimately calling, is a "revolutionary transformation." But Green realizes his own proposals are essentially reformist, neither idealistic nor revolutionary: "In the end, therefore, reformist interventions such as I've tried to articulate here are insufficient in and of themselves" (p. 266). This self-observation is telling. Green's proposed reforms — all practical, reasonable, and moral — create a *minimal* democratic theory; a democratic theory that falls far short of the aesthetic heights of Rousseau, Marx, or Mill. Perhaps in an age of Orwellian slumber, where Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher play the royal guardians of "go for it!" pseudodemocracy, Green's sober, pragmatic treatment is needed to remind us of democracy's inherent goodness and moral soundness. But then again, perhaps this is precisely the time to remember Plato and to continue to look for eternal beauty, demanding the optimum rather than the minimum form democratic theory.

Notes

1. Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), pp. 17-21, 34-40.