

Fred Dallmayr

The Promise of Democracy: Political Agency and Transformation.

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In *The Promise of Democracy: Political Agency and Transformation*, Fred Dallmayr sets out to design a democratic theory suited to present global and ‘postmodern’ concerns. The book however also means to rehabilitate religion for politics. The theoretical framework is a blend of neo-Hegelian, Deweyan, and postmodern political thought.

The main part of this volume consists of ten chapters, devoted to figures who, with the exception of Dewey, are mostly from the continental tradition. To this are added rather lengthy appendices devoted to the work of Claude Lefort, Chantal Mouffe, and Bell and Confucian thought, but these essentially serve as a set of book reviews. Dallmayr presents a very suggestive summary of the views of continental political thinkers, intermixed with important reflections on issues of religion and politics. Many will benefit from the presentation of the ideas of the European thinkers outlined and from reflection on questions of religion and politics taken up here. Unfortunately, Dallmayr does not succeed in making explicit a compelling narrative that links the various views he depicts.

The book’s main title, *The Promise of Democracy*, indicates clearly enough Dallmayr’s aspirations. He hopes for a democracy not yet realized. As he notes in the introduction and the last page of the main text (185), democracy should consist in an ethical community, aimed at the realization of our humanity. Democracy, as Dallmayr envisions it here, is aligned with Dewey’s vision of it as ‘more than a form of government’ but rather ‘a mode of associated living’ (8). To this end, however, in rather strong contrast to Dewey, Dallmayr wants to rehabilitate religion for its potentially positive effects on democracy.

As the basis for new, more global democratic forms, Dallmayr does not propose a proceduralist view of reason as found in Habermas, or appeal to a thin view of justice such as Rawls proposes. Instead, he looks for more substantive forms of the good to inspire ethical community in a more traditional Hegelian sense. His fear of such minimalist liberal views of politics is that they lead to a pervasive individualism that deadens people to the concerns of the common good. Yet, his proposal to be led by thick concepts of the good gives rise to a difficulty, not clearly enough acknowledged by Dallmayr: while Hegel relies on shared values of an ethical community, in the global context that Dallmayr is writing for there is no one shared form of ethical life, but many—often conflicting—ones. Dallmayr’s view that the *Sittlichkeit* needed is one ‘from the ground up’, rather than ‘the

top down' (39) and his call for a 'pluralist cosmopolitanism' (40) are suggestive, but need further elaboration. As it stands, it is not clear how Dallmayr imagines an overlapping consensus might emerge among those with radically different thick views of the good.

Dallmayr is decidedly against the secularization thesis (155), that is, against the idea that the forms of life to emerge with modernization entail secularization. He implicitly characterizes the 'postmodern' period as one in which religious identities are fundamental for many. So he holds out hope for a Hindu model of politics as embodied in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (173-82), neo-Confucianism (181-2), along with a new humanism engendered in Catholic Social Teaching (153-4) and even a renewed Muslim politics (Chapter 9). There may well be ways to generate global cooperation or consensus out of these disparate identities, which so often engender conflict. One possibility, for example, is the formulation of a global ethic, such as that proposed by the World Parliament of Religions, largely under Hans Küng's direction. This ethic, which has been endorsed by many proponents of the world's major religions, lists a common set of principles that those of the world's religions might endorse despite other differences in their thick views of the good. Unfortunately, Dallmayr does not mention this attempt or suggest other ways of attempting to generate consensus among those with disparate thick views of the good.

Dallmayr's thematization of both postmodern political theory and religion engenders a second issue. While he seems to identify both as postmodern, there are important differences between the main strands of postmodernism and the forms of religious thought he discusses. For the tolerance and respect for diversity that characterize the more positive elements of postmodern ethical sentiment are after all quite foreign to many religious identities. Are the appeals to religious conceptions of the good often not more appeals to premodern rather than postmodern identities? Can one get to postmodernism without progressing through modernism? Can religion foster the tolerance characteristic of postmodernism and needed in our era of global politics? Dallmayr deals with these issues to some extent when treating pernicious forms of Islamicism (Chapter 9). Again, however, he does not squarely address the general questions.

Both premoderns and postmoderns share the suspicion of reason that Dallmayr often voices in this text. But precisely this critical stance toward reason is a third troubling issue in a text on democracy. For while Dallmayr takes inspiration from Hegel and Dewey, both of these thinkers thought political processes needed to be rational. While both had thicker versions of the good than Habermas or Rawls, they also shared the focus of these later thinkers on rationality. In light of the global problems that we are confronting and the lack of shared forms of life and shared social identities, liberalism has maintained that our greater hope lies in a minimal consensus beyond all thick versions of the good. Dallmayr seems not to accept this solution.

His focus on postmodern thinkers gives expression to this suspicion of the

‘privileging of rationality’ (3) in the modern era. But it does not clearly show how thicker views of the good are to be garnered from these thinkers either. Nevertheless, the large sections of the book devoted to these thinkers are instructive. Here, however, Heidegger’s elevated status in the theory is irritating. While Dallmayr is careful enough to point out that Heidegger is not a ‘great friend of democracy’ (80), he thinks that Heidegger’s writing on human agency is of importance to democratic theory. In particular, Heidegger’s reflections on meaning and the “‘primordial praxis” of letting the truth of Being manifest itself” (81) can serve as a corrective to a view of human agency that is overly reliant on instrumentalizing logic (80f.). He is attracted in particular to the (perhaps nonanthropocentric) humanistic Heidegger, who in Dallmayr’s words emphasizes a community oriented toward an ‘openness to Being’ (76). In writing on Heidegger, however, Dallmayr is able to get what he needs or wants from Heidegger only with considerable reconstruction efforts. In short, he creates the Heidegger he wants, quoting for example Lawrence Hatab’s ‘bold’ translation of Heidegger’s ‘being-in-the-world’ as ‘being-ethical-in-the-world’ (79), a translation not so much ‘bold’ as willful. To make Heidegger more appealing to his own ethical impulses, Dallmayr is forced to such revisionism. Appeals to Deep Ecology might have provided Dallmayr with a less burdensome way of getting similar content.

His writing on the potentials for religion and democracy unmask his reason for wanting a revised Heidegger. Indeed, given Dallmayr’s focus on thick and often religious conceptions of the good, it is suggestive that he may indeed believe that, as Heidegger famously said, only a god can save us now. But he wants a god (or sense of Being) of a more ethical stripe than can be found in the most belabored readings of Heidegger’s work. In any case, Dallmayr gives a reconstructed Heidegger the last word in the main chapters of the book, where he emphasizes the need for a democracy in which human practice, understood as ‘letting be’, allows the fulfillment of individual and social flourishing, the fulfillment of humanity (185). This ‘letting be’ implies the individual and social relationship to Being that Dallmayr apparently finds necessary—or at the very least helpful—for overcoming the confines of instrumental reason.

The rather philosophical manner in which Heidegger speaks of relationships to Being has attracted many. In this work, Dallmayr, too, seems to be searching for a religious impulse to inform his politics, but one that can be put in the language of philosophy. So Heidegger is suggestive. However, the danger that lurks with the reassertion of politics embedded in a religious understanding or embedded in a quasi-religious philosophy, and the coextensive thematization of the limits of instrumental reason, is precisely that it threatens to attack reason in general. That danger is the one all too apparent in the way Heidegger lived his own ideas and obvious enough from the history of religious conflicts.

Yet Dallmayr is rightly pointing to the problems of liberalism. Does it provide the shared meanings we need for collective action? Does it break down impulses for collective

action? Dallmayr contributes to this dialogue, but in ways not always satisfying. Nevertheless the book contains seeds of thought on the issue of religion, identity, and politics vitally in need of reflection in light of the need to generate collective action in the global political arena.

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