
Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political

Seyla Benhabib, ed.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, vii + 373 pp. \$19.95 pbk. 0-691-04478-3.

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As Robert Nisbet noted decades ago, "if present tendencies toward the depletion of social power and the maximization of political power are to be counteracted, there must be a more exact knowledge of the specific social relationships which compose society, their connection with individual personality, with the industrial economy, and with the state itself" (*Tradition and Revolt*, New York: Vintage, 1970, p. 47). *Democracy and Difference*, which consists of thoughtful essays by twenty leading contemporary theorists, in effect advances Nisbet's project by both articulating the liberal tradition of democracy and exploring republican ways to "revolt" enough from that tradition to accommodate people's differences from one another. None of the twenty has any quarrel with democracy as such, and most present their ideas for reform in terms of a "deliberative" model of democracy. A few, however, move beyond this model to embrace what the editor calls an "agonistic" model of democracy. Just beyond the reach of all these approaches, however, are groups in many parts of the world who regard demographic differences within their purview as grounds for Darwinian survivalism. It is against this background that we are invited to "contest the boundaries of the political."

Writers working with the deliberative, or discourse, model tend to start with the assumption that "the system" is working reasonably well but needs to be more inclusive. Editor Benhabib looks to inclusion as a way to avoid tyranny of the majority, whereas for Joshua Cohen inclusion helps us surmount excessive individualism. In either case, Anne Phillips warns us, inclusion cannot be based on a mere politics of ideas; what is required, she insists, is a politics of presence. Fred Dallmayr, like many social scientists, endorses intermediate groups, especially voluntary associations, as bridges between individual and collective; but, like many liberals, Will Kymlicka worries that such groups are not sufficiently sensitive to individual rights. Iris Marion Young is also partial to voluntary associations but urges us to supplement the formal processes of deliberation with communicative behavior (informal greetings, etc.).

Several writers add a feminist dimension to these reflections, especially by appealing to privacy rights (Jean Cohen) or an adaptation of caregiving values to the public arena (Nancy Fraser). Fraser toys

with the idea of a "universal caregiver model" that combines the "universal breadwinner" and the "caregiver parity" models. Cohen alludes to "virulent forms of nationalism" as a problem for democracy but focuses her attention on the importance of decisional privacy as the basis for a woman to safeguard her "inviolable personality" with regard to abortion. Carol Gould also extols privacy, which (she thinks) democracy cannot protect, differences, if politically relevant, and groups, provided they respect equal rights.

Two women political theorists move beyond these more familiar feminist themes to exemplify the "agonist" model. Chantal Mouffe rejects any liberal model of civility that precludes conflict and contestation, especially if such preclusion is legitimized, e.g., by Rawls, as necessary for the common good. Instead, she practically equates democracy with conflict. For, she argues, conflict is a sign that pluralism is truly alive and functioning. Bonny Honig gives this focus on conflict a psychoanalytic turn, finding it deeply embedded in one's personal and public life. For her, neither the activism of "coalition" nor the comfort of "home" is unqualifiedly supportive; but each complements the other in one's ongoing quest for human betterment.

In the final section of the book, four distinguished theorists arrive at the conclusion that democracy as a practice requires no foundations, but none leaves it at that. Philosophers Richard Rorty and Amy Gutmann note the importance of language and reasoning for identifying and defending social ideals. Political scientists Robert Dahl and Benjamin Barber acknowledge no necessary connection between democracy and democratic theory; but the former thinks the role of intellectuals is important, and the latter concedes that democracy needs some explaining.

As these brief descriptions suggest, each article in this collection tends to focus either on democracy or on difference, however conceived. None attempts to explain directly and precisely how or how much democracy can accommodate difference. Most contributors write either from the perspective of a group that is different (e.g., women or, as Carlos Forment puts it, "peripheral peoples") or from that of a polity that is asked to find room for such a group. This being the case, the book provides few applicable maxims or guidelines for political action. But it is rich in reflective attention to the theoretical challenge that diversity poses for any complex, or multicultural, society whose members want to perpetuate the ideal of democracy in their lives. This is reason enough to include it on the recommended reading list and/or library reserve for just about any upper division or, more appropriately, any graduate-level course on social and political philosophy. It is, unfortunately, unsuitable as a text for most undergraduate courses because many of the contributions are pitched

at a technical level that presupposes considerable familiarity with the academic discourse to which they relate.

Related reading material has been multiplying rapidly in recent years. In particular, one should consult works that deal with communitarianism or relational autonomy or John Rawls's *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, pbk. 1995), and, in general, the SUNY Press political theory series. No less relevant, though ignored in the Benhabib collection, is current debate regarding religion and politics, which is made accessible in Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997) and is rendered pertinent by the case studies in José Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). For historical perspective on the issues at stake, see the fine collection entitled *Group Rights: Perspectives Since 1900*, edited and introduced by Julia Stapleton (Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1995).

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Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman

Ellen K. Feder, Mary C. Rawlinson, and Emily Zakin, eds.
New York: Routledge, 1997, 214 pages, pbk. 0-415-90917-1.

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Does the post-structuralist movement, and deconstruction in particular, open ingenious avenues of liberation for women or restrict feminist discourse in insidious ways? This is the question addressed in *Derrida and Feminism*, a new collection of essays by American feminist scholars in dialogue with the thought of Jacques Derrida. The challenge for these authors lies not only in addressing this question, but also in presenting *engaged* accounts of Derrida's works, with an understanding of the *depth* of Derrida's thinking. As happens all too often with critics not trained in Continental philosophy, engagement with this type of thinking falls by the wayside in order to promote outlandish claims, resulting in ever-increasing misunderstanding. *Derrida and Feminism* does not suffer from this problem. The individual authors provide analyses and critiques of Derrida which *undergo* deconstructive thinking, providing a true *engagement with* this thinking—an engagement missed by many critics of Derrida.

Focusing on two periods in Jacques Derrida's thought: his early, Nietzschean phase (illustrated by his text *Spurs*), and his later, Levinasian