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Review: Accepting Limits

Reviewed Work(s): Democratic Faith by Patrick J. Deneen

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## Book Reviews

### ACCEPTING LIMITS

Patrick J. Deneen: *Democratic Faith*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005. Pp. xvii, 365. \$45.00 cloth.)

While throughout much of the world democracy is regarded as the only legitimate form of government, democratic theorists are highly critical of actual democracies. Patrick Deneen focuses on the “radical gulf” between existing, highly imperfect democratic systems and many theorists’ “vision of democracy as apotheosis of human freedom, self-creation, and even paradisiacal universal political and social equality” (xvi). Claiming that such idealized conceptions of democracy rest on a form of faith, Deneen advocates “democratic realism,” which is based on acceptance of “human limitations and imperfection, even imperfectability” (9). While democracy lacks restraining internal resources, religious faith is able to chasten democratic faith.

The book is made up of nine chapters: three that survey a wide range of utopian democratic theories; three on thinkers identified as “voices of the democratic faithful”; and three on “friendly critics” of democratic faith; followed by a brief conclusion. The representatives of democratic faith are Protagoras, through his “great speech” in Plato’s dialogue that bears his name; Rousseau; and a series of American thinkers who moved from religious faith to democratic faith. The friendly critics are Plato, in the *Republic* and *Meno*; Tocqueville; and the two clearest representatives of Deneen’s favored position, Reinhold Niebuhr and Christopher Lasch. Cumulatively, this body of material provides a wide-ranging, often eloquently presented survey of democratic theories from different historical eras.

The targets of Deneen’s criticisms are characterized by belief in democratic transformation. There are two main versions: deliberative democrats, such as Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson; and more radical, “agonistic” democrats, including Hannah Arendt and such contemporary thinkers as William Connolly. Central to both variants is belief in the possibility of human transformation through democratic deliberation, political participation, or other means. Deneen traces the roots of such views to past thinkers such as Machiavelli, who, he claims, believed in the transformative power of religion, and Francis Bacon, who upheld the possibility of human self-transformation through science, although, as Deneen notes, Bacon was a monarchist. Later thinkers such as John Dewey and Richard Rorty echoed their views, believing in the beneficial long-term effects of science. Deneen believes that radical

democrats promise more than democracy is able to deliver, thereby contributing to the crisis in current democratic theory.

Deneen's assault on utopian democrats is generally convincing. But while he performs a valuable service in assembling an entire raft of such theories, his criticisms are almost too easy, given the theoretical excesses of his opponents. His survey of friends and critics is a mixed lot. His list includes both usual suspects and unexpected figures, with the result that at least some material is likely to be unfamiliar to almost all readers. His interpretations of texts range between the conventional and expected and include the highly original but also improbable.

Deneen's discussion of Protagoras centers on the role of Prometheus in his speech. Contrasting Protagoras's account with how Prometheus is portrayed by Hesiod and Aeschylus, Deneen argues that the Sophist relied on religion to shore up political association, in contrast to the optimistic, essentially anti-foundationalist position generally attributed to him. In the following chapter, Rousseau is identified as the first modern proponent of democratic faith. Deneen focuses on the role of religion as used by the lawgiver in founding the ideal state of the *Social Contract*, in addition to Rousseau's support of a civic religion. Deneen adds to this a stimulating account of Rousseau's theodicy, based on human rather than divine action, largely through a 1756 letter to Voltaire concerning the Lisbon earthquake. This section concludes with an account of how Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson anticipated democratic faith and then how Dewey and Rorty adopted the position.

Deneen's friendly critics begin with an ironic interpretation of the *Republic*, similar to well-known arguments of Leo Strauss and Peter Euben, though differing in details. Focusing on the analogy between city and soul that dominates the *Republic*, Deneen dismisses the overt teaching of the work in favor of a view of democratic equality, which is supported by the example of Socrates instructing a slave boy in geometry in the *Meno*. This is followed by a nuanced account of Tocqueville, who believed that religion is one cause of the equality Tocqueville viewed as threatening democracy. But then again, Tocqueville believed that religion was necessary to counter effects of equality, while also aware of possibly deleterious effects of religion if manipulated by the state. In the final chapter of this section, Deneen recounts Niebuhr's and Lasch's chastened views of human nature, and so their belief in the limits of what is possible. These figures argue from original sin, which Niebuhr described as the only empirically verified aspect of the biblical tradition (247). Deneen's conclusion is a brief account of Abraham Lincoln's "theological understanding" (282) of human limitations and consequent realistic view of democracy.

In spite of the many virtues of Deneen's exposition, there is a good deal to criticize in both his presentation of friends and foes and his overall argument. To begin with, Deneen does not explain why he chose this specific list of thinkers. The two chapters on Plato in particular are only loosely related to his main themes, while interpretations in both chapters are questionable.

In his account of Protagoras, Deneen does not address the massive incongruity of foisting on one of the ancient world's best known skeptics and agnostics belief in the need for religious faith. As for ironic interpretation of Plato, an obvious weakness of the method is arbitrariness. Through sufficiently selective interpretation, one can make Plato say anything at all. Deneen's particular view trades on a superficial and generally confused understanding of Plato's moral psychology, while he provides no reason to focus on his pet details, as opposed to the many and different things Plato says about democracy throughout his corpus. Not only does Deneen ignore bitter denunciations of democracy in the *Gorgias*, *Epistle 7*, and other works, but, had he wished to find in Plato a chastened democratic view based on fundamental human equality—as opposed to the class system of the *Republic*—he had only to turn to the *Laws*.

Deneen's defense of democratic realism is also significantly weakened by what he leaves out. Though, once again, he provides an effective critique of utopian democratic visions, there is little reason to accept Niebuhr and Lasch as the main alternatives. The fact that religion is able to counter democratic utopianism does not prove it is necessary for this purpose, or even that it is especially well suited, especially in a pluralistic modern society. Unaccountably missing from Deneen's survey is the mainstream of contemporary democratic theory. In general, worldwide acceptance of democracy is not rooted in wide-eyed idealism but in democracy's ability to constrain the abuse of political power. Perhaps the most prominent recent exponent of this view is Joseph Schumpeter, whom Deneen ignores. Winston Churchill's faint praise of democracy as the worst political system except for all the others—also ignored by Deneen—is as chastened as the views of Deneen's favored theorists. Given the long history of human tyranny, it is not necessary to turn to religion to recognize the dangers of unchecked power. In the absence of an argument for the need for religion—as opposed to laudatory recounting of the views of selected religious figures—Deneen fails to establish this central part of his case. If Niebuhr is right about empirical validation of original sin, the evidence that constitutes the validation renders otiose the theological claim it is said to support.

—George Klosko

### POLICY AND BEHAVIOR: QUESTIONS BEGGED

James F. Adams, Samuel Merrill III and Bernard Grofman: *A Unified Theory of Party Competition*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi, 311. \$70.00.)

This ambitious volume is said by its authors (239) to be a “significant advance in applied spatial modeling,” as well as in our understanding of the factors that determine party competition among democracies. The