

## ***BOOK REVIEW***

### **Radical Thought in the Time of Corporate Globalization**

*Milton Fisk*

*Philosophy Against Empire, Radical Philosophy Today, Volume 4*, edited by Tony Smith and Harry van der Linden, Philosophy Documentation Center, 2006.

In the 1960s, philosophy in the United States took an important turn in both topics and style. Social and political issues began to dominate over epistemic and ontological topics, while a rigorous formal style gave way to a more flexible essay style. Once the turn happened, a split took place within it. On the one side, there was a reappearance of the emphasis in the liberal tradition on treating freedom, equality, and democracy as guiding ideas. On the other side, the Continental tradition of the critique of ideology showed up in challenges to the liberal neglect of social divisions and power inequalities.

The intent of this critical side of the turn was not simply to correct theories but to feed a revolutionary practice. The philosophers of the Radical Philosophy Association have kept the radical side of the turn alive, and they are responsible for the *Radical Philosophy Today* series, in which the volume under review here is the fourth. This volume on *Philosophy Against Empire* shows that their creativity and standards are high. Their volume merits the attention of anyone interested in the social, political, and ethical issues raised by corporate globalization.

Ethics is a central concern of many of the authors in the volume. One of them, Ann Ferguson, in her contribution, “No Just War for the Empire,” says we should use the moral force of the ideas of “freedom and collective self-determination” to motivate people in countering the subversion of democracy by the corporations and the international organizations they influence.

How can radicals defend such ideals against the self-serving values of conservatives? Richard Peterson’s discussion, in his “Human Rights and the Politics of Neo-colonial Intervention,” points out that it is not enough to show that by ignoring freedom and democracy our leaders chance running the U.S. into the ground. This is a response based on the interests of a nation state.

However, he claims that, with the interpenetration of societies, we are moving into a post-national world where we can take the universal perspective required by ethics. For him this cosmopolitan ethics would be an ethics of human rights. In a post-national world, we would modify our identities so we could engage cooperatively rather than exploitatively with the oppressed, at home and abroad.

Why should we engage with the oppressed? Peterson quotes Vaclav Havel in saying that it is obvious we should. As philosophical radicals, we must say more. We live at a time when numerous forces threaten the survival of society, whether local, regional, or global. In reflecting on this vulnerability, we may be able to see that the ethical rules we make for

ourselves have credibility to the extent that they prevent social collapse. Reaching out to the oppressed, as Peterson would have us do, can help mend the divisions that threaten society.

Beginning in the 1990s, there has been a lively interest in immigration among radical philosophers. In her essay, "From Alien to Guest," Jo Ann Pilardi says that the growth of immigration can lead to a universal proletariat and global citizenship. However, the fact that more people are crossing state boundaries is no indication that states are dying or that migrants want to be stateless.

In "Biopolitics and the State of Exception," Devin Zane Shaw criticizes the state from the perspective of immigration. Following Giorgio Agamben, Shaw sees migrants as exposing a crisis that affects sovereignty, democracy, and human rights. Sovereignty leads to treating migrants as outcasts, as bare individuals with no democratic or human rights. Due to the nature of sovereignty, failure awaits reformists who accept the sovereign state. Moreover, human rights, being for Shaw only the creatures of sovereignty, lack liberatory potential. The implication is that the plight of migrants can be resolved by doing away with the state.

However, migrations come from persecutions, conquests, and want. In this volume, David Cormier and Harry Targ, in their "Globalization, Neoliberalism, and the 'Precarious Classes,'" describe the economic circumstances needed to create the impoverishment that leads to contemporary migrations. If one were to remove these economic circumstances, state sovereignty would reduce to a formal factor, with less reason to worry about floods of migrants.

A concern with consciousness runs through much radical writing. This writing always assumes the existence of agents who are conscious of themselves as possible sources of change. Richard A. Jones, in "Black Authenticity/Inauthenticity and American Empire," calls for a change of consciousness on the part of Blacks. Black inauthenticity used to be wearing white masks for immediate survival. Jones points out that now however, there is a question of global survival. Black authenticity can no longer be an attitude of otherness toward whites. The imperial world system threatens everyone's survival through pre-emptive war and corporate profit-taking. Black authenticity then comes to mean becoming more authentically human, which one does by entering the global struggle for survival against empire.

The volume ends with a symposium on Carol Gould's 2004 book *Globalizing Democracy and Human Rights*, in which she gives a justification of human rights and calls for a move away from the coercive form of sovereignty represented by the state and toward democratic self-determination within a variety of associations. Omar Dahbour in "Is 'Globalizing Democracy' Possible?" and Kory Schaff in "Are There Human Rights?" both address, among other things, Gould's ontological justification of human rights. Her response to them in "A Reply to My Critics" reveals the limits of ontology in ethics.

For her, human rights follow from equal positive freedom. In turn, freedom comes in as a necessity for human agency and is hence equal among human agents. Equality of claims comes from the interdependence of people as social beings. However, on the ontological plain, the most we can squeeze out of agency is some degree of freedom, a degree that may vary from agent to agent. A similar point holds for equality of demands in

an interdependent social setting. In a social ontology, power is a factor that, while not ending interdependence, limits equality of demands.

Editors Tony Smith and Harry van der Linden have put together an excellent volume on a wide range of important social and political problems. A notable exception is the absence of an essay devoted to the impact of corporate globalization on the environment, which reflects the absence of a major focus on the environment within this group of radical philosophers.