
BOOK REVIEW

Frank Cunningham: *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001.

This work is an excellent introduction to diverse trends in contemporary democratic theory, and is distinctive not only for its clear and concise presentation of major theories, but also for its critical and analytic approach to the underlying issues. Its focus is contemporary Western political theory, and it deals primarily with Anglo-American thought, though some important Continental European developments are also analyzed. The author mentions ecological and environmental issues, and occasionally makes important points concerning them, but on the whole there is little discussion of political ecology and green politics. Yet despite its limitations in scope, the work will be very valuable for political ecologists or anyone else who desires a wide overview of contemporary theories, an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each, and an exploration of the key issues on which they diverge or converge.

It will be particularly helpful in correcting certain insularities that one often finds in discussions of political theory. Quite often, students of political theory develop considerable knowledge of particular traditions, for example mainstream liberal and communitarian theory, post-structuralism and post-modernism, or Marxist and other left analyses, while remaining unaware of developments in the larger field. Cunningham's broad overview is a useful corrective to any such overspecialization. In addition, those who have focused primarily on either normative and philosophical theories or empirically oriented and social scientific ones will get a healthy dose of both. One of the author's strengths — something quite rare for a philosopher — is to have a firm grounding in political theory as that field is understood by political scientists.

Cunningham divides contemporary theory into seven (not entirely mutually exclusive) categories: liberal democracy, classic pluralism, "catallaxy," participatory democracy, democratic pragmatism, deliberative democracy, and radical pluralism. He uses as points of reference such classical figures as Hobbes, Rousseau, Madison, Tocqueville, Mill, Schumpeter and Hayek. The discussion of

contemporary theory encompasses a wide spectrum of thinkers, some of whose ideas are seldom juxtaposed. These include Macpherson, Dahl, Truman, Habermas, Rawls, Nozick, Buchanan, Gutmann, Kymlicka, Barber, Laclau and Mouffe. The book concludes with a useful chapter in which the implications of the various theories for a particular issue, globalization, are explored.

Liberal democratic theory receives the most extensive discussion, and justifiably so, in view of its dominance in modern Western political thought. Cunningham investigates such topics as the level of participation allowed by the theory, its degree of egalitarianism, its utilitarian versus deontological justifications, individualist and communitarian tendencies, its notions of autonomy and selfhood, the role of positive and negative conceptions of freedom, views concerning the public and private realms, the role of the state, and the issue of liberal tolerance of illiberal and undemocratic practices within a society. A number of issues concern debate over the relationship between liberal democratic institutions and either socialist or neo-liberal politics and economics. Cunningham discusses, for example, the supposed anti-democratic implications of interventionist economic policies, on the one hand, and the existence of authoritarian “free market” regimes on the other.

“Classic pluralism” was the dominant approach in American political theory for several decades and still remains influential. It stresses the clash of interest groups and the need for processes by which to establish social order and stability. Cunningham investigates its views of power, leadership, and political culture, and some of the criticisms of its conservative implications. In view of its abstract view of group power and its rejection of economic classes and ethnic and racial groups as relevant interest groups, this perspective is criticized by more radical democrats as an ideology legitimating the corporate capitalist system and having little compatibility with meaningful democracy.

“Catalaxy” is a species of “social choice” theory that takes self-interested individuals as the units of social analysis. Cunningham takes the term “catallactic” from the classical liberal theorist Hayek, and accordingly takes what is now called a neo-liberal or “free-market” view of democracy. He presents a clear picture of this theoretical framework and discusses its analytical strengths and weaknesses, including both empirical and normative problems with applying its economic account to political activity, including governing, voting, and citizenship in general. Not surprisingly (though the point remains rather delicately understated in the text), critics find the connection

between this theory and any meaningful conception of democracy to be rather tenuous.

Cunningham's relatively brief analysis of participatory democracy provides the reader with a great deal of theoretical material for reflection. The discussion will be particularly useful for those interested in recent proposals for ecological democracy, many of which constitute variations on the participatory model. Cunningham confronts such questions as the scale on which direct democracy can exist in a viable manner, the role (or non-role) of a state in a participatory system, and the tension between the libertarian and authoritarian dimensions of self-determination by small-scale, often relatively homogeneous groups. The strengths of the participationist critique of representation, of depoliticized consumer society, and of unresponsive political and economic systems in general are brought out, as are possible problems with a participatory approach, such as the dangers of majority tyranny and social pressure.

Cunningham places himself in the pragmatic tradition of Dewey and Macpherson, and stresses the contribution that "democratic pragmatism" can make to contemporary theory. The pragmatist emphasizes the relevance of democratic values and practices to diverse spheres of human activity, the importance of the social context in which democratic phenomena develop, the fact that the achievement of democracy in any realm is a matter of degree, and the need for a creative democratic response to particular circumstances, rather than a democratic ideological absolutism. From a pragmatic point of view, democracy requires experimentalism, and some questions — even basic ones about structures and procedures — cannot be answered through ready-made theories.

One of the currently fashionable theoretical options that Cunningham analyzes is deliberative democracy, which stresses the centrality of questions concerning public discourse, justification procedures, norms of reciprocity, and the conditions for free, rational and democratic formation of policy. This perspective shares with varieties of civic republicanism and participatory democracy an emphasis on the transformative effects of participation in democratic processes. Cunningham outlines the complexities of Habermas's highly influential version of such a theory, and the important contributions of thinkers such as Gutmann and Thompson to determining the preconditions for authentic social consensus. Significant criticisms of the theory, such as the charge that it retains an abstract, formalistic view of social transformation, are also examined.

The final theory discussed is “radical pluralism,” which is associated most closely with various post-modernist and post-structuralist theories. Though leading post-structuralists Laclau and Mouffe figure most prominently in the discussion, Claude Lefort, one of the foremost figures in French radical democratic thought, is also taken as an exemplar of this tendency. It is somewhat surprising that Lefort’s former collaborator in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Cornelius Castoriadis, one of the great democratic theorists of the last century, appears nowhere in the discussion, though some of his major themes, such as the radically creative nature of democracy and its incompatibility with fixed, transcendental or traditionalist ideas of human nature and society, are discussed in relation to Lefort. Such views are compared to the anti-foundationalist, anti-essentialist critique of politics that comes out of the tradition of Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard. The result is a pluralist politics exemplified by Laclau’s and Mouffe’s ideas of a “hegemonic project” drawing on radical democracy and other social movements to create a system in which “enemies” become “adversaries” sharing no ultimate ends but certain common democratic commitments. A number of problems with such views are discussed, including their ambiguity concerning what kind of concrete politics might emerge from such a perspective.

Although the book is structured around seven major theories, it is much more than a cataloguing of theoretical positions and their complexities. Though one can see its analytical strengths throughout, they are particularly evident in several issue-discussion sections scattered through the book. For example, there is a useful treatment of theories of representation that presents divergent views concerning the possibility of preserving democracy under representation (through accountability, mandates, delegation, etc.), investigates the question of what might be represented (interests, opinions, perspectives, etc.), and explores such issues as which groups should be represented, how such groups might be defined, and what basis for representation might be utilized (geographical, proportional, quota-based). Another useful analytical discussion shows how theories of democracy justify their claims either on an “individual” or “group” basis, and either from a “prudential” perspective or a “moral” one. Cunningham’s analysis shows that many positions fail to clarify their own presuppositions and distinguish themselves clearly from other views, and that this sometimes results in argument at cross-purposes and verbal disputes.

The book is called “a critical introduction,” and one of its strongest points is that the author never shrinks from critically pointing out the challenges faced in formulating a successful democratic theory. Early in the book he identifies such potential problems as domination by the

majority, failure to recognize minority views adequately, decline into cultural mediocrity, ineffectiveness of policies, spread of divisive conflict, manipulation by demagogues, mystification of rule by officials and other elites, and various irrationalities build into decision-making processes. He also notes the danger of appeals to “the people,” a “contentless and unstable” concept that has been invoked since the French Revolution for manipulative purposes (p. 20). Various responses to such criticism are also presented. In view of such discussions, the book will be particularly useful to those who are interested in formulating a “radical,” “strong,” “participatory” or “grassroots” conception of democracy, and who desire to remain resolutely critical, to confront objections rather than explaining them away, and to think through problems rather than obscuring them through democratic rhetoric.

Though I have stressed the books distinct analytical strengths, I found one very important analysis — that of the concept of capitalism presented early in the book — not to be very helpful. Cunningham defines capitalism as “a predominantly market-driven competitive economy in which individual or corporate owners of major means of production, distribution and the like are presumptively (though obviously not completely) free of state interference to dispose of their holdings or of profits derived from them as they please” (p. 46). This seems much too close to the conventional liberal formulation, with all its ideological shortcomings. Definitions that focus on the social dominance of processes of capital accumulation, or on the appropriation of surplus labor for purposes of class domination would be more useful, since they are at once more precise and more comprehensive.

Such definitions help uncover dimensions of state capitalism, fascist and corporatist systems, and oligopolistic and monopolistic capitalism. Correspondingly, and most relevantly today, they can help reveal the manner in which a highly rationalized, bureaucratized and institutionalized “free market” and a highly intrusive “minimal state” (together forming a coordinated corporate-state apparatus) can function on behalf of capitalist domination. Setting out from his limited definition of capitalism, Cunningham observes that social democrats offer the alternative of a society with greater social equality and cooperation. This captures a certain measure of political truth, it tends to obscure the crucial question of the relative merits of policies and strategies that aim at expanding equality, social cooperation and even democratic participation without posing deeper structural questions, and those that directly confront the issues of class domination, capital accumulation, and their ideological and imaginary processes of legitimation.

As important as such issues may be (especially to *CNS* readers), the central purpose of the book is not to analyze the capitalist system but to survey contemporary democratic thought in a critical manner.

Particularly in view of the relative brevity of the work, the author does a quite admirable job of describing and analyzing contemporary democratic theories and of posing critical questions concerning them. This book is therefore highly recommended to anyone interested in its subject matter. — **John Clark**



Correction in *CNS*, 3, 3, September, 2002, page 94, first full paragraph should read: “Liberal democratic systems have not performed much better. According to Pimentel et al., roughly 17 tons per hectare of soil is eroded away each year from US cropland” (“Gender Relations, Political Economy, and the Ecological Consequences of State-Socialist Soil Science,” by Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro, pp. 92-117).

In the same issue, the “not” in Richard Lichtman’s article (p. 140, indented quote, first line) should read “nor.”