

Returning Political Theory to Politics

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The odd disconnect between theorists of 'difference' and struggles for social solidarity

IT'S TRAINED ELEPHANTS linked tail to snout contending with accursed builders of The Tower of Babel. That's pretty much how defenders of discourse on class and identity caricature their opposite theoretical numbers. Not so Joseph Schwartz, who shows why such binary thinking is dangerous. Schwartz instead places economic inequality and politics back into discussions of identity and difference. It's about time. Schwartz, a Temple University political theorist and long associated with the Democratic Socialists of America, writes a book with beaucoup strengths. Two in particular stand out, and explain why it's a book that — in a period in which economic decline is an in-your face reality — nicely bridges the theoretical divide. In its first instance, it is a healthy contribution to political theory, written within that discipline about the weaknesses and parochialism of contending thought in the field. As such, it's a great summary of warring theoretical stances. It's even a good one-stop source to read for a Ph.D., much as Paul Sweezy's *Theory of Capitalist Development* helped this writer notch a tricky qualifying exam question in my day as a student ideologue cum scholar. Like Sweezy, Schwartz's work is also more than that. It's theory in the best sense, as a guide to praxis. Not a how-to-book on unifying the exploited, the oppressed, and the marginalized, if such an analysis could be made before the fact. Rather, it's a mostly successful attempt to weave a series of seemingly conflicting and frequently counterpoised ideas about power and powerlessness into a genuinely subversive strategy. What it does is nothing less than chart the underpinnings of a majoritarian politics of the left and the way to end radical isolation by linking common class needs with minority struggles. His academic project is pretty straightforward: Equal citizenship should imply equal access to resources. It's not, as Anatole France observed sarcastically, where "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets, or steal bread." While he holds a healthy respect for group differences, Schwartz focuses on "the structural barriers that low-income and working class people of all races face in regard to educational and labor market opportunities. "How," Schwartz asks about a question that vexed not just Marx but Rousseau and Mill, "do inequalities in wealth, income, power, and life opportunities contradict the formal commitment of liberal democracy to the equal moral worth of persons?" Why, in a period in which economic and social inequality exploded in the United States — roughly the last 35 years — being both cause and effect of the decline in political power by labor and other progressive movements, did so many radical thinkers move away from "speak(ing) forthrightly in favor of social solidarity and democratic equality?" "Why is it," he asks, that "political theory has taken a peculiarly 'anti-political' turn," . . . spending more energy debating the metaphysical and ontological nature of the 'self' . . . than on discussing how selves in the real world are affected by political and economic developments — and what people might do to reverse these inegalitarian trends?" Sure, that's not the whole picture, as when an American Political Science Association task force report put it in 2002, "The scourge of overt discrimination against African-Americans and women has been replaced by a more subtle but potent threat — the growing concentration of the country's wealth and income in the hands of the few." We can quibble about whether indeed overt discrimination of African-Americans and women has been replaced so much as that class differences have become exacerbated, but at least the APSA was looking at the problem. The list of the unseeing and the uninterested — at least until the investment bank collapse of 2008 — is staggering. What took the place of studying inequality in the hearts and minds of many radical academics was instead a focus on "epistemological and ontological questions about the nature of 'the self' and "difference." Studying transgressive behavior in cultural studies was in; strike behavior, work alienation, and economic survival was out. Even today, for Schwartz, "few political theorists consider how social and

economic structures shape identity and even constrain — but also enable — individual and group agency.” What emerged from that post-structuralist perspective, and what he cautions against, is “a new radical orthodoxy of uncritically embracing the value of ‘difference.’” “In short,” Schwartz writes, “‘difference’ is not empowering for marginalized communities that possess inadequate resources and life opportunities for their members. Thus, the moral and political challenge confronting democratic theory and practice is not that of choosing between the false antinomies of unity and diversity (or ‘universality’ verses ‘particularity’), but of constructing unity through diversity, and vice versa.” Note how Schwartz won’t dichotomize the two approaches, (if anything he sees them as causally linked) , only that “inegalitarian distribution of power, voice, and life opportunity cannot be politically overturned absent a politics of solidarity that promotes alliances across groups in favor of democratic equality.” Schwartz does more, I think, than any other theorist in years to connect issues of “otherness” and “group identity” to their development under a specific mode of production, capitalism, and the need to battle politically in alliances. Early in the book he writes, *pace* Terry Eagleton, that post-structural analysis emerged in a period of working class and social movement defeats in contending for power. True enough. And while post-structuralists drew attention away from what they called the imperial claims of an enlightenment-based “grand narrative,” a far worse grand narrative — substituting what historian Tony Judt writes off as “the Higher Drive” of what it terms “decentered selves,” battling in an amoral death-locked competition for power — got enshrined by the right: the neoliberal idea that free market rapacity was in the common good. The demise of democratic theory and, as I would argue, theories of class did indeed coincide with the decline not just of the left but of post-New Deal liberalism. Social class as agency atrophied in political theory following political defeats. When Auto Workers president Doug Fraser quit a federally sponsored labor-management board claiming business was “waging a one-sided class war,” those studying what Michel Foucault called “subjugated knowledges” were quick to leave the battlefield in a blur of semiotics. So while the academic left was busy difference-mongering (my words, not Schwartz’s) the U.S. Right shifted what was an economic struggle into a social and cultural struggle. Saying that, I do think Schwartz is right (or at least he’s magnanimous) to say that “if the post-structuralist and ‘difference’ turn had occurred in a vibrant, hopeful period for left politics, they would more likely have joined an earlier generation of radical theorists in taking on America’s dominant faith in the liberal Democratic capitalist order.” Yet some issues are not as easily reconciled as Schwartz believes. Where he writes that “inequality over the past 30 years in the United States has distinct political, and not structural economic causes,” he exaggerates. It has both, working in tandem. Certainly the devastation that globalism and the collapse of Fordism did to U.S. industry never reached those depths in Scandinavia (at least not yet), but that speaks to Scandinavia’s unique export capacity, its niche precision-manufacturing sector, the combined strengths of its labor movements historically and the weaknesses of its ruling classes, and not just to the institutional blocks built up to defend European social welfare programs and avoid a race to the bottom. These blocks aren’t epiphenomenal, of course. Europe’s own history of class struggle and the left’s embedded social democratic and radical institutions in Britain, France, and Italy are indeed political causes, or the legacy of past politics, as Schwartz says. But these institutional buffers, thanks to capitalist globalization and not just sclerotic social democratic leaderships, are now under assault in exactly the same ways as they were in the United States under Carter, Reagan, Clinton, and the greater and lesser Bushes. Structural explanations have their place, too. I also think he’s too hard on pioneering sociologists William Julius Wilson and Theda Skocpol for invoking what he calls a “race-blind politics” of universal rights and responsibilities. They’re not the first to suggest that viable programs that help the poor, such as universal health care, a massive federal investment in affordable, high-quality housing, improved and expanded social security benefits, federal jobs programs, and unemployment insurance without a sunset, are programs that help everyone and should be marketed as such. On the radical democratic left, much of the work of Caribbean Marxist C.L.R. James’ — a scholar and a left militant — argues the same point. And Schwartz unfairly, I think, dismisses Thomas Frank as someone who disparages working class suspicions of government

programs as “irrational.” That’s not how I read Frank, who argues in *What’s the Matter with Kansas* that religiously based workers voting for the Right do so precisely because they make a rational choice after seeing no difference between the two main U.S. parties on issues that matter to them. So why not vote their conscience or their fears over their interest when neither party seems to represent their interests anyway? That’s no description of irrationality, though when workers begrudge entitlement programs and oppose all tax increases, including tax increases on the rich, it is problematic. Electing Republicans or center-right Democrats may not be irrational, but it is ironic and self-destructive. It only compounds working people’s problems. And one last caveat, perhaps an unfair one, as this particular Schwartz sin appears more like a lead prairie dog whistling a warning to the pack and less a protagonist in Schwartz’s bestiary. It’s the bogey of “class essentialism,” said to be the province of the “white male Left.” After a proper demolishing of his main targets, he shifts gears to aver, no essentialist he, that his study “is not another paean by white male academics to a glorious past of class-based, universal struggle.” Would that he were as felicitous and balanced in his treatment of white Y chromosomed Marxists as he is in his critique of the limits of difference and a purely identity politics. Schwartz prefers a more nuanced one — and who wouldn’t? — that holds that “culture and ideology have always played a major role in the shaping of individual and group identity, and that the Left has always consisted of a coalition of progressive middle-strata and secular members of the industrial working class.” I think Schwartz states it so bluntly for only one reason: there aren’t many defenders of “class essentialism” in academia. Maybe the 17-something newspaper hawker at a recent “U.S. Troops Out of Everywhere” mobilization, but not among academics, or even among the democratic socialist/radical left. It’s a red herring. In fact, was there ever such a blockheaded Marxism? Was there ever really a prevailing orthodoxy, of uncritically embracing the value of class, itself a historically fluid category defined as much by what it is arrayed against as what it comprises? Not in the universities, where Marx wasn’t even taught in graduate survey of social theory at the University of Chicago in my day, and I’d argue, not really much on the radical Left either, then or now. From Marx to Dubois to C.Wright Mills, and from Raymond Williams and Norman Birnbaum to Hal Draper, Sheila Rowthbotham and Mike Davis, no one put forward such a one-dimensional definition of class. Whatever readers of *New Politics* think of the late Philip Foner’s international stances, his exhaustive studies of working class institutions are infused with the tension between white and black workers over scarce jobs and employers practiced in playing one off of the other. From the time the Wobblies organized integrated locals and Gene Debs’ refused to speak to Jim Crow audiences and the Black Panthers distinguished themselves from other nationalists with their clear-eyed approach to alliances, the Left that prizes class struggle has also embraced race and gender, if not sexual orientation or the specific language of opposing white supremacy? What union doesn’t have racial, ethnic, and women’s caucuses? Isn’t this all part of class formation and not simply a higher form of class consciousness? It’s been a long time since the making of the film *Salt of the Earth*, where a trade union leader had to be persuaded that sanitation in company-owned miners’ homes is not simply an issue for “the wives” but a trade union issue, too, or that nuclear power is a danger to working people, as the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers understood as early as the mid 1970s. Who on the socialist Left would disagree with Schwartz that “culture and ideology have always played a major role in the shaping of individual and group identity, and that the Left has always consisted of a coalition of progressive middle-strata and secular members of the industrial working class.” Or that “In a world where interests are radically unequal, under-represented, disempowered groups inevitably are likely to mobilize outside the formal deliberative sphere—often resorting to disruptive, non-deliberative protest tactics — in order to force the state to grant greater voice and power to the disenfranchised.” What Schwartz is describing here is class struggle, retro-style, and it’s at least an understated if an understandable bow to the necessity for framing to call it a battle for equality instead. What else were the sit-downs of the 1930s in the United States and France, or the plant occupations going on now (as *New Politics* goes to press in May) in France, Ireland, and the U.K. now. Or the Dalit land seizures in India, the wave of factory occupations in Argentina in 2001, where the cry was “occupy, resist, produce,” or

the United Electrical Workers factory occupation of the Republic Windows and Doors in Chicago late last year, where employees chanted, "You got bailed out, we got sold out!" Now criticizing Schwartz for the book he didn't write may be unfair, given that his target is not so much a hide-bound left as the academic rock stars who think a bohemian living on a trust fund engages in transgressive behavior while a worker raising a family is tied to normative expectations. Like the abolitionists before them, who were said by contemporary radicals to "stretch their ears to hear the sound of the lash on the back of the oppressed black, at the same time that they were deaf to the cries of the oppressed wage workers in the North," Schwartz has managed not so much to trash today's theorists of difference as to provide a template for uniting freedom struggles into a movement for equality and solidarity. The effort is appreciated. Like working-class critics before him who faulted many abolitionists for, as one contemporary wrote, "stretch[ing] their ears to hear the sound of the lash on the back of the oppressed black, at the same time that they were deaf to the cries of the oppressed wage workers in the North, " Schwartz manages not so much to trash today's theorists of difference as to provide a template for uniting freedom struggles into a movement for equality and solidarity. The effort is appreciated.