
BOOK REVIEW

***The Specter of Democracy*, by Dick Howard. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. 368 pp. with notes. \$75.00 cloth. ISBN 0-231-12484-8.**

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In 1968, when I was in 8th grade at St. Francis de Sales, I organized and led the other boys in my class in a march (banners and all) to protest the rule forbidding us to run on the playground. The nuns called in the Monsignor and things ended badly for our physical education, but I got the message; don't take those civics lessons too seriously. Democracy, it appeared, really was a radical idea.

In 1974 I got another in a series of miserable jobs, this time working a punch-press for minimum wage in a back-alley machine shop. I lasted until lunch hour on my first day and then walked out, grabbed my knapsack, and caught a Greyhound Bus to Montana where I enrolled in college on cheap loans just to avoid, if only temporarily, the next miserable job. In sociology and philosophy classes I read Marx, and came to understand why miserable jobs were so plentiful. In order to profit, capitalists must get more from workers than they pay them. And since, other things being equal, workers would prefer not to be exploited, successful capitalism requires workplaces be organized in authoritarian, anti-democratic ways. Looking back at those miserable jobs, it occurred to me that I didn't even mind so much that someone made a little money off my labor; what I hated was feeling powerless and not having much of a say in when, where, or how the work got done. Exploitation was bad, to be sure, but what I liked best about socialism was the possibility that workers themselves would have the power to determine their own collective fate. For me, (and it seemed to me, for Marx) economic democracy could evolve, eventually, into a socialism in which the workers who produced the surplus would

be the ones to decide what to do with it, at which point the elimination of exploitation was synonymous with the democratization of the economy, which would in turn reinforce democracy in the political world and spread it to even more social institutions (e.g. families, churches, even the military). Thus, democratizing the workplace was, in my view, part of the larger radical democratic project and promise of America. I thought of myself then, and still do, as a student for a democratic society.

So, an American Marxist, or at least *this* American Marxist, takes democracy for granted. We assume that any socialist project will, by definition, also be a democratic project. It never occurs to us that a society worth living in would be *less* democratic than the society we live in now—that transforming capitalism would either be done anti-democratically or would result in anti-democracy. I readily acknowledge that this Americanized Marxism is abnormal (as well as naive and utopian) and that, sadly, Marxism is known worldwide—and with good reason—more for its association with totalitarianism than for its radical democratic critique of capitalism; but this the mess we are in, and this is where Dick Howard’s project begins.

The *Specter of Democracy* consists of Howard’s recent essays on Marx, post-Marxist French social thought (Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis), American and French political history, and left politics after 1989. Howard notes that all of the essays were revised, “...extensively in most cases...”¹ for this volume. The revisions were undertaken, no doubt, to eliminate the inevitable repetition that works its way into the writings of a serious and focused intellectual, but also to make more explicit the argument that justifies, at least in retrospect, such an assemblage. Unfortunately the book remains a bit repetitive and, as discussed below, its argument remains somewhat unclear.

Part One, “Marxism and the Intellectuals,” tries to both explain why intellectuals—particularly French intellectuals—were attracted to Marxism, and how a few of them, rebelling from Communist Party orthodoxy and the reality of Soviet barbarity, worked their way in the 1950s and 1960s through a critique of official Marxism and totalitarianism toward a belief in, and

commitment to, democracy above all else. Taking his cue from Lefort and Castoriadis, Howard sets out to rescue Marxism from party thugs, bureaucrats, and historical/sociological determinists alike, and to reclaim Marx for philosophy, democracy, independent thinking, and freedom. For Howard, the democratic revolutions of 1989 against Communism rendered official Marxism obsolete (“...it waged on history and it lost its bet.”), leaving the field open for anti-deterministic and democratic reinterpretations of Marx and Marxism.² In these interesting, if difficult, chapters on Lefort, Castoriadis, the Frankfurt School, and Habermas Howard teases out the most democratic and anti-determinist movements of thought in the post WWII period—particularly those movements that developed in response to the calcification of Marxist theory and the probably not unrelated, horror of Marxist practice.

Part Two “Republican Democracy or Democratic Republics,” consists of four chapters devoted to French and American political history and culture. Howard’s point in these chapters is to ground his more abstract and philosophical/theoretical discussion of democracy in part one and “...fill in the picture of democracy and to explain some of the difficulties in the practice of democratic politics.”³ Howard shows how France and America have played two variations on the theme of democracy. As Howard puts it, “The French democratic republic assumes that society only acquires its true unity by being integrated within the republican state, whereas the American constitutional republic guarantees the autonomous self-management of individual and social relations...”⁴ But from this analysis Howard draws the conclusion that democracy should not be seen as a solution to anything, and, moreover, that democracy creates problems even for itself—problems that people are always tempted to try and solve, but problems that lead in the direction of “anti-politics” and totalitarianism (the appeal of communism in France and political-religious fundamentalism in the U.S.):

Democracy is not a solution (comparable to Marx’s communism); it poses problems not only to the established order but to itself. The French got it right with their quest for the

unitary democratic republic (which is not quite identical with socialism), but so did the Americans with their discovery of the politics of republican democratic diversity (which is not quite identical with liberalism). The challenge is to hold on to the unity that animates the one without losing the diversity preserved by the other.⁵

Part Three “Back to Marx?” consists of one long chapter in which Howard makes his case that Marx was primarily a philosopher, and that it was his rigor as a philosopher that blinded him (and most of his followers) to the democratic political implications of his own analysis of capitalism.⁶ This explains why Howard replaces “communism” with “democracy” in the title of his book and asks “Would *The Communist Manifesto* that he published in February of 1848 read so very differently...?”⁷ Thus, in contrast to a Marxist who might reread or rethink Marx after the fall of Communism to get Marxism “back on track,” politically, Howard argues that the last thing we need is another Marxist political program “... as if humanity were only awaiting new marching orders to achieve its destiny...”⁸ So, instead of retooling Marxism to fulfill the same political goals in new times, Howard attempts to recover a “...philosophical Marx in order to open the path to politics.”⁹ Thus, as a philosopher, Marx can help us see things more clearly, but contrary to those who attempted to derive a political program from his critique of capitalism, Marx offers us no help—nor should we expect help, from Marx nor anyone else. Democratic politics means doing our political thinking for ourselves.

Let me say first that I think Dick Howard is a deeply learned, thoughtful, honest, and devoted political philosopher who has been trying to understand Marxism, democracy, and totalitarianism (among many other things) for the past thirty years—long before the democratic revolutions against the Marxist regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe made such an analysis unavoidable, particularly for those on the left. Thus, I admire Dick Howard and find his radical democratic project of great interest. At the same time I also found *The Specter of Democracy* extremely frustrating

and difficult to read. The book is inaccessible to all but a small coterie of philosophers and leftist intellectuals. Jargon abounds, key concepts and ideas go undefined or are used in vague or multiple ways, and the argument or arguments (the connections between them are difficult to follow) are murky or undeveloped. Revising the essays, even substantially, was not enough to pull such an ambitious project together. That work is left to the reader, and it shouldn't be. Nevertheless, despite the lack of clarity, the book does have its lucid moments, however brief, and Howard raises important issues for anyone interested in Marxism and democracy.

Space limitations, the ambitiousness of the book, and my limited competence (Howard's forays into French politics and culture in particular are well beyond my interests or expertise) prevent me from trying to fully construct and critique the overall argument here, so I will just briefly try to address several concerns I have about Howard's project.

I would like to believe that Marx, were he alive today, would understand and appreciate my own way of thinking about democracy, capitalism, and socialism. I think, for example, that the philosophical anthropology he outlined in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* could easily accommodate the idea that democracy is a social organization of political *labor* that is consistent with our nature as *Homo Faber*, man the maker.¹⁰ Indeed, democracy might be thought of as a flowering of collective self-efficacy. As such, I think he would agree that democracy is a good way to live and that, for the reasons I pointed out earlier, capitalism hobbles democracy. So, given my democratic instincts and commitments, I was predisposed to accept Howard's re-reading of Marx as an unwitting, if not unwilling, democratic theorist. But I wonder how Marx would respond to it? How would he respond, in particular, to Howard's reluctance to subject capitalism to radical democratic critique? Howard claims that it is "... no longer possible to call oneself a Marxist..."¹¹ Presumably, this is because of the totalitarian legacy of Marxism and the collapse of Communism. I agree, to a point, but for Howard it also seems one is no longer able to call oneself a Marxist because it is no longer necessary, or

possible (?) to critique capitalism. Obviously, I don't agree with this. Indeed, as I have already noted, if one views Marx as providing a radical *democratic* critique of capitalism, as Howard surely does, what else is there for a radical democrat to do?

Of course, it doesn't really matter whether or not Marx would like Howard or me better, or even if it is or isn't still possible to call oneself a Marxist. I only make this point to illustrate one of the first issues I plan to bring up with Dick Howard if I ever get the chance. In the meantime, it's worth reporting a very recent exchange I had on this very subject with an American leftist who now prefers to call himself a "radical democrat" instead of a "democratic socialist." When I asked him if "radical democracy" meant working for economic democracy he said: "As someone who describes himself as a radical democrat, I believe the credibility of this position depends, first of all, upon our insistence that democracy in all its permutations is bottom line. Then we can debate issues such as workers control and so forth." In my response I pointed out that if you read Marx as a democratic critic of capitalist exploitation there was no need to jettison "socialist," but he didn't respond, and went on his radical democratic way. The exchange left me wondering if he didn't see (or accept) that the problem with capitalism was a lack of democracy, or if he had just gotten tired of beating his head against capitalism, or if he just didn't want to sound old-fashioned by calling himself a liberal (i.e. someone who wants to reform or constrain capitalism rather transform it), which is what he sounded like to me. I would not call Dick Howard a liberal, but I do wonder what is radical about a radical democratic theory that fails to penetrate the gates of the grossly undemocratic capitalist workplace. In any case, I would very much like to know what Dick Howard has to say about the struggle for economic democracy and the socialist goal of collective democratic decision-making over the surplus by those who produce it.

One thing that is important to understand about Howard's work is that he is not much interested in the surface level institutions of democracy that concern political scientists or sociologists, so you won't read much in this book about voting, parliaments,

constitutions, and so forth. Nor does Howard have much use for positivist, or even empiricist sociology (Marxist or otherwise), which might be useful in any efforts to “improve” society or ameliorate social problems. Or, at the very least, such efforts should not be confused with the more important business of political philosophy. Appropriately, I suppose, this philosopher is interested in a philosophy of democracy.

Yet, however much Howard might want to steer clear of sociology or social theory, any search for the meaning and truth of democracy unavoidably involves one in making claims, or at least making assumptions about the nature of the social world and the relationship between the individual and society. After all, for whom is this philosophy of democracy intended? As I pointed out earlier, *The Specter of Democracy* is written for philosophers and intellectuals, which raises the question: is Howard’s democracy also only for philosophers and intellectuals? In a way, yes, because it seems that Howard believes that all democratic citizens need to be philosophers of democracy. For instance, he writes at one point:

Democracy is not a natural condition of human kind; nor is it inscribed in the inevitable course of human history. Democracy cannot exist without democratic citizens, individuals conscious of the perils as well as the pleasures that it offers.¹²

Where Marxism, in theory, was to serve the interests and needs of the working class, democratic theory is to serve the needs of the democratic citizen. Indeed, democratic citizens *need* democratic theory in order to live up to our never-ending responsibilities. We all must become philosophers.

Let us assume for the moment that democracy refers to “...a distribution of equal power among members of a society to participate in collective decisions over the conditions that affect their lives.”¹³ Let us also assume that we all agree that democracy, so defined, is a *good thing*, preferable to alternative arrangements in which there is unequal power such that most people are deprived of the opportunity to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Given that democracy is a good thing, it is important to

understand what it is, how it works, how to preserve it, defend it, strengthen it and spread it. While not developed in *The Specter of Democracy*, the role of the democratic citizen *cum* philosopher is critical to the democratic project. But sprinkled throughout the text we do find glimpses of what, according to Howard, we have to understand about democracy in order to fulfill our responsibilities.

As noted in the quote above, one thing we need to know about democracy is that it is neither natural nor inevitable, and hence should not be taken for granted. Clearly, as noted above, my Americanized Marxism does take democracy very much for granted. This, Howard reminds me, is a two-edged sword. Taking democracy for granted means not sacrificing democracy in the pursuit of class justice, but to some extent it also means failing to recognize that democracy is an *achievement* of citizens who identify with democracy and who are capable of developing and sustaining democratic self-conceptions. Howard's contribution to Marxism after Communism, then, is not restricted to his textual exegesis of Marx. He urges Marxists who are committed to democracy (among whom I would like to count myself) to pay more than lip service to it. For instance, following Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, my working definition of a non-exploitive class structure—of socialism—is a society in which those who produce the surplus shall appropriate it and decide what to do with it.¹⁴ But is this socialism to be a *dictatorship* or a *democracy* of the proletariat? Will all workers, and *only* workers, have an equal say in how the surplus is allocated? These and other issues surrounding the problem of class justice are vital to any democratic socialist politics.¹⁵

If democracy requires democratic citizens, and these democratic citizens require democratic self-conceptions, as Howard suggests, how are these self-conceptions to be developed, how will they be sustained, and what might pose a threat to them? Howard does not attempt to raise or directly answer these questions, but they seem to me vital to his project. Unless Howard is assuming an isolated, autonomous, philosophical self capable of somehow transcending her or his historical situation (and at times he does seem to be assuming this), which I think is untenable, democratic

theory must recognize, as Marx certainly did, the socio-historical construction of the self, democratic or otherwise. Thus, how are democratic citizens to learn to avoid the totalitarian temptation to solve democracies problems “once and for all” in a society dominated by authoritarian institutions and ideologies that suggest just the opposite? If the central tenet of belief that guides the radical democratic citizen is the belief that, as Jane Addams so nicely put it, “the only cure for the ills of democracy is more democracy,” how will we keep this faith when all around us we see the decisions that most affect our lives are made by government technocrats, corporate autocrats, or Republicans and Democrats far more committed to demagoguery than democracy? While I applaud Howard’s democratic project, I see in his refusal—if that’s what it is—to ground his democratic citizen in the real world of anti-democratic democracies a bit of wishful thinking. This is not to say that we should always see the democratic glass as half empty rather than half full. It is only to face up to the very real ways in which the democracy that we all want to survive and flourish remains underdeveloped by the undemocratic social forces at work in the world. Howard is to be praised for facing up to the catastrophe of Marxist politics, but we still have the catastrophe of world capitalism to deal with.

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Notes

¹ Howard 2002, p. XV.

² Howard 2002, pgs. 3-4.

³ Howard 2002, p. XI.

⁴ Howard 2002, p. XII.

⁵ Howard 2002, p. XIII.

⁶ Howard 2002, p. XIII.

⁷ Howard 2002, p. VII.

⁸ Howard 2002, p. XIV.

⁹ Howard 2002, p. XIII.

¹⁰ Marx [1844] 1964. See also Avineri 1968, pgs. 65-95.

¹¹ Howard 2002 p. 108.

¹² Howard 2002, p. XIV.

¹³ Wolff 2000, p. 113, note 4.

¹⁴ Resnick and Wolff 1987.

¹⁵ On the question of class justice, see DeMartino 2003. For a list of a few of the most central questions see Wolff 2000, pg. 120.