Reviews

The Undeserving? Disclosing Critique and the Absent Externalized Consequences of Powerlessness

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In her book McNay calls for radical democratic theory to question why there is no resistance in the face of explicit inequality, instead of positing an ontology of agonism and the inevitability of resistance. McNay critiques radical democratic theory for being inadequate or socially weightless and pinpoints to the way in which radical democrats, according to her, focus on the ontology of the political and prioritise atemporal scholastic theory over contextual and dynamic praxis. Whilst sympathetic to the overall radical democratic critique of idealizing forms of theory that overlook the power relations that social inequality and embodied agency produces, McNay points out how they fail to follow their own advice. Following radical democratic theory and its critique of power, she agrees that models that fashion political relations as linguistic relations are insufficient to overcome asymmetrical power relations echoing the well-established critique against various models of deliberative democracy. Further, she sides with Mills's critique that such theories are rather ideological in the sense that they fail to reflect on the way that they universalize their own (privileged) worldview and mistake it for the reality (p. 10). However, she does not see that radical democratic theory has passed those hurdles altogether convincingly either. Instead, McNay argues that a phenomenologically oriented disclosing critique, focusing rather on possibilities and problems than on formal models of democracy, could be a better method of thinking about transformative agency and improved democracy than the ontological approaches of focusing on the nature of the political, which are currently employed by the radical democratic theories (p. 20).

Essentially, McNay claims that despite its claims radical democratic theory fails to engage with the way asymmetrical power relations and social inequalities impact on political realities and political practice, thereby partly falling into the trap of abstraction and formalism (p. 8). McNay's wish for a radical democratic theory better able to deal with issues of practical feasibility relies

on the ability of the phenomenology of political agency and negative social experience of subordination to provide depth to (radical) democratic accounts of democratic practice. According to McNay, radical democrats fail to engage with the actual practice of politics, and, thereby, with the way structurally produced negative experiences (potentially leading, for example, to internalized powerlessness, disengagement from politics etc.) impact on political agency and its effectiveness. This leads radical democrats to produce democratic models, which prioritise the political realm over the social realm, in a way that makes them socially weightless and leaves a huge theoretical gap between the models and the actually socially conditioned existence of the objects of its theories. "In its disregard of social relations, this stark 'politicism' fails to do justice to the complexity of structural causation in capitalism and cannot therefore conceptualize 'dialectically entwined sources of power asymmetry in contemporary society'" (p. 15). That is, according to McNay, radical democratic theories fail to address problems related to actual inequalities of political agency and participation as well as their effect on democratic practice despite their aim of doing just that.

Firstly, when addressing issues causing social weightlessness in radical democratic theories, McNay claims that, in spite of its own critique of communicative democratic models, radical democrats turn democracy into an indeterminate relational negotiation of meaning by modelling political action according to linguistic dynamics. This linguistic universalism, whilst attractive as a model, fails to account for forms of power and inequality that are more internalized and structural, i.e. unexpressed and inexpressible (p. 35), than matters of agonistic debate, such as an experience of chronic deprivation or a lack of symbolic resources to participate in the debate to start with. Secondly, McNay attacks the deployment of ontologies of abundance by radical democratic theory as being insufficient for dealing with structural inequality. That is, following the analysis of radical democratic theories as purporting either an ontology of abundance or an ontology of lack, in which ontologies of abundance lead to models of democracy that envision strategies of pluralisation and flux as radical enough to produce enhanced democracy, McNay critiques these models of producing a "one-sided, glamorized account of mobile agency that downplays fixity and stultification...that may accompany persistent deprivation and inequality" (p. 19). The emphasis on notions of flux, contestation and plurality assumes "that social existence is straightforwardly amenable to challenge and transformation," which according to McNay is not necessarily the case as "[m]any aspects of social existence, particularly those related to structurally generated inequalities of class, race and gender, are deeply entrenched and systematically reproduced in a relatively predictable fashion" (p. 14).

McNay points out that the irony of a non-elitist starting point, i.e. assuming fundamental equality and universal capacity for political agency, is that

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such a theory often fails to sufficiently analyse the barriers to political participation faced by marginalized and powerless groups. According to McNay this leads to not engaging with how to "realize equality in conditions of social inequality," as she formulates quoting Deranty and Renaut. In contrast to the more abstract models, McNay suggests that radical democratic theory should employ a notion of embodied political agency with habitus, which takes into account "the negative experiences of subordination within hierarchical relations and the repercussions that these have on the capacity of individuals to act as autonomous political agents" (p. 16). Employing Bourdieu's concept of habitus, or incorporated experience, would present, according to McNay, a concept with which to approach the mechanisms of internalized domination and potentially lacking resistance grounded in social suffering and embodied experiences. McNay is, however, aware that this carries the risks of falling into the trap of determinist miserabilism focusing on suffering and victimhood and inadvertently producing powerless subjects as an ontological starting point of an alternative (radical) democratic theory. But as Bourdieu's concept of social suffering is not a psychological category but a politicized social category having to do with structural inequality and social control, McNay claims it would rather serve to keep the issues of injustice and marginalization on the agenda and avoid the trap of socially weightless anti-essentialism. This would enable radical democratic theories of lack to avoid positing a "messianic, emancipatory promise of 'democracy to come'" without addressing the issue of compromised embodied political agency (p. 22), as she expresses it quoting Adorno. To tackle compromised political agency at a practical level, seen for example in the endurance of oppression and in unrebelling submission, McNay insists that radical democratic theory needs to include an interpretative approach to the phenomenology of injustice grounded in an analysis of power in everyday social relations that includes the analysis of the 'conduct of conduct' in Foucaultian terms.

McNay builds her argument by examining four different types of radical democratic theory: Chantal Mouffe's dissociative agonism, Wendy Brown's Foucaultian and Linda Zerelli's Arendtian feminist political theory, Jacques Rancière's ruptural agonism and the existential agonism of William Connolly and James Tully. McNay's critique of Mouffe focuses on the rigid anti-essentialist logic and prioritisation of the political over the social realm, which she claims leads Mouffe to disregard issues of power that impact on political agency and everyday political practice that are, however, purported to be central to Mouffe's own theory. Because of this anti-essentialism, Mouffe's account of political agency "empties identities of any existential depth" (p. 82) and fashions the reformulation of political identity in terms of "contingent and precarious articulations," in Mouffe's own words (p. 81), which according to McNay is caused by the analogy that Mouffe draws between the contingency of meaning

and the contingency of socio-cultural frameworks. McNay also draws attention to the way that Mouffe uses Lacanian theory to explain the inevitability of emotional resistance, which McNay critiques for both its conceptualisation of emotions as something primal and subliminal (such as seen in 'populist movements') and for its assumption that resistance is as inevitable as antagonism.

Predictably McNay's critique of Zerilli's feminist theory focuses on her explicit desire to surpass the social level of identity and experience and, instead, preferring an imaginative political exercise of alternative world-building, which according to McNay leads to a "peculiarly abstract notion of agency as indeterminacy" (p. 115). Her critique of Brown focuses, firstly, on the common use of Foucault's criticism of phenomenology, naturalized identities and the confessional desire to speak the truth about one's essence, which by Brown and others is employed as an aversion of the analysis of the subjective experiences of victimhood and of the practices and embodied consequences of discrimination. McNay points to the notion, forwarded for example by Bickford, that the understanding of embodied experiences of marginalization as 'victimhood' and 'suffer-mongering' could be seen as a hostile backlash against identity politics and struggles for recognition by the dominant culture. Instead, McNay insists that subjective experiences could be included in the task of understanding how normalized and docile subjects are produced socially. Thirdly, McNay critiques the type of political agency assumed by feminist political theory and points to how both Zerilli and Brown assume that the indeterminate agency that they posit is essentially radical and rebellious to start with. Instead, she calls for a more substantive analysis of the effects of "depoliticizing governance of the self" by tackling practical identity and political agency issues in feminist theory (p. 131). In line with this, McNay asks us to consider "what kind of capacities must necessarily be attributed to citizens for them to be able to implement the perpetual self-critique that is a crucial part of Foucauldian ethical self-formation" (p. 111). That is, McNay diagnoses the problem of political agency more in terms of a lack of political consciousness of rights or lack of mobilization, which can be seen in the reluctance of women to view even sexual discrimination in terms of legal rights as Nielson's study showed, than as a matter of lacking consequentialness of the discourse of rights or of the politics of identity.

McNay's critique of Rancière logically focuses on his lack of conceptualising the social and of analysing power and his radical assumption of ontological equality. However, on the positive side she thinks that Rancière's notion of rare ruptural agonism in fact highlights the lack of rebellion and tacit normalization that, in McNay's view, undermine the agonist notion of perpetual resistance. Moving onto analysing Connolly's and Tully's ontologies of abundance, McNay points to their misframing of the issue of inequality as an issue of difference and to the optimism of their theories suggesting that a multitude

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of everyday struggles could easily execute a shift in rather established societal power relations. However, McNay admits that Connolly's vitalist approach portrays a more nuanced and less depoliticizing picture of the social and that Tully's more practice-oriented thinking on games of freedom for equality and justice is less restrictive in its preconditions of who can participate and how in such debates. In the end, however, McNay insists that Connolly's model of agonistic debate waters down the "conflictual nature of politics" and, like other theories relying on a demand for agonistic respect, it is "more compatible with a politics of reform than with radical social transformation" (p. 191). In addition, she points to Tully's similarly fundamental trust in the force of a dialogical model of speech, which she sees as underplaying "the effects of structural violence on disempowered groups" (p. 201).

Discussion

McNay's critique is important in the sense that she draws attention to the way that the postulation of equal participatory capability, i.e. the way that political agents are imagined as having certain qualities and symbolic resources, can unintentionally perpetuate structural inequality. However, I cannot see how imagining that they do not have those resources could not have the same effect. Yet, what McNay's critique highlights is the gap between realities and abstract political theory, which McNay's wants to expose by positing the question about the kind of agent that is required by (post-structuralist) self-criticism or by floating identities. Whilst I do agree with McNay in that (radical) democratic theory often remains silent about those who do not 'reach the level' of political agency and, sometimes, participates in disciplining their political action as identity politics, 'populism' or Lacanian emotionalism, it is hard to see how this inequality could be approached through a phenomena of social suffering without positing an equally problematic 'messianic, emancipatory promise of empowered political agency to come.'

The positing of an equal political agency could be understood as self-defeating for radical democratic theory, as McNay suggests. However, as the traditional response to lacking "political virtuosity and articulacy" (p. 111) has often focused on the improvement of the marginalized formulated as a policy of empowerment, i.e. in a policy of making subjects of equal quality, one must also ask about McNay's prescriptive normative goal of diagnosing inequality of symbolic resources and her strategy of treating internalized powerlessness. It remains unclear whether she envisions her disclosing critique in terms of speaking for the subaltern, in which case the subaltern needs to be able to recognize him/herself in the account of social suffering or his/her interests in the

notions of justice employed, or in terms of empowering the unresourceful socially suffering subject. In light of this, the assumption of equal agency is an understandable shortcut when dealing with the abstract theory: the anti-essentialism and the primacy of freedom are both programmatic and functional as marginalized 'essences' are too numerous to count and their interests often antagonistic to each other. Even as McNay concedes that there is a strategic reason for this anti-essentialism, she does not see it as preventing an engagement with the phenomenology of social suffering.

However, I am not convinced that turning away from the ontology of the political towards the phenomenology of lived experience is conducive to modelling democracy, which is why, despite her claim of not doing this, McNay's critique comes close to being a wish for radical democratic theory to be something that it is not. McNay in fact concedes to this by calling for a "problem- rather than model-oriented" (radical) democratic theory that deals with praxis (p. 214). However, whilst I agreed, as McNay suggests, that certain types of experiences of suffering accumulate or happen more to others than to some, it cannot be ignored that social suffering leads to any number of internalized or *externalized* consequences – a point which McNay chooses to ignore – in terms of (political) agency having to do with withdrawal, avoidance, assertion, defensiveness, radicalization, aggression or even violence etc. that are all conditioned by the political and social context. If the intention is to avoid positing an empty general category of socially suffering human ontology, this type of enquiry necessitates empirical and strategic political action research, if not social psychology, because such approach necessarily is a study of the contextual and the emergent, unless it wants to become another type of alternative world- building, a litany of speculation about what some suffering people somewhere experience – not that this type of research could not have a function to play. McNay is well aware of the strawman effect, which is evidenced by her own constant critique of radical democratic theorists for ignoring a range of other types of inequality or suffering when they try to engage with the practical aspects social power relations and democracy. However, I do agree with McNay that less atemporal and less abstract research is needed, but I doubt it would be political philosophy. Therefore, I would insist that it is because of the diversity of the marginalized and because of the diversity of the reactions to social suffering that the abstract conceptualisation of agonism is overall conducive to resignifying democracy.

Resignification of equality or political participation, however, is another matter, but in this respect I do not find McNay's argument anymore reassuring than the formulations of the radical democrats. Whilst radical democrats limit their account of what democracy can include by picturing a rational, equal and capable political agent committed to agonistic respect as a form of civility, McNay posits a suffering agent that comes perilously close to picturing a

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pure, deserving victim in need of rescue. This has an equal risk of unwittingly perpetuating established social power relations between the deserving and the undeserving, because controlling the effects of this type of strategic essentiali- sation is a hazardous exercise particularly vulnerable to neoliberal methods of conducting the conduct of citizens. Neoliberalism is not a regime that is particularly understanding of those 'unequal,' because of its tendency to con- ceptualise this as 'natural inequality' or at least as inequality that is not cost- effective to try to remedy through structural policies. More emphasis is needed on the ways of including the marginalized in the political process in their own terms and not on the aesthetic and reasoned terms of the bourgeoisie or the world 'we' would like to live in that prefers not to deal with the undeserving or the illiberal. The phenomenology of social suffering certainly has insights to give to this, but in order to have critical bite, it should also include those in whom marginalization results in unruly resistance, aggression and disruptive behaviour.

Despite the risks involved and the problem of Foucaultian political theory turning to phenomenology, I do think that the type of disclosing critique that McNay suggests has its role to play on the strategic level and on the level of treating particular types of inequality in particular situations where the poli- tics of justice claims have bite. And it is at this level that the analysis of specific social relations, particular societal structures, discourses of rights, strategic es- sentialisation, specific ontologies of suffering and disclosing critique can have an impact. Certainly, political theory needs to engage more with the world and the praxis and it is probably better to err than not to try at all. Any theory is likely to correspond to only parts of reality, therefore, the more the theories, better the likelihood of there being actual advance in democracy and equality.