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Review

Democratic Statecraft: Political Realism and Popular Power

J. S. Maloy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 236 pp.

John R. Wallach^{*}

This book presents itself as a critique of the idealist strand of democratic theory, via a theory of “democratic statecraft” that relies on “realism,” “pragmatism,” and “skepticism,” rather than “idealism,” “moralism,” or “utopianism” for first principles. In order to make his case, the author generates a “composite portrait” of this concept, drawing interesting and idiosyncratically on relatively unknown political thinkers, movies, and selective readings of major figures in the history of Western political thought, theory, and events—for example, Athenian democracy and Aristotle, Bartholomew’s Day, Machiavelli, Traiano Boccalini, Herbert Traubeneck, James Weaver, and *The Mission*.

The task of composing a historically informed and theoretically cogent concept of democratic statecraft is both worthy and daunting. It is worthy, because most democratic theory written today either stems from a tradition of liberal, analytical political theory—which harbors no great affection or understanding of the *demos* as an agent of political power—and radical democratic theory, which is often wildly disengaged from the experiences and prospects of actual citizens. Moreover, “democracy” is generally at odds with “the state”—in ancient Athens and in the modernist eyes of Marx and Dewey—and democracies must have a modicum of faith that

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the ethics of their citizens transcend raw realism in order to justify a political order that empowers them. This makes Maloy's task daunting, for the institutional mechanisms that currently support the modern state do not support *democracy* as such but rather a mostly passive citizenry that offers public legitimation of their "democracy" via the dominant, mostly anti-democratic powers of capitalism and bureaucracy, corporation-dominated political parties, and globalization. This observation supports using the idea of democracy critically not realistically. In fact, however, Maloy believes his idea of democratic statecraft can be both critical and realistic. This is an important task, if democrats are to make progress on behalf of their cause in the political world.

Maloy's book demonstrates his wide range of knowledge about the Western tradition. We learn not only from Aristotle but from Plato, Cicero, Tacitus, Plutarch, the mirror-of-Princes literature, Puritans, and Populists. One might wonder how this "composite" actually forms a "tradition" for the idea of "democratic statecraft." After all, the Athenian *polis* had virtually none of the features that characterize the modern state—at least according to Max Weber (not cited by Maloy)—and the Italian city-states, about which Machiavelli wrote, only contestably did. Yet these are Maloy's two sources for the "Reason of State" tradition upon which he wants to graft a democratic purpose. Maloy mostly finesses the effect of different ethical and ideological traditions on the ideas that he engages in dialogue with one another (such as idealism, moralism, pragmatism, scepticism, etc.). For example, he does not acknowledge the effect of communal or Christian religious sensibilities on one's approach to democracy and politics. Marx's and Lenin's views of the relationship between democracy and power do not appear in his discussion. As for the Populists, the effect of the racism (legitimated by *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896) that characterized many strands of their support and limited their political reach goes unmentioned. Yet these may not be fatal flaws for Maloy. His background is not centrally in the history of Western political theory, and there should be no scholarly litmus test for writing historically and theoretically about democratic statecraft. The question becomes what he makes of the materials he uses, whether he has developed a valuable perspective on democratic statecraft that is both critical and realistic. Here is what I can make of his program.

Moralists and utopians evidence no understanding of the actual workings of the political world. They are not helpful for either political understanding or democracy. This is a point made convincingly by Machiavelli and Weber. It's not clear historically

or theoretically, however, that Socrates (who wrote nothing) or Plato (who uses Socrates as a character in his dialogues) are unadulterated idealists with no appreciation of the workings of the political world —although it surely is the case that that is how many have (mis) read them. Maloy states that Socrates had a “fixation on godlike purity,” but that characteristic is hard to fathom—at least as an obvious, sufficient description of Socrates’ character—especially since Maloy makes no references to Platonic dialogues rooted in the historical Socrates (*Apology* and *Crito*). Maloy also associates utopians (such as Plato) with a preference for “contemplation” over action. But that is only partly true in Plato’s case, as he initially had an interest in becoming an Athenian politician and sought to validate his own theory by teaching how a Sicilian tyrant might become more law-abiding and peaceable. Plato probably had more political experience than most academics today, and starting a radically new institution of learning surely was not a contemplative experience.

Then Maloy turns to stocking his team of “realists.” From the Greek moment, he selects Thrasymachus and Aristotle. It is not clear how Aristotle is a democratic realist (though he surely writes realistically about Athenian political problems and believes that democracy is the least bad of perverted political regimes), since he is very well-known for his anti-democratic ethical and political teleology and his belief that *theoria* is the highest form of *praxis*. Indeed, Hobbes regarded Aristotle as the chief theoretical source of the ethical imaginaries that he (Hobbes) wanted to dispel. But Maloy does not offer any serious readings of Aristotle’s teleology *or* Hobbes’s nominal realism, even as the latter is regarded by International Relations theorists as the lodestone of Reason of State theory. After Aristotle, Maloy’s next big hero for democratic realism is Machiavelli, relying on the work of John McCormick (citing no other major interpreter of Machiavelli) in order to finesse the point that Machiavelli regarded himself as a republican, not a democrat, who wanted to reconcile endemic class conflict between the few and the many, not reduce it. Maloy does not care much about reading theorists whole; rather, he likes to pick and choose from their writings in order to support his argument. That is fine, if they do. But more often than not, the chief figures from the history of Western political thought that he chooses to support his views do not. And what exactly does realism mean if it can embrace Aristotle, Machiavelli, Puritan reformers, and various Populists? It seems that the conceptual integrity of his definition of realism is so far removed from historical arguments that it almost becomes, well,

unrealistic.

This also is the case with his alliance of pragmatism and realism. One might think that Maloy would engage the work of John Dewey, but Dewey is neither mentioned nor discussed. Further, one might think there would be a relatively extensive discussion of Joseph Schumpeter, insofar he is the twentieth century godfather for an alliance of “democracy” and “realism.” Maloy mentions but does not discuss him, probably because Schumpeter allies democracy and realism for the purposes of making the voice of a country’s elite a metonym for the voice of the people—a position that Maloy’s populist sympathies reject. And what about “democratic statecraft”? Unfortunately, there is no systematic, interpretive analysis of that idea in Maloy’s book.

Maloy creatively addresses an extremely important problem in *Democratic Statecraft*, namely how to ally a critical and realistic democratic perspective to an effective political posture in a world that is profoundly anti-democratic, drawing on major political thinkers and history. Such a task requires a fair-minded engagement with major theorists who have contributed to the meaning and usage of democratic statecraft. Unfortunately, this interesting, readable book does not successfully carry out this mission.