The Misguided Search for the Political

Reviewed by Nick J. Sciullo

In *The Misguided Search for the Political*, Lois McNay argues that radical democracy suffers from a reliance on abstractions that echo the criticism radical democrats make of traditional liberal democrats. While radical democracy is often theorized as a critique of the immaterial focus of liberal democracy, it too suffers from the inability to adequately account for the materiality of inequality. McNay’s book is provocative, readable, and a worthwhile addition to the libraries of political theory graduate students and scholars.

It would be easy to dismiss this book as the work of someone fed up with the excesses of continental philosophy and its sometimes-nefarious impact on political theory. At times McNay seems to read those with whom she disagrees in an overly negative manner, but at the same time, the briskness of her critique is welcome in a world of platitudes. Other times, one wonders why she focuses on some scholars and not others, as in Chapter 5 when William Connolly is the focus, but Stephen K. White and Jodi Dean get relatively little sustained attention. For that matter, why not more discussion of Judith Butler and Gianni Vattimo? In some ways, this is a minor quibble. One can only fit so much in a book, and one has to endure the vagaries of editors, yet readers familiar with the vast expanse of critical theory post-1950 will often
wonder about her focus. Still, one must not dismiss this book as it presents a theory of suffering’s centrality to political thought. Indeed, this might be one of the most important works on suffering in the last 10 or so years. This work is important and necessary in the ravishing political excesses of our time.

McNay hopes to center suffering in political theory. This focus helps readers understand what is at stake, namely the well-being of people. She argues that capitalism underlies much of this suffering, and that critique can help us undo oppression. The question is: how do we perform said critique? McNay’s critique is grounded in critical theory (Badiou and Mouffe are prominent) with specific attention paid to human suffering. This approach understands the ills of the world as material, and she argues that solutions or theories from political theorists must resist the weightlessness of theory and attend to lived experience. This is why she calls for a phenomenology of negative experience, which is a phenomenology that recognizes the normative nature of political experience rather than highly theoretical approaches to political ontology that often leave out what those theories mean in everyday life.

Phenomenology does offer a way forward. Political theorists are confronted with a menagerie of political ontology arguments from around the political milieu. These arguments often focus on abstract notions of subjectivity or the individual. They are often crouched in theories about being and relationality. Seldom do they address the realities of war, deprivation, social unrest, crumbling infrastructure, poor social services, and crime. McNay argues that phenomenology, particularly when it is turned toward negative experience, can help us do just that.

Some will find McNay’s criticisms harsh and perhaps criticize her of simply falling back on liberal democratic hopes. This criticism is not without merit, as critical theory true believers will likely be resistant to her. Her analysis of feminist political theory in Chapter 3 is well argued, but one cannot help but think her fear of relativism might be based on an overly narrow reading of some feminist theorists. That is, the sort of decentered, post-identity politics of many feminist political theorists does not necessarily mean that those thinkers are unable to theorize political subjectivity (or other ideas) in empowering ways that are responsive to lived experiences. Scholars of gender and sexuality will find this chapter particularly challenging as it poses reformula-
tions of commonly held feminist political theories from a number of different angles. Nonetheless, one should read McNay generously as she has much to teach.

This book is highly recommended for graduate students in political theory as well as scholars hoping to challenge pre-conceived notions about critical theory. For those without a background in critical theory, the text will be challenging, but McNay’s other works would be helpful tools. This text will no doubt produce considerable debate and class discussions, and for that it is commended.