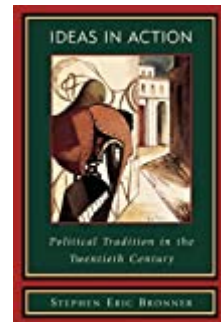


H-Net Reviews

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Stephen Eric Bronner. *Ideas in Action: Political Tradition in the Twentieth Century.* Oxford and Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999. 349 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-9387-0.



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At the start of a new century, it is not at all surprising that we see scholars reflecting on the previous hundred years. Such is the case with this work. In it, Stephen Eric Bronner presents the reader with an “intellectual history” that has a political purpose. As its title would imply, *Ideas in Action* is not a “disinterested” scholarly treatise. It has a self acknowledged “political intent” which is “informed by a concern with the social implications of epistemological assumptions” and which “highlights the friction between theory and practice” (p. ix). Bronner claims that his is the first attempt to come to terms with the past one hundred years of political theory. “No book has sought to provide an overview of the major political traditions of the twentieth century,..., let alone interpret them with an eye upon their practical impact” (p. ix). To the best of my knowledge he is correct. And while I am certain that his will not be the last attempt to come to terms with political theory in the twentieth century, he has set a high standard for those that follow.

The work is stunning in its scope and breadth. One cannot help but be impressed with the extent of Professor Bronner’s knowledge of the past century of political theory. He reminds us of the range and diversity of political ideas that were influential during the past century. His focus is not on political theory understood primarily as an intellectual pursuit. Rather he is interested in ideas

expressed by individual writers who wanted to make a difference, who wanted to change their existing political situation, in short who were as, or more, concerned about politics as they were about theory. His ultimate goal in studying the past is to find help “for developing a progressive politics in the present” (p. x). Given that, Bronner can be placed firmly within the traditions of thought he seeks to explicate.

In his survey of the twentieth century, Bronner adopts a structure that is thematic and roughly chronological. He divides the theorists he covers into four basic groupings and utilizes the category of “tradition” as an organizing concept, while at the same time redefining it and attempting to rescue the concept from “traditionalists” (pp. 8-13). Each perspective that he covers is approached with an appreciation of the appeal that the tradition has for its followers and advocates. At the same time he presents a critique of the shortcomings he finds in each. Some people may, legitimately, want to take issue with particular interpretations and characterizations, however, overall the interpretation is sound.

The first section of the book is entitled “Envisioning Democracy,” and it includes specific chapters covering liberal, communitarian, conservative, and anarchist political thought. Within the liberal tradition Bronner focuses on the contributions of Jurgen Habermas,

Karl Jaspers, John Rawls, and Isaiah Berlin. He classifies John Dewey and Hannah Arendt as communitarians. The conservative writers he emphasizes include Michael Oakeshott, Eric Vogelstein, Leo Strauss, and especially Carl Schmitt. Anarchist thought is represented by Peter Kropotkin, Georges Sorel, and Emma Goldman. In examining these traditions, Bronner is most interested in reminding us of, and resurrecting, the emancipatory power embedded in democratic theory.

The second section of the book is entitled "Changing the World" and covers socialism, fascism, and communism. The chapter on socialism is one of the strongest sections of the work, most likely because this is one of the two traditions covered that Bronner has the most affinity for due to its progressive character. In fact, he begins the chapter by reminding the reader that "Socialism incarnated the hopes of the labor movements everywhere when the twentieth century began" (p. 91). He focuses on the contributions of Jean Jaures, Karl Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg, and Richard Bernstein. Bronner is careful to treat communism as a distinct tradition of thought, with at least as much in common with fascism as with socialism. He focuses on the ideas of Lenin, Antonio Gramsci, and Georg Lukacs but only briefly touches on the contributions of Mao.

Despite the fact that fascism is obviously a perspective that is diametrically opposed to his own, Bronner seeks to understand both its roots and appeals. He locates the philosophic roots of fascism in the early century exponents of "vitalism," a tradition within political thought that is often neglected if not ignored all together. Finally, however, he concludes that fascism is "ultimately a modern phenomenon; it assumes the existence of what it wishes to obliterate" (p. 109). Neo-fascism, he takes pains to point out, still exists.

Part III, "Reclaiming Subjectivity," covers existentialism, critical theory, postmodernism, poststructuralism and what Bronner calls the "radical imagination." The existentialism chapter focuses almost entirely on Albert Camus; while Bronner does discuss the conflicts between Jean Paul Sartre and Camus, he reserves most of his analysis of Sartre for his discussion of the "radical imagination." Critical theory is the tradition that most fully informs Bronner's own perspective. According to him, "The aim of critical theory was initially to help make humanity capable of controlling its destiny in a manner consonant with the goals of freedom and autonomy" (p. 174). He focuses on Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in this discussion. And, despite his affinity for their per-

spective, critical theory is faulted for having "lost its political edge" as it developed (p. 182).

Bronner is clearly not a proponent of postmodernism and poststructuralism although he fully appreciates the contributions of many of the writers within these traditions. Some readers will find his placement of Martin Heidegger here questionable, as arguably Heidegger ought to belong in the existentialism chapter. Bronner also touches on the contributions of Jacques Derrida, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, and Judith Butler. While presenting a sympathetic reading, ultimately Bronner concludes that postmodernism "harbors a debilitating relativism," (p. 187) which makes it of dubious value as a basis for political action.

Bronner groups a number of seemingly disparate thinkers together in a chapter he calls "The Radical Imagination." In it he concentrates on Herbert Marcuse, and also discusses Jean Paul Sartre, Cornelius Castoriadis, Louis Althusser, and Ernst Bloch. Bronner praises these writers for articulating "utopian visions" which point to political possibilities if not always realistic solutions. He reminds us of the appeal these figures had when their writings first appeared. This may be one of the most significant overall contributions of the book, to reconnect the reader with authors who, at key points during the 1900s, were once considered to be of major significance and who have since fallen out of fashion.

The final section of the book is entitled "Empowering the Other" and it includes chapters touching on black liberation thought, feminism, environmentalism, and, in a chapter he calls, "The Forgotten," post-colonial thought. Since Bronner clearly has an affinity for the political projects of these movements, it is surprising that this is probably the weakest section of the book as none of these positions receive as compelling a treatment as is present in the earlier sections of the work. In the chapter on race, he discusses W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Martin Luther King. According to Bronner, "Feminism has unquestionably been the most influential new political philosophy in the last quarter of the twentieth century: certainly within academia . . ." (p. 247). He focuses on feminism's roots in early twentieth century socialism by emphasizing the ideas of Clara Zetkin, Alexandra Kollontai, and Lily Braun. Bronner also points to the importance of the contributions of Simone De Beauvoir (who might have been included in the existentialism chapter), Kate Millet, and Shulamith Firestone. In his discussion of environmental thought, he focuses on the romantic root,

especially of Murray Bookchin's work, and covers a number of eco-feminist writers. The forgotten include Che Guevera, Mahatma Gandhi, and Franz Fanon.

In the book's epilogue, Bronner makes clear his position on where political theory needs to go in the twenty first century. His primary desire is to reinvigorate the importance of the "political" as well as the "critical" dimensions of political theory. "A critical theory of politics must take seriously the different opportunities for social change, different interests, and different possibilities for enacting policy under different forms of government" (p. 304). Thus democracy, civil society, and institutional concerns all matter. Exploitation still exists, and it needs to be confronted from both a political and a theoretical point of view. Bronner suggests that one way to do this would be to reinvent the concept of "class," while at the same time always maintaining a commitment to democratic accountability. One of the most refreshing aspects

of this work, is that Bronner has both hope and political commitment, and he also thinks that theory and ideas are a means of furthering political goals. His work is a reminder that political theory has contributed to political action in the past and that theory continually needs to be reinvented so that it can matter again in the present.

This book is a successful monograph which will be of interest to political theorists and historians of ideas and which will be likely to contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding the vocation of political theory. It also would be useful for teaching purposes, particularly when accompanied by Bronner's reader, *Twentieth Century Political Theory: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997. ISBN 0-415-91533-3).

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