

The Art of Freedom: On Dialectics of Democratic Existence

JULIANE REBENTISCH

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Democracy has been condemned by some prominent philosophical figures, because it is allegedly founded on arbitrary aesthetic motives, and because democratic all-giving freedom could be exploited for political wrongdoings. Juliane Rebentisch's *The Art of Freedom: On Dialectics of Democratic Existence*, originally published in German as *Die Kunst der Freiheit: Zur Dialektik demokratischer Existenz* in 2011, is an insightful defence of the 'aestheticization of politics' criticized by Plato, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Carl Schmitt, Rousseau, and Walter Benjamin. It is coincidental that the 2016 English translation of Rebentisch's book, which urges inclusions of theatrical elements in democratic processes, comes as politics in the United States becomes increasingly theatrical.

Rebentisch starts in Part I with a dialectic conversation with Plato, who in his *Republic* identifies types of political constitutions with types of human souls, and thereby interconnects politics with ethics and metaphysics. As Plato argues, democracy based on the principle of freedom commonly appears to be the fairest political system; however, he "cautions that we should distrust the fair appearance of democratic culture even before it turns into tyranny" (19). This is because he views democratic freedom as a license for one to do whatever one wishes, which produces citizens with fickle characters easily seduced by asceticism or laziness. However, Rebentisch objects that Plato "failed to recognize that the [democratic] possibility of asking what is truly good is itself a part of what is truly good" (31). Furthermore, she argues that citizens need this license in order to become self-critical and to withstand the inducement to asceticism. Plato, nevertheless, comparing democracy with the mimesis of theatre, sees further problems in the nature of unstable democrats, who, like actors, become 'subjectless' during mimesis and thus can turn into anything by following accidental opportunities. Open to any role-play and blinded by charismatic figures, democratic citizens can be exploited to rebel against existing political order in attempts to achieve 'good outcomes' without knowing what is truly 'good.' Therefore, since in democracy no one knows where self-government leads, democratic freedom is as opportune as it is threatening. In the light of these accusations, Rebentisch contends that democratic "unfolding of the self in the dynamic sense... protects the possibility of posing the 'question of truth'.... In other words, it requires democracy [itself]" (44). In this way, Rebentisch not only defends democracy but also uses Plato's own critique of democratic principles to endorse it.

In the three subsequent chapters that comprise Part II, Rebentisch brings the views of Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Schmitt to bear on the role of irony in democratic politics. She argues that irony plays an important normative role in the establishment of general laws and morality in the state. That is why Rebentisch raises, 'with and against Hegel,' in the defence of Socratic reflexive irony, which pledges to reveal the truth by criticizing the existing law. Contrasting her views with Hegel's, she advocates "sublating both morality and its attendant notion of subjective freedom into a form of ethical life" (97). She entitles the result a "democratic form of ethical life" (97). Calling Socrates "the first

genuinely democratic philosopher,” (97) she poses romantically ironical ‘knowing of knowing nothing’ in opposition to the Kantian categorical imperative and places it at the heart of democratic thinking.

However, three formidable thinkers are against the Socratic ironical aestheticization of political life. In addition to Hegel, who dislikes the ironist’s alleged alienation from ethical life, Kierkegaard dislikes the ironist’s frightful slavery of unrestricted freedom. Schmitt, together with Kierkegaard, further warns that the romantic ironist “is anything but sovereign, a ‘king without a country,’ whose falsely understood freedom... is completely irreconcilable with any moral, legal, or political standard” (153). Therefore, Schmitt concludes that “where political activity begins, political romanticism ends” (153). Rebetisch, nevertheless, defends an aesthetic political life and argues that romantically inspired freedom is a positive possibility for self-determination in democracy.

Rousseau makes a tremendous contribution to this discussion in Part III. Particularly relevant is his negative approach to the indeterminate aesthetic nature of actors and his eloquent refusal of the proposal to build a theater in Geneva. Rousseau divides citizens to two groups: first, as determinate members of the community with all social roles; second, as indeterminate non-members, detached from their roles. Since he endorses the former, he requires that ‘natural aesthetic freedom’ be “transformed into a limited and determinate ‘civil freedom’” (207). Should someone desire to be aesthetically free, s/he should be excluded from the social contract. The social contract is *eo ipso* without both irony and mercy. However, Rebetisch shows that aestheticization avoids indeterminate non-membership and that it resists Rousseau’s critique.

Lastly, in Part III, Rebetisch responds to Benjamin’s worry that aesthetic ‘theatricalization’ can be exploited to spread radical ideologies, as it was infamously done by the Nazi Party in their use of *charisma of actor*: Hitler. Rebetisch, however, effectively re-names the exploitation of charisma as ‘anaestheticization’ and explains that Plato’s and Rousseau’s observations that real aestheticization separates citizens from their roles works “against the anaestheticization of the political as practiced by fascism” (247). Moreover, charisma itself, as a temporary authority, is not a threat; the threat is a belief in a permanently inherited charisma founded on the claim of racial superiority.

The main thesis of the book is compelling. Rebetisch clearly states objections to democracy posed by well-known figures and provides her own defences. The dialectic style provides a great evening reading with certain technical leftovers for the morning. However, her presentations of objections to theatricalization of democracy vastly extend her proposed defence of theatrical elements; therefore, readers must stay focused when tracking the logic of Rebetisch’s argument. Nevertheless, it is difficult to resist the captivating style of the book and it is easy to forgive Rebetisch for some redundant passages. Her delicate and fearless conversation with anti-democratic thinkers is an invitation for a thought provoking journey.

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