



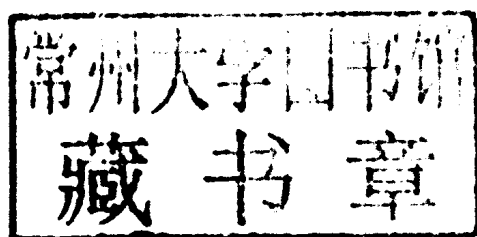
Lois McNay

The Misguided Search for the Political

THE MISGUIDED SEARCH FOR THE POLITICAL

Social Weightlessness in
Radical Democratic Theory

Lois McNay



polity

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For Maisie (again), Freddie and Solomon

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Introduction

If Benjamin said that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things which were not embraced by this dynamic, which fell by the wayside – what might be called the waste products and blind spots that have escaped the dialectic. It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. . . . Theory must needs deal with cross-grained, opaque, unassimilated material, which as such admittedly has an anachronistic quality, but is not wholly obsolete since it has outwitted the historical dynamic.

(Adorno 2005: 151)

THE RISE OF THE POLITICAL

Since at least the 1990s, normative theory, of all stripes, has taken a distinctly abstract turn in so far as it has been very much concerned with identifying the quintessential principles that shape political life and, on that basis, formulating abstract models of democracy. The present moment abounds with diverse and competing models of democracy: there are the numerous accounts of deliberative and cosmopolitan democracy derived from the work of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, the various ideas of agonist democracy taken from Hannah Arendt, Carl Schmitt and Michel Foucault,

left Heideggerian theories of democracy-to-come and Deleuzian accounts of democracy as becoming, to name but a few. This preoccupation with purified political dynamics and democratic principles might appear on the face of it to be unremarkable, for what else should the task of theory be but to sketch out, in the abstract, the outline of more desirable forms of social organization? While this might capture the ends of democratic theory in the most general sense, there is, nonetheless, something distinctive about the contemporary mode of thinking about the political which relates to its peculiarly abstract and free-floating nature. Its transcendental cast becomes evident if it is compared, say, to political theory in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, which was more closely tied to a social scientific agenda and whose theoretical concerns were driven by debates on issues such as the decline of class, the rise of pluralism, state legitimacy, and so on. Political theory nowadays has pulled away from the social sciences and has established itself as a separate, even ascendant, form of inquiry, namely a philosophy of politics whose fundamental task is, in the first instance, to isolate and capture the very essence of political being. It is this interest, then, in conceptualizing the political as an autonomous realm with its own intrinsic logic that constitutes the distinctiveness of the current moment in democratic theory. By thinking about the political in isolation from other areas of social life, and by identifying its inherent features – those all-encompassing qualities that are capable of transforming any given thing from a ‘mere thing’ to a ‘political thing’ – theorists hold that the democratic imagination can be renewed and transformed: ‘Political imagination . . . could be restored to its former power and dignity by an authentic political philosophy which would present, or rather discover, the sole and all-embracing concept of the political’ (Heller 1991: 330).

There are a variety of reasons for this resurgent interest in the autonomous dynamics of political life. In terms of intellectual influences, the ideas of Rawls, Arendt and Schmitt have been notable catalysts in the disengagement of political theory from a social scientific agenda and in engendering a certain transcendental way of thinking about the constitutive features of democratic existence. The influence of Rawls’ notion of justice as fairness on egalitarian liberal theory can hardly be over-estimated: ours is a moment where the majority of political theorists are engaged in producing some kind of comprehensive account of a just society either with or against Rawls. The resurgent interest in the work of Arendt and Schmitt has also been influential in the rise of ideas of the political, especially for a certain type of radical democratic theory. Their basic

idea that, in so far as it represents the essence of human freedom and sociality, an autonomous sphere of the political must be kept apart from the mundane, instrumental concerns of social life has resonated with contemporary worries about widespread depoliticization. Asserting the primacy and all-encompassing nature of the political is seen as part of an effective response to the depoliticizing social tendencies that have been unleashed by a resurgent, globalized capitalism and that are best dealt with from within a more universal democratic frame. It is also seen as the most compelling way of moving beyond the limiting preoccupation of a previous phase of democratic theory with pluralism and the politics of identity, issues which are often held to terminate in the dead-end of ethical relativism. The 'new' recuperative spirit of neoliberal capitalism has forced democratic theorists to reconsider the thrust of categories and ideas that they had previously considered to be progressive but, in fact, now regard as complicit with the pernicious dynamics of increasingly marketized social relations (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello 2007; Fraser 2009). The capacity of neoliberal capitalism to neutralize challenging activities by transforming them into opportunities for consumerism has necessitated a wholesale rethinking of the political and associated forms of democratic collective agency. In short, the 'obsession with the exclusively political' is bound up with a more general historical and paradigmatic crisis, where old conceptual frameworks are held to be in need of radical rethinking in the light of rapidly changing social contexts (Heller 1991: 336). To quote Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy: 'With the collapse of certainties, with the deterioration of their foundations and the effacement of their horizons, it became possible – even necessary and urgent – to resume the question of what had been called "the essence of the political"' (1997: 144).

It goes without saying that underlying this common concern with identifying the essence of the political, there is little agreement amongst democratic theorists about the best way of going about this task, about what might constitute the most convincing methods, approaches and ideas. Despite such divergences, what they share nonetheless is the catalysing insight that some kind of withdrawal from the complexities and messiness of the social realm is vital in order to reflect properly on the independent political dynamics that form the grounds of a robust theory of democracy. The political realm does not take its essential shape from underlying social dynamics and interests which it relatively passively reflects and transmits into the democratic arena. Rather, the political is accorded its own distinct logic that not only renders it autonomous but also

gives it primacy over other social realms. The rise of the political can be said therefore to be accompanied by a corresponding retreat from the social, although this retreat is not intended to be permanent; it is not, as Ian Shapiro (2007) would have it, a one-way 'flight from reality' into abstraction. Instead, it is meant to be a strategic theoretical manoeuvre, a temporary bracketing of social life, that enables the clearer identification of constant political dynamics and principles within the flux of daily existence, and consequently of possibilities for progressive democratic change.

There is no doubt that this transcendental mode of reflection on the political has breathed new life into democratic theory. Agnes Heller goes so far as to claim that it came to the rescue of political philosophy and saved it 'after it had fallen victim to too much science, too much compromise, too much realism' (1991: 336). But it also has some troubling entailments for democratic theory, and the central argument of this book is that, in some cases, it is a misguided move tending towards what Pierre Bourdieu (2000) has called a 'socially weightless' mode of thought. Bourdieu uses the term 'social weightlessness' to denote an abstract way of thinking about the world that is so far removed from the actual practices and dynamics of everyday life that, ultimately, its own analytical relevance and normative validity are thrown into question. To be clear, this is not an argument against abstraction *per se*. It is an inescapable and crucial element of political theorizing to 'abstract' from the complexities and flux of ordinary life in order to highlight generalities and tendencies that can be used to underpin the formulation of democratic principles and procedures. There are, however, different ways of going about this task of abstraction, and I argue that some are more plausible than others, and that, in some cases, abstraction goes awry and what was originally intended as a strategic and temporary retreat from the social becomes a more lasting withdrawal into a reified and self-referential model of the political. Abstraction might be unavoidable but, in the context of democratic theory, it must somehow or another be linked to thought about what can be changed in our collective ways of being if it is not to become what Sheldon Wolin (2000) has termed a 'theoretic theory' rather than a genuinely political one. If thought is to be politically effective, in other words, it must be conducted in the same directions as the tendencies of the world, not at a great remove from them (Bourdieu 2000). It is my claim that some types of democratic theory have become so enmeshed in a style of abstract and closed reasoning about the political that their relevance to the phenomenal social world and to the logic of embodied action is cast into doubt along

with, ultimately, their purportedly progressive political implications. For such democratic theories, it might be more productive to relinquish the misguided desire to rescue purified models of the political from what Arendt (1999) famously called the 'social question' and, instead, to do more or less the opposite, namely situate ideas of the political more securely within an account of the social world that subtends it.

ABSTRACTION, IDEALIZATION, ONTOLOGY

From what has been said so far, it might seem that an obvious target for the criticism of social weightlessness is the analytical liberalism, associated with the work of Rawls and others, that is currently so dominant in the discipline of political theory. On the face of it, a critique such as mine concerned above all with the troubling entailments of abstraction for democratic theory seems to fall clearly on one side of the burgeoning debate on ideal versus real theory. But, in fact, so-called 'ideal theory' is not the focus of this book's discussion. A reason why this is so is the straightforward one that there are already many discussions about the merits and limitations of an approach that begins with the premise of the fact independence of moral principles and understands its primary task as supplying, in as rigorous and detailed a manner as possible, the normative content of democratic orders. Another reason why I do not focus on this type of democratic theory is that, although it might initially appear to be vulnerable to the criticism of social weightlessness given the counterfactual nature of much of its reasoning, this is not in fact the case. The postulation by analytical democrats of the necessarily free-standing nature of normative thought (although they differ considerably over the nature and extent of this fact independence) pre-empts the criticism of social weightlessness, rendering it, in a sense, redundant. On their view, reflection on democratic moral principles should indeed be without social weight in as much as it expresses a logic that is as objective as possible, that is, unclouded by the concerns of daily social existence. Whatever one may think about the intellectual plausibility of such a method, the kind of issues raised in the critique of social weightlessness about the actual tendencies of the world, about power and asymmetrical social relations, leave many analytical liberals relatively untroubled because they do not regard these as pertaining to the realm of the ideal thought in the first place. Instead they belong to the realm of

the 'real', which is, in their view, the proper concern of sociologists, politicians and policy makers but not of political philosophers (e.g. Swift and White 2008). In short, given the intellectual terms in which ideal theorists operate, it is not possible to conduct the type of immanent critique that I am interested in pursuing here with the notion of social weightlessness. To criticize thinkers of ignoring hierarchical relations of power and domination when they explicitly state that they are not interested in such issues in the first instance is, at least from their perspective, no criticism at all.

The focus of my discussion of social weightlessness is instead radical democratic theory and, in particular, those types that could be loosely classified as agonist in nature. Unlike analytical theorists, thinkers of radical democracy (and others) do not subscribe to such a clear-cut separation of the real from the ideal; indeed, many would regard it as a false antithesis that simplifies the complex, dialogic relationship between normative political thought and the social world it addresses. Radical democrats maintain, in one way or another, that thought about emancipatory norms cannot be disconnected from an account of existing social inequalities, either with regard to the kind of presuppositions upon which it rests or with regard to its potential political entailments. One of the distinguishing features of this dialectical way of thinking is that it pushes against the formal models of democracy that ensue from the severing of political ideals from the underlying context of power. From this perspective, what are presented as impartial procedures and universal norms often turn out to be unexamined generalizations of the interests and *modus vivendi* of dominant groups. Formal models of democracy lead too easily to what Bourdieu has described as 'a fictitious universalism' where 'to grant "humanity" to all, but in a purely formal way, is to exclude from it, under an appearance of humanism, all those who are deprived of the means of realizing it' (2000: 65). Thus, for radical democrats, an essential feature of political theorizing is not so much its internal logical rigour but the extent to which it is tied to and furthers a critique of power.

What is meant, though, by the critique of power varies according to what type of radical democratic theory is in question. Radical realist thinkers, such as Raymond Guess, for instance, would emphasize above all the institutional circumstances that form the inevitable context of political activity. Such a perspective results in a vision of politics as the instrumental pursuit of power, as involving conflict and struggle and as the imposition of authority using a variety of means, some more legitimate than others. Democratic theory that does not take into account the ineluctable context of

power is, on this view, at best naïve and, at worst, dangerous in its disregard of the actuality of political life. In contrast, the critique of power in a post-Habermasian tradition of Critical Theory stresses that political theory should constantly scrutinize and reformulate its presuppositions and proposals in the light of what existing inequalities and political struggles may tell us about their progressive potential, or lack of it. On this view, political theorizing forms part of a larger interdisciplinary project where dialogue with other types of inquiry – such as social and cultural theory – engenders an enlarged understanding of the world and also a heightened awareness of one's own theoretical and methodological presuppositions. Other types of democratic theory, for example Chantal Mouffe's idea of agonism, maintain that the relational logic around which democratic identities are created and maintained necessarily involves the exclusion of certain groups as the political enemy or Other. It is the job of the radical democrat to challenge this exclusionary logic, in so far as it reinforces unjustifiable social hierarchies, and to suggest instead other egalitarian forms of collective identity around which citizen loyalty can be focused. Finally, for proponents of the genealogical approach to politics, such as James Tully, the critique of power entails an awareness of the act of theorizing itself as a practical intervention on the part of the oppressed in their struggles for freedom. The democratic theorist does not stand above citizen struggle reflecting dispassionately on its outcomes, but participates directly in it. It behoves her, therefore, to be as mindful as possible of the strategic outcomes of her partisan intervention within the field. In one way or another, then, despite significant variation in their understanding of the nature of politics, radical democrats emphasize the intrinsic connection that exists between the theoretical enterprise and the critique of power.

Differently put, radical democratic theory must build into itself, in some way or another, a responsiveness to the asymmetrical social relations from which it arises and which form the basis of many of its presuppositions as well as its normative proposals. Nancy Fraser's description of the guiding principle of Critical Theory can stand, *ceteris paribus*, as the distinguishing feature of radical democratic theory more generally, namely to produce an account of society that has the practical aim of unmasking domination and, in doing so, revealing possible paths to emancipation: 'to conceptualize society in a way that [makes] visible its historical fault lines, revealing the contradictions and emancipatory potentials that mark a given time and place' (Fraser and Naple 2004: 1107). Ironically, however, it is precisely this claim about its intrinsic connection to

the critique of power that renders radical democratic theory vulnerable to the criticism of social weightlessness. To accuse analytical liberals of social weightlessness is, in some sense, to talk past them, given that their concern is explicitly not with examining social inequalities but rather with producing logically robust normative proposals. Radical democrats do not subscribe to the free-standing nature of normative political thought, and that is why the criticism of social weightlessness has critical bite in relation to their work. To make such a criticism is to imply that they are failing to realize their own stated aim of challenging settled political orthodoxies in the name of excluded and oppressed groups and are instead falling back into precisely the type of political formalism that it appears they explicitly reject.

If the charge of social weightlessness refers to the dangers of excessively abstract modes of thought with regard to an account of power, then more needs to be said about the nature of the problem given that abstraction is an inescapable, indeed constitutive, feature of political theory. To do this, it is helpful to turn in the first instance to Onora O'Neill's criticism of the deployment of idealized abstractions in normative political theory. O'Neill observes that the difficulty with so-called 'ideal' political theory is not that it abstracts away from the underlying social context, with the consequence, as ethical particularists maintain, that it substitutes simplified universal norms for the more complex reality of situated moral practices. Abstraction in a straightforward sense is not where the problem lies because it involves the bracketing, but crucially not the denying, of predicates that are true of the matter under discussion. In this respect, abstraction is a fundamental aspect of most forms of reasoning, including even the most contextually sensitive ethical thought, which itself necessarily highlights certain features of moral practice at the expense of others in order to ground its claims. The merit of abstraction in this strict sense is that it 'never arbitrarily augments a given starting point, so will not lead one validly from a truth to a falsehood' (O'Neill 1996: 40). The real problem with ideal theory, in O'Neill's view, is the way in which its abstractions are tacitly idealized, or augmented in such a manner that they deny certain predicates and, as a consequence, may easily lead to falsehood: 'An assumption, and derivatively a theory, idealizes when it ascribes predicates – often seen as enhanced, "ideal" predicates – that are false of the case in hand, and so denies predicates that are true of that case' (O'Neill 1996: 41). For example, the assumption that individuals have the capacity for rational choice, or self-sufficiency or independence from others, is an idealized abstraction with

potentially misleading consequences when it is evident that many or even most individuals do not display such attributes in their daily lives. Theories of justice that start from such unvindicated idealizations of personhood are problematic because, in denying the non-rational, vulnerable and dependent aspects of personhood, they finish in principles that are inapplicable to most cases 'where they are not satisfied' (O'Neill 1996: 41). Similar difficulties have been identified with the idealizing assumptions of full compliance and the lexical ordering of principles (e.g. Farrelly 2007).

Extrapolating from O'Neill's discussion, Charles W. Mills argues that it is important to distinguish between different types of ideal theorizing. There is ideal theory in the sense of a schematized model of the essential features or workings of an actual thing and there is ideal theory in a second sense of creating idealized models of how something should or ought to work. The first type is reconstructive in nature, a descriptive model that resembles Weber's notion of the ideal type, based on simplifying assumptions that highlight certain essential features of the phenomenon under consideration. Like O'Neill's idea of straightforward abstraction, Mills regards such reconstructive ideals as a constitutive element of systematic reasoning. The difficulties lie for Mills with the second type of ideal theory, based in an idealizing mode of reasoning, because, in its preoccupation with how things ought to be, it disregards the systematic workings of how things are in actuality. When the actual is not some straightforward, predictable mechanical problem (like a vacuum cleaner that is not working in the way it should) but the complex and changeable realm of human action, then the separation of idealized forms from their actual instantiation becomes potentially problematic. The central flaw of so-called 'ideal' political theory is not its use of ideals per se, since 'non-ideal' theory will also invoke ideals and norms, although the structure of this normativity will vary. Rather, the problem lies for Mills with its downgrading of the actual vis-à-vis idealized constructions: 'What distinguishes ideal theory is the reliance on idealization to the exclusion, or at least marginalization, of the actual' (2005: 168). Ideal theory is underpinned by a disregard for the given either in as much as it thinks that the latter is not worth theorizing in its own right or because it thinks that the best way of understanding democratic change is through idealized assumptions. Thus, for instance, it abstracts away from structural relations of domination, oppression and exploitation that are a constitutive feature of many individuals' lives and instead relies on an idealized social ontology – the formal, undifferentiated equality of atomized individuals typical of the contract model. In treating oppression as

a deviation from the norm rather than as intrinsic to capitalist social relations, its lived reality is downgraded and effectively ignored. A corollary of idealized social ontology is the attribution to persons of idealized capacities, both psychological and cognitive (rationality, autonomy, etc.). This, too, compounds the neglect of actuality in so far as there is a failure to appreciate the effects of oppression upon embodied being, the way in which inequalities shape, hinder and distort the realization of certain capacities and dispositions often in line with an agent's social location. As Mills puts it, 'A general social transparency will be presumed, with cognitive obstacles minimized as limited to biases of self-interest or the intrinsic difficulties of understanding the world, and little or no attention paid to the distinctive role of hegemonic ideologies and group-specific experience in distorting our perceptions and conceptions of the social order' (2005: 169).

The central problem, then, with ideal theory is not abstraction per se, but rather its reliance on idealized abstractions that treat inequality, domination, and so forth, as anomalies or deviations from a hypothetical norm. Such sanitized abstractions are therefore deficient, a 'distortional complex of ideas, values, norms, and beliefs' (Mills 2005: 172) that ignores the constitutive significance of asymmetrical power relations in determining social reality. Ideal theory, from this view, is an ideology which, like many ideologies, tacitly universalizes the world-view and experience of a privileged group and marginalizes the perspective of other groups which, *inter alia*, might reveal different aspects of reality. Clearly, ideal theory is ideological not in a conspiratorial sense, but rather in an unintentional, unreflective sense, namely that it fails to scrutinize sufficiently the extent to which its premises are in fact extrapolations from 'a non-representative phenomenological life-world (mis)taken for the world', and reinforced by 'the absence of any countervailing group interest that would motivate dissatisfaction with dominant paradigms and a resulting search for better alternatives' (Mills 2005: 172). Mills concludes that starting with idealized premises is a wrong-headed way of going about the job of normative political theorizing because, in abstracting away from crucial realities of the world, it terminates in principles that have little purchase on existing injustices and major inequalities of gender, race and class. Indeed, so-called 'non-ideal' theorists, such as feminists and race theorists, have always been sceptical of idealized assertions of political equality, and so forth, on the grounds that, despite the formal universality, their neglect of crucial underlying social realities results in tacit conceptual biases and exclusions:

If it were obvious that women were equal moral persons, meant to be fully included in the variable 'men,' then why was it not obvious to virtually every male political philosopher and ethicist up to a few decades ago? Why has liberalism, supposedly committed to normative equality and a foundational opposition to ascriptive hierarchy, found it so easy to exclude women and nonwhites from its egalitarian promise? (Mills 2005: 178)

In the first instance, then, for Mills, the task of normative theorizing would be better served not through the strategy of idealization but through abstractions grounded in a reconstruction of the fundamental inequalities that structure social existence.

Clearly, idealization is not the cause of social weightlessness in radical democratic theory. Radical democrats would agree with sceptical assessments of the value of idealizing abstraction as a method for emancipatory thought and would strongly endorse the idea that political norms should be linked more securely to an examination of the crucial social reality of inequality. The problem in their case, then, is one of ontology. The over-reliance by radical democrats on a certain ontological way of thinking about the political results in a not dissimilar disregard of the actual to the one described above and that undercuts their purported central concern with the critique of power. In the final analysis, the failure to attend sufficiently to certain crucial features of social reality, particularly the lived experience of inequality, has troubling implications for the emancipatory import of their theories. The ontological turn taken by radical democrats has been widely noted and described in various terms as weak versus strong ontologies, ontologies of abundance versus ontologies of lack, negative versus positive ontologies, and so on (e.g. Connolly and Strathausen 2009; Tønder and Thomassen 2006a; White 2000). At the most general level, the ontological turn represents the leftist version of the widespread preoccupation amongst democratic theorists with capturing the essence of political being, defining its sovereign and autonomous logic and, on that basis, formulating comprehensive models of democracy. For radical democrats, the use of political ontologies is seen as a promising way of thinking about transformative political change beyond the problematic alternatives of prioritarian reasoning, on the one side, and uncritical ethical relativism, on the other. Indeed, in their view, it is precisely the failure to understand the political in its ontological dimension that is the root cause of what is seen as a widespread inability to think about politics in a genuinely radical way (Mouffe 2006: 8). To this end, many radical democrats