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Gary Dorrien. *Economy, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010.

Gary Dorrien, the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary, has written broadly on ethics and social theory, theology, politics and history. His fourteenth and most recent book, *Economy, Difference, Empire: Social Ethics for Social Justice*, is a collection of essays and lectures on social justice and progressive Christian social ethics. As the title suggests, the book explores three primary themes—economic democracy, race and gender, and American imperialism—grounded in a fourth: the discourse of Christian social ethics in America.

In the first part of the book, “The Social Gospel and Niebuhrian Realism,” Dorrien outlines the history and development of the social gospel in America in the late 19th through mid-20th centuries and lays the theoretical foundation for what is to come, particularly with respect to the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr. The first chapter explores Washington Gladden’s and Walter Rauschenbusch’s use of the social gospel for achieving economic justice at the turn of the 20th century, and the three subsequent chapters examine aspects of Niebuhrian thought: first in contrast to Karl Barth’s wartime “crisis theology” then Billy Graham’s post-WWII evangelism. Given Niebuhr’s far-reaching influence in post-war America—especially on later neoconservatives, who Dorrien believes misuse him—Dorrien is keen to reach Niebuhr’s core motivation. “For [Niebuhr],” he writes, “the love ethic was always the point, the motive, and the end (even when it had no concrete social meaning . . .). Christian ethics was about facing up to the terrible difficulty of being a disciple of Jesus and taking responsibility for society’s problems at the same time” (p. 65).

Part II, “Economic Democracy in Question,” is the backbone of the book. Chapter five, a reappraisal of social gospeller Norman Thomas, begins an arc of the book that examines the slow transformation of one strand of American socialism into neoconservatism. He credits Thomas, saying that he “fought for nearly every good cause of his time” (p. 110), noting that FDR incorporated many of his ideas into the New Deal even while publicly distancing himself from Thomas. It is this distance, in part, that leads Dorrien to describe Thomas’s career as dogged by “near constant failure” (p. 110). Chapter six continues to outline socialism’s devolution into neoconservatism while attempting to rehabilitate Michael Harrington’s later career. Harrington, notes Dorrien, cut his teeth in Max Schachtman’s circle of “determined but unhysterical anti-communists” (p. 114) before coming to fame with the 1962 publication of *The Other America*, a book Harrington never considered a major work. Dorrien here focuses on Harrington’s critique of late capitalism, in which he saw democratic socialism as the means to effectively democratize what he saw as the inevitable collectivization of society. Harrington’s central achievement, he concludes, was to act as a strong left flank for democratic politics to lean on, without which it has since tilted away from its more progressive core. Chapter seven offers a critique of social gospel utopianism, identifying in Christian socialism many of the weaknesses that ultimately led to the development of neoconservatism.

If Part II is the backbone of the work, the next two chapters are the core, in which Dorrien gives a voice to his own “long-term engagement with economic globalization and economic democracy” (p. x). Written during the lead-up to the 2008 presidential election, the text calls for renewed investments in green technology, transportation, infrastructure, health care, and education and likened the concurrent economic turmoil to a “1930s-like political moment”

(p. 165). He supported a drastic scaling back of military spending, prescient given President Obama's pronouncements on the Pentagon budget in late 2011. Dorrien is at his most prescriptive in these chapters, recalling Harrington in his calls for increased economic and workplace democracy, citing as an example, Mondragon, the Basque cooperative bank. His idealism is tempered by his use of Mangabiera Unger's idea of "alternative pluralisms," in which individual workplace democracies are built up "piece by piece, opening new choices, creating more democracy, [and] building an economic order that does not rest on selfishness, consumerism, and the prerogatives of shareholders" (p. 185).

Part III, "Neoconservatism and American Empire," is perhaps the most unified of the book's sections. It is a harsh critique of America's neoconservatives, who, in Dorrien's estimation, have "had a more dramatic idea of politics than other kinds of conservatives, [which features] a radical, expansive faith in American power," larded with "messianic ambitions for the United States" (p. 213). Though these chapters were written prior to the election of Barack Obama and are necessarily somewhat dated in their particulars, Dorrien's critique of the movement remains topical, as even now, some U.S. American conservatives are calling for new military actions in Syria and Iran. Throughout these chapters, Dorrien never allows the reader to forget neoconservatives' roots in anti-communist socialism while at the same time underscoring their drive to create a militaristic Pax Americana in which no other sovereign nation will ever be in a position to challenge U.S. dominance. For his part, Dorrien does not forswear absolutely the need to use force for humanitarian reasons—as the SDS might well have—but he stresses that "the presumption against war must be very strong for an ethic to be Christian" (p. 258), and this presumption shapes the foundation of his critique.

The six chapters that make up Part IV, "Social Ethics and the Politics of Difference," touch issues of race and gender in a series of character studies. It is, for me, the weakest part of the book, insofar as it lacks the feeling of being tethered to the earlier chapters. The section contains chapters on Rosemary Ruether, Cornel West, and Katie Cannon as well as discussions of religious pluralism, the "Obama Phenomenon," and Dorrien's inaugural lecture as the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor at Union Theological Seminary. His account and partial rehabilitation of Ruether, to whom Dorrien's own theology owes a particular debt, takes care to admit that while early feminist theology was white—a fact that opened Ruether up to later criticism—this fact is better attributed to the absence of women of color rather than their active silencing. Admitting that she was blind to some of her own privilege, he opines that her work was often unfairly criticized by later feminist theologians, concluding that "[h]aving come to the academy from outward-reaching activist movements, she and her Christian feminist colleagues deserved better than to be remembered wrongly" (p. 303). Perhaps to underscore the unfairness of the critiques against Ruether, he profiles Katie Cannon, the first African-American woman to receive a Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary, earning it in 1983. Summing up her work as "a corrective enterprise that worked within and outside the guild, interpreting traditional paradigms from the perspectives of the black, female non-canonical other" (p. 344), he notes her ironic complaint of being misunderstood by "post-womanist" theorists.

The most unsatisfying chapter is the penultimate, "The Obama Phenomenon and Presidency," which reads like a bibliographical sketch followed by an outline of policies Dorrien would have liked the then newly elected president to have pursued, many of which were explored in chapters eight and nine. In the immediacy of the 2008 election, it is rich with the hopes held by many progressives in the wake of President Obama's election, but when read with

any distance—three years having now passed now since his inauguration—much has already happened to moot Dorrien’s 2008 perspective.

The final chapter, originally given as Dorrien’s inaugural lecture as the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor at Union Theological Seminary, recounts with humor and modesty Dorrien’s own arrival to theology before moving to explore “America’s original sin of racism and white supremacy” (p. 400), which forms much of the foundation of his own interests with social justice. Notwithstanding the earlier chapters in Part IV, in which he profiles theologians of great importance to his own development as a theologian, this final chapter is the most intimate, and it is a moving choice with which to close the volume. “It took me years of asking. . . before I realized that to become more diverse, we had to privilege the issues of people of color,” he writes, continuing on to say that too many organizations approach projects in ways “that militat[e] against anything stronger than weak gestures toward diversity” (p. 407). In questioning his own privilege, he calls on his auditors, and later readers, to question their own.

For those well acquainted with Dorrien’s previous work, this book will not offer much that is new or surprising, but for those wanting an introduction to social ethics and justice issues in America or those seeking a wide-ranging text that fits in the classroom, this book could very well fit the bill. The book offers good general introductions to the history of the social gospel in America, social-ethical thought, and the rise of neoconservatism written from a single, decidedly progressive perspective, and were it to be named “The Gary Dorrien Reader,” it would more likely reach the audience to whom it would be of greatest benefit.

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