

Book Review

Democracy and the Political Unconscious

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Noëlle McAfee, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 256 pp. ISBN 0231138886. \$50.00 (hbk.)

In *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*, Noëlle McAfee analyzes social pathologies that have arisen in the United States since September 11, 2001. In particular, she argues that we have been suffering society-wide repetition compulsions and time collapses, compelling us to experience the trauma repeatedly, and we have been acting out in ways that continue the cycle of suffering. She also presents a prescription for how we might work through these issues more democratically and fruitfully using deliberative talking cures. McAfee's application of the psychoanalytic model to society is fascinating, and she offers concrete and practical suggestions for how to better resolve social trauma.

In the first four chapters, McAfee presents a perspective on humanization that centers on social participation. Human identity is developed in making and keeping social commitments, rather than in the achievement of autonomy. Language enables humans to sublimate and channel drives into public meaning. Silence is troubling because it reflects a social unconscious that alienates people, cutting them off from full participation. McAfee argues that modernity itself causes trauma, as the world has become disenchanted and devoid of meaning. In addition, specific elements of modernity, like colonization and the slave trade, have played significant roles in the development of the social unconscious. Because our culture remains mostly silent about privilege and race, historic traumas continue to haunt us. McAfee suggests that isolationism, repression, McCarthyism, and the abjection of supposed barbarian elements are all subconscious defenses against working through modernity's

social traumas. These defenses prevent the development of a public sphere of deliberation that has demonstrated its ability to work through traumas in Eastern Europe, South Africa, and elsewhere. Following Derrida, McAfee argues that the United States' War on Terror has prevented our country from working through the trauma of September 11, instead discharging the trauma in destructive autoimmunity. Our society also represses the trauma in the act of naming the event by the date, September 11. Instead, we need to reconstitute a public that can deliberately work through these traumas.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to the specifics of how best to work through social traumas. McAfee views South Africa's truth and reconciliation commissions as examples of how testimony can integrate one's private experiences with the broader public. Bearing witness to suffering re-creates a community by helping others to recognize fellow participants as subjects and sufferers like themselves. The goal of the process is not mutual agreement; we don't need anything but for others to hear our narrative. The process of witnessing does not involve wresting any recognition from those in power, but the creation of a public through story-telling. McAfee agrees with John Dewey that the public is in eclipse and that democracy is not built simply in holding elections or in trusting experts. Instead, McAfee gives plenty of specific examples of the formation of public dialogue. She has been a consultant for the Kettering Foundation's National Issues Forums since 1988, and the inclusion of her practical experiences with NIF yields a rich and detailed account of public deliberation.

In chapter 7, McAfee turns to the subject of feminism, contrasting her position with the agonistic approaches of many feminists. Instead of assuming the feminist struggle is a war against patriarchy and the strict division of the world that this approach entails, she argues that our own sociosymbolic structures oppress us because they are not being sublimated; they unconsciously hold us within their limits. We can no more overturn the entire sociosymbolic field as we can choose to have a different first language. So a more appropriate feminist task is to encourage public deliberation in order to reconstruct the meanings of women and femininity, remaining conscious of the ways in which the semiotic field in which we live and work acts upon us.

Chapter 8 addresses the nature of democracy and public knowledge. Here, McAfee argues that we have accepted a proceduralist account of democracy that legitimizes state power, where support of fifty-one percent of the population justifies the adoption of policy. McAfee asserts that this legitimizing account must be expanded to include deliberation as central to democracy. When partial and biased people come together with a variety of personal and communal aims and tell stories of how a particular policy will affect them and their community, this public knowledge is essential for democracy to function. So, unlike many theorists of democracy, McAfee views partiality and particularity as critical elements of deliberative democracy.

Chapter 9 describes three models of deliberation that are in use in political discourse today. A social science polling model assumes that we can record individual preferences which are aggregated into a policy that becomes the will of the people. The advantage of this model is that no coercion of people's preferences arises. But McAfee argues that people may not have fixed preferences prior to deliberation, and that these preferences may be unreflective; in addition, aggregation is an impossible task. A rational proceduralist model, following Habermas and Rawls, argues that deliberation involves giving universally acceptable reasons for policy that would be convincing to all. A problem with this model is that we rarely gain consensus; universal arguments rarely convince all participants. McAfee's preferred model is an integrative model, where people are encouraged to look at the consequences of various policy options and tell stories about their experiences with these positions. In so doing, McAfee argues, people become a public.

In her final two chapters, McAfee describes specific barriers that prevent deliberation and technologies that can support it. The first barrier is the elitist myth of democracy that says all that is necessary for democracy to flourish is to evaluate our representatives periodically. That is to say, we can have democracy, run by experts, without much public deliberation. The alternative of direct public referenda often results in poor public policy. All of this leads to the alienation of citizens from democratic processes. A final barrier to deliberation is that it is difficult to connect public deliberation to changes in public policy; our democracy is not set up to institute the results of public deliberation. On the positive side, contemporary media, such as wikis and blogs, are an opportunity for sublimation and public deliberation. While these tools can be used poorly, links, interconnections and genuine communication can produce public deliberation that is audible and leaves no one out of the process.

McAfee's book gives a detailed and compelling argument for a particular type of deliberation as crucial for democracy and that avoids acting out unconscious social traumas. Despite the origin of this book as a series of articles, it coheres thematically around her careful delineation of what public deliberation is and why it is important. One striking feature of this work is her use of the psychoanalytic model of social discourse to illuminate social ills, and this feature could be examined in more detail, addressing the nature of the social unconscious and relating this to the individual unconscious. On the nature of the unconscious, McAfee assumes that sublimation is always preferable to leaving things in the background. But pragmatists like Dewey also address the benefits of unconsciousness, in particular relating to the horizons of meaning that fold into conscious experience. It would be useful, I think, to examine in more detail the connections between psychoanalysis and pragmatism as they relate to the unconscious. In addition, McAfee assumes that the role of sublimation and recognition is universal, that we are not so different from those whom we fight, that "peoples—even hermits like North Korea—dearly want to be seen and respected" (p. 82). While this may be true, it requires a much more

significant defense in order to claim universal validity for McAfee's account of the benefits of the deliberative process. Indeed, looking at other cultures through the lens of Western psychoanalysis may itself be exclusionary. Explanatory narratives developed by non-Western cultures might also explain the War on Terror, albeit in very different terms. But they may not be so amenable to us and friendly to our presuppositions about democracy and deliberation. McAfee's claim of universal validity for a model of creating publics through deliberation requires a much more robust defense.

Finally, McAfee's account of deliberation leaves little specific room for experts in the creation of public policy. She does assert that experts, like everyone else, can have a seat at the deliberative table. But authority, while not always deferred to in American democracy, does have a way of asserting itself and coercing assent even in purportedly free deliberative processes. This suggests the critical nature of facilitation to ensure that all voices can be heard. More could be said about the crucial role of facilitator and whether facilitation itself can be coercive and harmful to the deliberative process. My critical remarks are not intended to undermine the importance or strength of McAfee's achievements in this book. Instead, I hope that McAfee continues to produce books that offer imaginative perspectives on social ills and are practically useful in developing democracy.

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