

Robert J. Antonio

Review

The Spector of Democracy
by Dick Howard

Reviewed by
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Dick Howard's *The Spector of Democracy* is composed primarily of recent essays revised for this volume. They express ideas that he has been developing for about three decades. Cutting a broad swath, he critically explores the relations between theory, history, and politics. The essays reflect his intellectual journey—his early engagements with Marx, the Frankfurt School, and, especially, Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, his later works on politics, political judgment, and French and American political history, and his current ideas about Marx and political theory after communism. Howard's post-Marxist theoretical argument provides a connective thread in the loosely integrated essays. He states that re-engaging Marx is timely in a "post-1989 world that wants to replace political choice by submission to the 'natural necessity' of the market."¹ He contends that Marx's effort to conjure up proletarian revolutionary subjectivity from technical progress and economic crisis has a similar "antipolitical" thrust. Howard (p. 10) holds that "Marx was essentially a philosopher," but that his attempt to radically historicize Hegelianism, translating it into a materialist theory of historical rationality and social progress, subordinated his philosophical critique of alienation to a deterministic "sociology."² According to Howard, Marx's practice of "philosophy by other means" obscured the normative nature of his critique, conflated the realm of freedom with necessity, and blinded him to the "*democratic political implications of his own analysis*" (emphasis in the original). Howard attempts to execute a complicated theoretical maneuver; he criticizes Marx's sociological reduction of politics in order to recover the "philosophical Marx" and, then, ultimately go beyond him "to open the path to politics" and democracy that he sees to be absent in Marx (p. xiii).

Howard acknowledges considerable debt to Lefort and Castoriadis, devoting

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several chapters to their ideas and employing them throughout the book. Increasingly skeptical about communism after the suppressed 1956 Hungarian revolt, they and others in the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* circle declared the autonomy of politics from economic determination, engaged new forms of protest that went beyond class, and brought to the foreground communist repression, which generally had been ignored by the French left. As Howard explains, Lefort and Castoriadis saw Hegelian historicism to be a root of Marx's reductive claim that progressive development of the mode of production leads inevitably to emancipation. Rather than an advance over Hegelian idealism, they argued, his materialism grants pseudohistorical necessity to contingent historical processes. Stressing an affinity for totalitarianism, they held that Marx's historicism has been deployed by communist regimes and parties to justify the suppression of political opposition. Howard shares their view that Marxism neutralizes its own democratic political potentiality and that realization of it requires a radical break with historicism and a new openness to history.

Howard also agrees with Lefort's definition of the political as the "symbolic institution of society," or creation and reproduction of the normative bases of societal institutions. Lefort held that pre-existing hierarchical societies limited these symbolic practices to élites, who fashioned "external or transcendent" religious and metaphysical legitimations to justify their dominance. As Howard explains, he argued that democracy seeks "unity from within" society and expects its "members to take responsibility for their own individuality." Lefort held that democracy arose when the ancien régime collapsed and citizens asserted the "right to have rights," or the right to demand from the state recognition of their individual rights. He portrayed democracy as a plural "public space" where diverse citizens and groups, empowered by their rights, engage in open-ended, historically-variable deliberations. In his view, the consequent "radical indeterminacy" rules out unified publics and determination by general social conditions. However, Lefort contended that these reductionist ideas are products of modern ideologies, which arise to ease uncertainty and mask contingency. For example, liberalism's claims about a rational self-interested subject and the inevitable operations of "market forces" provide a sense a certainty about liberal society's foundations that discourage consideration of political alternatives. Lefort believed that an independent, open civil society is the best bulwark against the ideological reflex's antipolitics.

Following Lefort, Howard holds that Marx's sociological reduction and vision of materially-driven proletarian unity deny politics' discursive, contingent nature and that these historicist ideas, combined with Marx's highly negative view of civil society and liberal rights, constitutes a proto-totalitarian ideology (pp. 77-80, 116-18, 166, 209-10, 327, note 10).

Howard states that Castoriadis acknowledged that "Marx bet on history and lost" (i.e., his hopes about the emancipatory proletariat failed). Howard implies, however, that Castoriadis still carried on the Marxist project to transcend Hegelianism with the understanding that it required a much more radical break than Marx was willing to make. Howard shares Castoriadis's goal of moving beyond historicist teleology to a position recognizing history's uniqueness, autonomy, and contingency (pp. 87-88). By contrast, Howard argues, the Frankfurt School failed to make this decisive post-Marxist, post-Hegelian move and, when their revolutionary hopes crashed, they sought aesthetic transcendence and rejected "everyday politics" (pp. 39-41). Howard speculates that their deeply pessimistic vision of consumer capitalism's seamlessly integrated, depoliticized, "one-dimensional" culture helped inspire later postmodernist claims about the end of modernity and exhaustion of politics. In his view, this "antipolitics" or "politics of theory" manifest constricted political vision, rather than politics' actual demise. Howard explains his youthful affiliation with *Telos*, stressing the initial trouble that he had getting that formerly left journal, which was then still operating in Marx's tracks, to take up Lefort and Castoriadis. He did not mention, however, that the editor and his inner circle, at that time, posed an extreme version of the one-dimensionality thesis portraying a near total closure of historical contradictions and of immanent possibilities for progressive change. This view not only anticipated pessimistic forms of postmodernism, but the *Telos* inner circle's consequent search for organic community led them to take up Carl Schmitt in the 1980s and, after, to make an anti-liberal, neopopulist turn.

Howard devotes considerable attention to historical comparison of French and American political cultures. He holds that the framers of the French republican regime had to pose a new conception of unity to replace the old monarchy's lost integration. Faced with the problem of fragmentation, Howard contends, they envisioned a republican state reviving political unity. He argues that the framers of the new French regime stressed inclusion at the national level,

calling for universal citizenship and state action to insure social and political rights and to secure social equality. By contrast, he explains, engaging a setting that lacked the ancien régime's cultural and political unity, American framers forged a vision of a self-managed democracy that is composed of diverse communities and individuals and that secures inclusion through free association and minimal reliance on state power. He holds that adoption of judicial autonomy and competitive political parties made clear that rights had to be won and defended politically. Howard embraces American "republican democracy," which he sees to be inherently pluralist, open, and dynamic, while he implies that the state-centered French "democratic republic" is prone to the sociological reduction and proto-totalitarian singularity that he says inheres in Marxism. Still, he argues that American democracy may also express antipolitical tendencies; e.g., its emphasis on individual rights can degenerate into a "procedural republic" manifesting "right over good," legal formality, and social fragmentation. In his view, the republican idea in France as well as in the United States is "political" rather than "socio-economic" and, thus, can be employed critically against the sociological reduction and collective subjects (pp. 174, 184). Howard's historical accounts of French and American republicanism are too complex to adequately summarize here. However, their unifying thread is emphatic critique of the reduction of discursively-mediated political action to general sociological contexts and fictive collective subjects, which he implies deprive politics of their historical particularity and complex, dynamic, plural, dispersed agency.

Howard speaks briefly about a totalizing "politics of will" that posits— independent of political action—a "right thing to be done" and a "unified actor" to do it and about an opposed "politics of judgement" that reflects critically on the consequences of political action and acts prudently. Stressing the need to take "responsibility" for political decision, which the politics of will abjures, Howard suggests that the politics of judgement suffuse republican democracy and his own analyses (pp. 18-22, 30, 78, 74, 107, 194-96). He also mentions in passing Max Weber's related "ethics of conviction" and "ethics of responsibility" (p. 236). These concepts were part of Weber's broader post-traditional argument about political responsibility, which rejected ideas of historical necessity and collective subjects and the consequent aversion of political decision. Moreover, Weber warned that fanatical forms of conviction suspend ethical reflection as well as political prudence, justifying extreme

control, violence, and repression and giving rise to the total state. Addressing Weber might have prompted Howard to clarify his concepts of politics of will and politics of judgment, which are central to his argument, but are left unelaborated. John Dewey's radical democratic theory also seems to converge at key points with Howard's project. Dewey stressed democracy's uncertain, plural, discursive, historically particular, incomplete, experimental nature. He aimed to fashion a radically historicist, antifoundationalist democratic alternative to Hegelian historicism that breaks as fundamentally from modern ideas of historical necessity as it does from traditional metaphysics, religion, and political philosophy. Also, Dewey posed his mature social theory contra totalitarianism—Fascism and Stalinism. Engaging Dewey critically also might have sharpened Howard's argument. However, his failure to address these particular thinkers is not problematic per se. Rather, the problem is that he does not situate adequately his theory relative to related political theories and social theories. Developing this theoretical context would have helped Howard bring forward more clearly and completely his overall position on democracy and its connections to current historical and political contexts.

Howard's unqualified claims about the "autonomy" and "radical indeterminacy" of politics and negative comments about "the flat terrain of sociology" and the "mere sociologist" (pp. 77, 81) draw an overly sharp boundary between politics and its "sociological" contexts. Exaggerating the threat of sociological reduction, he largely ignores the interdependence between these *relatively* autonomous spheres. Moreover, he does not distinguish the pseudo-sociology employed in bogus historicist arguments from genuine sociological inquiry about conditions that influence the direction and content of politics. He recognizes passingly that sociological analysis may have a limited role in normative critique, but he does not explain that role and, being very wary of the "totalitarian temptation," he asserts that such analysis easily turns reductive (p. 134). He also implies that a sociological moment in normative critique would be positivist, suggesting the kind of disembodied eye, oblivious to normative conditioning of social inquiry, that thinkers like Weber and Dewey dismissed early last century. By contrast, Howard does not acknowledge that philosophy, which he strongly privileges in political critique, may need a sociological moment to avert the very tendency "to fly above reality" that he attributes to positivism. Strong claims about autonomy may inhere in efforts to make radical breaks from powerful constraints, but these

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moves still manifest the sociological context. Lefort's and Castoriadis's emphatic claims about autonomy and indeterminacy make sense in light of their effort to break politically, intellectually, and even personally from post-World War II communism and from its patently constrained politics and sterile deterministic theories. However, this context has faded long ago. Today, politically ambiguous Schmitteans and populists as well as "New Right" proto-fascists make similar strong claims about the autonomy of politics and attack sociological reduction in their critiques of globalization and neoliberalism. Howard surely opposes such positions, but the context of his own work is not clear and he does not explain its political relevance.

Howard recognizes the problem. He says that he does "not want to leave the impression that the theoretical arguments presented here have no immediate political implications," and he invites readers to his website to sample some of his recent "directly political" commentaries, which he says illustrate his "understanding of democracy as radical." I accepted his invitation, but his many well-reasoned points about the American political climate in the wake of 9/11 do not clarify the political direction of his overall argument and, especially, why it should be construed to be an extension of Marx or to be radically democratic. Howard analyzes how historicism and sociological reduction contribute to de-politicization and de-democratization, but he explains neither the current relevance of his strong claims about autonomy nor his overall *substantive* vision of democracy. Like Dewey, he stresses an affinity between historicism and democracy, but, by contrast to Dewey, he does not offer tools for a critique of "really existing" democracy—e.g., to evaluate whether the United States has "strong" or "weak" republican democracy and to suggest how it might be made "stronger" and more just. This is an ironic problem for a thinker who endorses political critique and democracy so enthusiastically.

The issue of historicity and sociology brings us back to Marx. Howard's critique of historical necessity addresses a deeply problematic thread in Marx's work. However, he implies that determinism rules Marx's analysis of capitalism. Howard does not acknowledge the side of Marx's work that stresses sociological inquiry into the specific conditions of particular situations (i.e., recognizing the contingent nature of the social) and that employs concepts as heuristic devices (simplifying a contingent empirical world for

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analytical purposes). Even young Marx countered his Hegelian side with points about the need to study “definite individuals” sharing historically-specific social and political relations. However, the materialist transparency promised at the end of the *Manifesto’s* famous passage about “all that is solid melts into air” is replaced, in his mature work, by a warning that the “appearance of simplicity vanishes.” In *Capital*, Marx spoke of an “economistic law of motion” operating with “iron necessity” and leading “inevitably” to proletarian emancipation. However, he also held that proliferation of “middle and intermediate strata,” in England, “obliterate lines of demarcation everywhere.” He understood that advanced capitalism’s complex class relations and interventionist state posed problems for his political hopes and that his social theory had to be brought to bear on increasingly diverse types of capitalism. Late in life, Marx even doubted that full capitalist modernization would extend beyond western Europe. His sociological uncertainty appears in other forms. For example, he conditioned his core materialist idea that the pumping out of surplus product from direct producers is “the hidden basis of the entire social structure” with the qualification that the process has “infinite variations and gradations in appearance, which can be ascertained only by analysis of the empirically given circumstances.” Similar qualifications about empirical variability appear in other parts of *Capital*, implying that Marx saw his theory as a heuristic model as well as the mirror of the Telos of History. The point is that Marx expressed two types of “historical” narratives—sociological historicism and Hegelian historicism. Howard criticizes sharply Marx’s historicism, but his position should be evaluated in the broader light of the tensions between and entwinement of his determinism and his sociology.

Engels admitted after Marx’s death that he and Marx had exaggerated the “economic side,” but he also declared famously that their materialist method claimed nothing more than: “the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production of and reproduction of real life.” Holding that “all history must be studied afresh,” Engels insisted that they created “a guide to study, not a lever after the manner of the Hegelian.”³ Engels’s afterthought understates the determinist thread in Marx’s and his materialism, but it stresses correctly the importance of their sociological historicism. The master narrative of their texts is still a matter of debate. However, Howard’s privileging of the “philosophical Marx” and reducing of his sociological side to Hegelianism understates the significance of his sociology. The enduring value of Marx’s work derives as

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much from his sociology as from his normative ideas. His analysis of capitalism poses still compelling questions about its highly problematic relationship with democracy. His view that socio-economic matters condition fundamentally the shape, quality, and possibility of democracy and, thus, need to be taken account of in theory and practice does not by itself constitute a sociological reduction of politics. By contrast, unqualified emphasis on the autonomy of politics does not favor inquiry into the impacts of wealth and power on democracy, which are often concealed or intentionally suppressed. Addressing the impacts of expanded corporate power and increased economic inequality, under neoliberal globalization, is *essential* to today's debates over the prospects for democracy and does not preclude the relative autonomy of politics or deny other forms exclusion. A theory of radical democracy must bring to the foreground the unequal and unjust distribution of the material and cultural means of participation. Marx's impassioned emphasis on this matter gives him more than nine lives and is the reason that his specter still hangs over us today. In this light, Howard's emphasis on the importance of Marx's normative side makes sense. But Marx's vision of capitalist inequality is the main point of conjuncture between his philosophy and sociology—his sociology provides his normative vision of justice specificity and historicity. That Howard is silent about the relation of capitalism and democracy raises questions about the methodological adequacy as well as the historicity of his claims about the autonomy of politics and his dim view of the sociological moment of criticism.

Arguably Marx founded the tradition of modern "social theory." Social theorists frame normative arguments, but their work is distinguished from earlier types of normative theory by a strong sociological moment. Although the borders are fluid, social theory's normative thrust distinguishes it from more narrowly-focused, empirically-oriented "sociological theory" and social science. By contrast to religion and metaphysics the legitimacy of social theory depends on the discursively-mediated, empirical-historical validity of its "sociological" claims as well as the consistency, persuasiveness, and emotional/aesthetic force of its normative facets. Social theory's project of providing an "historical" alternative to absolutist normative argument is neither complete nor transparent. First-generation social theorists, like Marx, often conflated History with history and tried to justify their practice as "science," obscuring its normative thrust. Howard rightly criticizes this reduction, which

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is still a problem today. However, as in Marx's case, social theorists' historicist and scientific claims have often appeared alongside, in the same texts, valid types of sociological and normative argument. Today, after multiple waves of critiques of scientism, theorists sometimes deny or understate social theory's empirical-historical side and, thus, lean back toward absolutism or simply fail to justify their normative practices at all. Howard does not make this error, but he suggests a rather narrowly construed conception of political theory that understates the role of sociological contexts in conditioning political action and political thought. The interdependence of the sociological and political moments call for a broader view of theory that takes fuller account of the fact that democracy is a "social thing."

That confusion still reigns over the nature of social theory and its boundaries with empirical-historical work has been easy to see in later 20th century polemics over postmodernism and other interdisciplinary theories. Opposing sides in these disputes have often pitted science and social theory against each other. By contrast, these practices, regardless of their independent logics, are culturally entwined; social theory provides a post-traditional language to debate the normative directions of science and policy and social science provides the historical knowledge for social theory arguments, in which normative justification depends largely on claims about the socio-cultural and political consequences of the proposed policy regimes. Howard's critique of historicism contributes to the project of social theory. His points about the sociological reduction eroding political responsibility and sapping democratic vitality likely has as much cultural significance after communism, as they did when Lefort and Castoriadis posed their ideas. Recall Howard's passing comment that his critique of Marxist antipolitics is relevant to neoliberalism; its collective subject, the rational economizer, and claims about the inevitable impacts of "market forces" suggest an abdication of political decision parallel to that generated by Marxist certainty about the emancipatory proletariat and communism. Hopefully, Howard will follow up on this provocative point, bringing to bear his broader argument about the political on neoliberalism, which will likely make his position clearer and perhaps answer the concerns that I have raised.

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Notes

¹ Dick Howard, *The Spector of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 287. Further page references to this work are in parentheses in the text of this essay.

² “Sociology” is used here to refer to social science, rather than to the explicit discipline of sociology. Howard identifies Marx’s “economic” theory as “sociological.” Marx’s historical materialism focuses on the *social* relationships by which ruling or dominant classes extract surplus from direct producers. His “labor theory of value” addresses the capitalist version of this social relationship.

³ Frederick Engels, “Engels to Conrad Schmidt” and “Engels to Joseph Bloch” (Letters written in 1890), pp.395-400 in *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, edited by Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1959).

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