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A Bridge Too Far? The Experiment of Marrying Liberal Institutions and Everyday Political Discourse in Transitional Democracies

Review Essay: Cultures of Democracy in Serbia and Bulgaria by James Dawson (Ashgate, 2007) and After the Revolution: Youth, Democracy and the Politics of Disappointment in Serbia by Jessica Greenberg (Stanford University Press, 2014), *Perspectives on Politics* (forthcoming)

The question of how democracy sustains itself remains topical at a time when its institutions are criticized for their response to problems engendered by the recent economic crisis, terrorism or immigration. *Cultures of Democracy in Serbia and Bulgaria: How Ideas Shape Publics* is a close inspection of discursive practices whereby democratic values become articulated and enter into dialogue with as yet inchoate institutions of transitional democracies. Embarking on this project, James Dawson took up the multifarious and remarkable task of comparing two Eastern European polities with ethnographic tools. The process is marked by several milestones. In the opening chapter, attention is devoted to what amounts to a quantitative bill of health that emergent democracies receive from international monitoring organisations. The critique of the practice paves the way for the hands-on treatment of political culture, with the purpose to illuminate the intricacies of the acculturation that democracy has undergone in Serbia and Bulgaria. The 2nd Chapter is an overview of the empirical methodology coupled with a synopsis of the main findings that bridge the micro-analysis of citizen deliberation with the institutional analysis that typifies much of the literature on democratisation (c.f. della Porta, 2013). This enterprise is completed in Chapters 4 and 5 whilst the 3rd Chapter provides a much needed historiography of political discourse, in a region where democratic politics have at best been a tolerated newcomer to the table.

At the outset of the book, Dawson aims to query and ultimately reconstruct rehearsed indicators for the quantitative measurement of democracy. Concentrating on the Freedom House 'democracy scores' that Dawson avows have held sway both in and outside academia, he mounts a frontal challenge to their presumed objectivity. Alternatively, he seeks to peer behind these categories to reveal their social construction, an elite process internal to the organisation that eludes public scrutiny and scientific verification. To that end, the Freedom House *Nations in Transit* Annual Report comprising the aforementioned democracy scores is gainsaid with insight to spotlight the reductionism and subjectivism intrinsic to its scoring mechanism. Yet, this painstaking positioning seems overwrought first in light of the scholarship already placing the crucible of democratic culture deeply within messy social interaction and lived experience (c.f. Dahlgren, 2009). Second, the limitations of the Freedom House methodology have for long been the source of technical indictments as attempts were made to control its subjectivism whilst maintaining its large-scale comparative scope (see Vanhanen, 2000). Consequently, the primary merit of Dawson's book is unlikely to be its debunking of the democracy scores. Rather, it will likely be the fruit of the bold application of ethnography to a comparative design and the resultant—many of which are counter-intuitive—findings.

Beyond the combined ontological and epistemological critique of the democracy scores, although in close connection to it, the author unveils fundamental tensions in the everyday discourse that domesticized liberal democracy in Serbia and Bulgaria. In the course of performing this reappraisal of transitional democracies, the book successfully illustrates first the fraught cultural translation of democratic normativity, thus endorsing the conception that democracy is at least as much an aspiration to be nurtured or challenged as a reality to be appraised (c.f. della Porta, 2013); and

secondly, that for the sake of theory-building, methodological divisions are better bridged than reinforced.

Of the main research findings, the most provocative were, first, the notion that in Central and Eastern Europe liberalism has been far from a hegemonic category in political discourse. More likely, it has been a 'means of dissent' in a political climate marked by nationalism, religious and social conservatism (p. 26). Second, equally penetrating was the conclusion that the Serbian public sphere appeared more robust than its Bulgarian counterpart. This was chiefly attributed to a higher level of scepticism towards nationalist sentiments with a proven record of destructive consequences for the Serbian state. In Serbia, that mindset, although far from prevalent, endured to produce a representation of nationalism as thinly-veiled political instrumentalism. In both countries, however, the broad parameters of political conversation were narrowly set by an exclusionary and thus illiberal discourse that would be dispiriting to even those civic actors most committed to fostering civic participation (c.f. Taylor et al., 2010).

Underpinning the foregoing arguments is a silent assumption that the public sphere is the primary environment for the articulation of liberal democratic discourse. That postulation, however, has been disputed in light of the digital extension of civic participation into the previously private domain of social life (Papacharissi, 2010). Dawson probed this confluence quite astutely in Chapter 4 but not to the extent that a systematic account would emerge of the 'relational social arena' (p.97) populated by the non-governmental organisations he studied and their members. Before they might be in a position to express common interests and build shared identities, people require personal ties drawing them into the civic space propped by the organisations where the author met his interviewees (c.f. McAdam, 1986). Tying together general observations made in the book about the incidence of political preferences typical for a certain type of discourse, be it liberal or otherwise, with personal trajectories encountered during fieldwork could have resulted in a tapestry of social pathways showing how the resilience of Serbian liberal discourse was possible whilst contemplating potential departures in Bulgaria that would explain the more pronounced illiberalism ascertained by the author.

In *After the Revolution: Youth, Democracy and the Politics of Disappointment in Serbia*, Jessica Greenberg deploys a similar methodological apparatus to Dawson's—an ethnography of non-governmental organisations that she found entangled in the intricacies of democratisation. The book is divided into five chapters that track the rise and subsequent life stages of Serbia's student movement from the moment it crystallized to unseat the Milosevic regime. Commencing with a genealogy of the revolutionary fervour that spread among student organisations and swept Milosevic out of power, the book continues to chart the trajectory of three such organisations and the part they played in the subsequent construction of democratic institutions and progressive citizenship. Chapters 4 and 5 are where the book comes into its own as it pinpoints what is the principal conundrum faced by civil society actors who put their weight behind a society's shift towards democracy (c.f. Linz and Stefan, 1996). That most consuming of questions has been how to entrench democratic procedures and values in a setting with little appetite for them without making recourse to enforcement mechanisms in use under preceding authoritarian regimes? The answer embodied by Serbian student leaders was the accrual of disinterested organisational and political expertise harnessed to find and give voice to the student body they came to represent, their grievances and aspirations. The process was by no means linear or unchallenged. The most fascinating of insights was that the contestation of expertise and the legitimacy of representation premised on it were the most formative of democratic experiences for those involved.

Spanning a decade, Greenberg's study is comparable to Dawson's on a number of levels. The first is the decision to focus on important urban centres with an expected higher density of germane organisations. Second, there is a shared preoccupation between the books to grapple with democratisation as it is distilled in everyday communication. Third, intersubjective interpretations of transitional politics nurtured by NGOs are situated back into variable institutional geometries of democratic government. This interplay is not measured against normative conceptions of liberal democracy. Instead, it is pondered as formative of democratic belief structures and discursive practices that stand up to their authoritarian and nationalist opposite numbers.

A cardinal proposition of both studies is that the intercourse between the multiple subjects engrossed in the sinuous process of democratisation has been vexing, occupying a spectrum from *agonism* to outright *antagonism* (c.f. Mouffe, 2013). A telling example of the latter was the assassination of Zoran Dindic, a key figure in the revolution that ousted former Serbian authoritarian leader Slobodan Milosevic. The starting point of Greenberg's analysis, the slaying of the first democratically elected prime-minister in the post-Milosevic era, marks the beginning of a downward spiral descending into what is starkly depicted as a generalised state of reflexive disappointment. A counterweight to expanding pessimism, student organisations were instrumental to rekindling the hope of the revolution to re-inspire a brave utopianism, all the while calling for positive engagement to strengthen feeble democratic institutions. An ensuing tiered interplay –among student NGOs and of the latter with the institutions of representative democracy—was seminal for an *agonism* of nascent deliberative practices exercised within the discursive spaces erected by the NGOs and followed through in attempts to overhaul representative institutions. This transference from antagonism to agonism pitted not just reactionary nationalist forces against progressive liberal reformists but also competing conceptions of democratic citizenship against each other.

Thus, the levelling dogma of liberal democracy and its measurable institutional outputs –be they the succession of multiple parties in government, the number of market reforms, or the tally of operational non-governmental organisations collectively representing a consubstantiation of civil society— was far from steamrolled by local devotees. Nonetheless, according to Greenberg, post-authoritarian Serbian politics were predominately a 'politics of disappointment' (p.21) where despondency was fuelled by a sense of inability to rise to the expectations of the liberal-democratic canon. Contrariwise, a mitigating effort was mounted by student organisations seeking to reframe democracy as a discursive field wherein culture, practice and institutions are thrashed out and possibly stabilised. All the while, Greenberg contends, these material and immaterial pillars of democracy have remained under continuous oversight from a trans-national public generated by global media and fundamentally interested in outcomes rather than the deliberative process generative of a *lived* democracy.

In sum, both research monographs are a very welcome and methodologically distinct repositioning in the field of transition studies. Students and scholars of democracy will therefore likely find them stimulating. They are equally exemplary for the comprehensive interrogation of the analytical preoccupation with democratic institutions and procedures to the detriment of citizen practice. Their common contention that liberal democracy is not purely the setting but equally an object of political competition is more bold a statement than it may appear *prima facie*. This, it is proposed, is because liberal democracy represents a political ideal that is moulded by its receiving social and cultural context along existing divides. Its struggle for domination may dislodge deep-seated inequalities whilst at the same time creating new ones as one set of elites replaces another.

Greenberg's diagnosis tells us that an attempt at the superimposition of a normative political system should of necessity be an object of concerted reflection for it to gain legitimacy beyond vested interests. Dawson's volume cautions us that even in countries such as Serbia where a long-standing liberal elite was in place, liberal democracy may have shallow roots just as it did in Bulgaria where democratic norms other than majoritarianism were upheld selectively in everyday discourse.

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