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## Review

# The specter of Babel: A reconstruction of political judgment

Michael J. Thompson,

State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2020, 380 pp., ISBN: 9781438480350

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2023) **22**, S109–S112. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-022-00582-5>; published online 17 August 2022

For democracy to work, citizens must be capable of political judgment. This is true in the obvious sense of making decisions between choices mediated through candidates and parties in elections. Concerns about the accuracy of information necessary for these choices fuel many contemporary political debates. The issue is much more difficult and foundational for democratic theorists. Michael J. Thompson's *The Specter of Babel* thoroughly explores the place of political judgment in modern society and reconstructs a complex genre of political and social theory along the way. Based on the social-scientific consensus that our norms, values, and ideas are to a great extent the result of institutionalized socialization processes—a notion that is at once a truism and somehow absent from much of political theory—Thompson defends the inquiry into how such processes are shaping the ways we interpret the world as the prime task of political theory, and the facilitation and exercise of political judgment as the core of democratic life.

This exploration of knowledge, critique, and judgment establishes a political theory both more complex and more practically minded than prominent alternatives. Contemporary liberal theory is characterized by variants of non-instrumental rationality, from the Rawlsian veil of ignorance to sophisticated works on discourse, language rules and games, and the public sphere; these ideally allow us to identify the truth—or, rather, the closest thing to it—irrespective of what is discussed, where, or by whom. To many of its critics and proponents of community- or identity-based currents across the political spectrum, this faith in disembodied reason fails to recognize that we live and always already have lived in a particular society with particular norms and values: attempting to escape this concrete world merely creates an illusory realm of abstract reason, no matter how intersubjective it may be conceptualized. Any judgment or critique needs to remain strictly an exercise of interpretation within the normative horizon provided by society at any given point in time.



Debates along those lines leave us with two broad creeds: the world we live in is either a modestly persistent obstacle to rational discourse, or it is so fundamentally part of us that we can never advance beyond its current prescriptions. In contrast, *Specter* begins with the bold claim that we can do both: understand ourselves as products of the social world *and* critique it; accept the impossibility of disembodied reason *and* strive for universality and objectivity; and commit to changing the world *and* question the sources of such commitments. Thompson is a renowned critical theorist, but his reconstruction of judgment follows a particular variant of this tradition for solely practical reasons: he affirms its commitment to the essence of enlightenment philosophy under conditions of advanced capitalism because competing approaches have shown rather limited success in coming to terms with the much-lamented crises of liberal democracy. Apart from being an original and deeply persuasive entry in this line of scholarship, *Specter* clearly and systematically presents a school of thought notorious for its resistance to plain explication. By supplementing its framework with republican democratic theory and practical examples, it provides easy access to its subject matter before proceeding from intuitive partial analysis to higher levels of complexity and critique.

In the first of its two parts, Thompson investigates the poor reputation of ‘judgment’ today and reviews a number of the most influential contemporary approaches, with particular emphasis on the elevation of ‘the political’, discourse ethics, and recognition. These chapters provide concise summaries and establish the recurring problems rendering them politically ineffective: the separation of language from that to which it refers and the reliance on convention.

It is in the book’s second part that Thompson reconstructs a type of political judgment applicable to its own social sources without falling into relativism or infinite regress. In order to arrive at the possibility of objective political judgment, *Specter* turns around the frequent accusations of ‘metaphysics’ against critical theory. Rather than dismiss these, Thompson distinguishes between a quasi-religious variant of the metaphysical and another rooted in the tradition of Aristotle, Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx. The latter, which ultimately boils down to the assertion that there is something more to what we can see and describe at first sight, yet is materially present and can be approached objectively, provides the starting point for political judgment. The promise of this metaphysics is its ability to overcome particularity in two complementary meanings: (1) it relies on a shared human condition underlying cultural difference; (2) it posits a social totality, allowing for the possibility of judging a given social scheme not within its own limited institutional frame of reference but with a view toward human potentiality.

From here, Thompson develops his critical social ontology. He proceeds, first, from innate human capacities (for language, say) and their concrete manifestation to a totality encompassing processes, roles, and social relations. In order to explain what a ‘teacher’ is, we also need to consider the meaning of education, childhood, and knowledge; we cannot separate these from how a teacher acts, what the



relationship to her student is (and what a student is), and what is to be taught. In a second step, Thompson introduces the crucial dimension of the ‘teleogenetic’: social schemes are designed retrogressively, with their expected results in mind, by social actors powerful enough to do so. The teleogenetic allows us to identify institutional processes which either hide this telos (in which case we act and think like automatons, following scripts without considering why) or confuse its relationship with others (in which case we believe to be furthering one interest when in reality we do nothing of the kind).

This procedure relies on distinguishing between the ‘ontic’ and the ‘ontological’. In Thompson’s model, analyses of the ontic remain descriptive; they can tell us *that* a smart phone is the product of many people working together in processes unaffected by their intention but controlled by a small circle of managers and owners. In contrast, critical social ontology can tell us *why* manufacturing might be organized in this way, what kind of social relations it fosters, which values it requires or produces, and whether it serves society as a whole or only a privileged subset. Via the concept of the social totality, these questions can open up new and meaningful insights into how particular practices come to structure and indeed colonize our social relations as a whole.

The teleogenetic comprises the active and the passive parts of human agency: we create the social world in the same measure as it creates us. This suggests that debates between idealists and realists, liberals and communitarians, universalists and relativists, and so on, obscure a number of important blind spots: particular conventions either constitute our interpretive horizon or are merely the passive object of the dictates of communicative reason; and critique and judgment are either entirely internal or entirely external to the material world. This impasse goes well beyond epistemological questions because even ostensibly democratic procedures fall short if the deepest effects of particular institutions are either ignored or embraced. Thompson’s dialectical solution counters such latently antidemocratic tendencies in liberal and communitarian approaches with a notion of republican citizenship sensibly amended to meet contemporary conditions of pluralism while maintaining its quintessentially modern ideas of rationality and collective agency. It reestablishes the dialectic at work between conceptual binaries (thought and being; self and society; agency and structure): once we accept the need to judge objectively from within an inescapably particular lifeworld, Thompson makes a rigorous case for the idea that only the critical tradition can truly enable us to do so rationally.

Reintroducing the vision of a free rational society (‘Rousseau’s answer to Crito’s question’) suggests that we owe obedience to few of the institutions which demand it, especially when such demands rely on the supposed benefits of institutionalized stability. The vision of a better society requires critical engagement with existing institutional structures. The flipside of human agency is the responsibility that comes with it, and the latter is abdicated unless applied to the reproduction of



dominant social schemes and the ethical framework on which they rely: ‘values, norms, and practices are sustained by those who have refused to judge them. They have been shaped and made ambient by those who seek to maintain power over others and over the community as a whole. Disobedience can only come from judgment; judgment can only come from critique.’ (p. 341)

*Specter*’s emphasis on the objectivity reality of the material world—in explicit contrast to the ‘postmetaphysical’ turn—does not entail an apolitical stance: critique here means showing how and why our institutional arrangements fail to advance our individual or collective development and that alternative arrangements are both possible and more conducive to an objectively better social life. This does require commitments: to freedom, individuality, and sociability; to reason and self-determination. If there is a ‘normative’ dimension to Thompson’s critical theory, this is it, and it is among the book’s achievements to show just how short the distance between this set of not-particularly controversial ideas and a commitment to radical political change really is. *Specter of Babel* is a formidable challenge to anyone intent on downplaying the continued urgency of either the European enlightenment or the type of critical theory set on continuing its unfinished project.

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