

Review - Under Weber's Shadow

Written by Andreas Zaunseder

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ANDREAS ZAUNSEDER, APR 17 2017

Under Weber's Shadow: Modernity, Subjectivity and Politics in Habermas, Arendt and MacIntyre
by Keith Breen,
Ashgate Publishing, 2012

Keith Breen provides a welcome and critical reappraisal of Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt and Alasdair MacIntyre, drawing attention to the pivotal relevance of their very powerful theories that still elicit fruitful analyses and refinements for teaching on the political. The book sets out with a scrutiny of Weber's diagnosis of politics in modernity in which the individual is subjected to a dominant rationalisation of values. Breen points out that the analysis of the instrumentalisation of thought in the context of increasingly bureaucratised political institutions leads Weber to ascertain 'the reduction of meaning or value to the inner will and to politics as a realm of domination' (p.2) and equating 'ethics with an unfathomable inner will' (p.7). In his book, Breen offers his exploration of the three other thinkers as a welcome contestation of this pessimistic tendency to suffocate potential spaces where established powers are challenged and effectively disputed by a plurality of people. However, he asserts that their theorisations are problematic as they build upon a dualist assumption. In his book, Breen dedicates major attention to investigating this dualism and its implications by focussing on three main themes: modernity, subjectivity and politics.

The author's fourfold purpose structures this book. His starting point is to show that in these three themes, the political theories of Habermas, Arendt and MacIntyre significantly affirm the Weberian diagnosis of modernity – however, without widely explicit engagement with Weber's writings. Secondly, he explores how each theorist seeks to alleviate the shortcomings of an understanding of politics in modernity that disempowers the political engagement of a plurality of individuals. Thirdly, by cross-fertilising their conceptualisations of the political sphere and action, Breen aims to carve out aspects that, on the one hand enhance a more fruitful understanding of the political space for plural engagement in modernity, and on the other hamper it. He locates the latter in another idiosyncratic commonality of their different political theories. Namely, when aiming to reclaim the political sphere, they ground their theories in a peculiar dualism. We encounter this in Habermas as the distinction between "lifeworld" and "system", in Arendt the separation of the "private" and "public" realm, and in MacIntyre the rift between "community" and "state". By then critically examining their approaches to conceptualising the political, Breen discusses for each of the three authors the critical implications this dichotomy entails. Fourthly, he concludes that although these three scholars offer fruitful remedies, a more monistic pluralism would help to avoid the shortfalls that result from the underlying dualism. For him this monism means 'the spatial interwovenness of human activities' (p.216-217). Human activities transgress the spheres of the public, private, local community, state, small-scale and large-scale economic and administrative institutions and, hence, can be more appropriately and fruitfully explored when not fragmented in bounded realms that enable or disable the political.

Building on this he recommends that ethical values are also embedded in the economic system and administrative regimes (p.220). In doing so, he ascribes to the economy an inherent transformative potential that can be realised through reflective practice. For him, this means revising 'the understanding of work [...] as an intimate part of workers' lives and identities' which would elicit a 'mode of production wherein the pursuit of external goods is checked by and bound to the pursuit of internal goods determined by reference to the conditions of human flourishing' (p. 220). This epitomises his understanding of practices as inextricably intertwined with institutions whereby their perpetuation is teleologically grounded – in other words, they always have a purpose. As such, they cannot be neutral or non-ethical.

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Here, the universalistic concept of human flourishing serves as an ethical adjustment for the pursuit of the underlying purpose. In a similar vein, Breen appeals for a conceptualisation of the ethicalness of strategies whereby ethics are considered embedded in political strategy. This is grounded in his assertion that we must 'acknowledge that the recourse to strategy and coercion' (p.224) cannot always be avoided in political life. Major reasons for such exigencies are the situation of 'temporal urgency' of some political decisions, an 'argumentative stalemate' amongst subjects and the incidents where ethics compel the addressing of excluded minorities that otherwise would have no effective voice (p. 222). He argues that Arendt, MacIntyre and Habermas do not treat these sufficiently – given they are essential parts of politics. In Breen's opinion this gives way to recognising the potential for the normativity of strategy, because strategies can be an 'appropriate and sometimes virtuous response' (p. 224-225) in troublesome situations, granted their potential for ethicalness. Eventually, all spheres in human life have a transformative potential, and thus harbour ethical values.

The book builds up across an introductory section and three main parts, of which each is dedicated to the analysis of one author's conceptualization of political action as embedded in modernity and subjectivity. Interestingly, the introductory section is unconventionally divided into an introduction proper and the first chapter. Breen dedicates the introduction to explaining the aim of the book and the structure to the reader. This is essential as he endeavours to put three very prolific scholars in a constructive discussion and embed this in his own critical investigation of each of them is extremely complex. In the first chapter, he then goes on to outline Max Weber's core concepts with respect to modernity and politics. Here he delineates the core concepts of Weber's analysis of modernity, which recur throughout the book in his examination of Arendt, Habermas, and MacIntyre. These concepts are the individual subject, the categories of social action, systematization, rationalisation, life spheres, disenchantment, specialisation, charisma and the iron cage. Acknowledging the validity of the diagnosis of the pathology of modernity in the Weberian analysis, a more political realist view sets the stage for exploring the space for change and effective contestation of political power in Weber's theory. Modernity is characterised as producing an atrophied political realm. The different approaches of the four thinkers put this atrophy in different lights. Breen explains that for Weber the subjects of the body politic increasingly shift into a bureaucratized bondage and disenchantment, for Habermas their 'intersubjective [...] lifeworld' is unwarrantedly seized by the 'systemic integration' into 'market and administrative state' (p.30-31), for Arendt this is epitomised by their shift into worldlessness (antonym of her concept of worldliness), and for MacIntyre the emerging 'emotivist culture' (p. 159).

Each of the main parts, subdivided into chapters, generally starts with a critical explanation and examination of the author's theories on modernity and politics, and is followed by a sympathetic critique of their main theses. Thereby, Breen engages them in a discussion with each other which helps him to point out specific conceptual problems and potential theoretical remedies for the pathologies of politics in modernity as theorised by Weber. The first part is on Habermas, the second on Arendt, and the third on MacIntyre. The logic of the order in which he deals with the three authors conveys the inherent rationale of the overall argument. Appreciative of Habermas' understanding of politics as being rooted in the intersubjectivity of life, Breen locates the essential shortcomings of his approach in his linguistic-discursive focus. With Arendt's phenomenologically grounded understanding of the political and the potential of action, he demonstrates a more authentic approach to political life that can help to rectify the flaws he identifies in Habermas' theorisation of communication. However, Breen problematizes the dualism that leads both conceptualisations to single out an a-political or 'fallen' as opposed to 'free' realm. MacIntyre polarises community and the liberal state. However, he understands the former as the nexus for the political founded on intersubjectivity as well as for phronetic and teleological practise regulated by human flourishing. Thereby, Breen contents, his neo-Aristotelian perspective alleviates the shortfalls arising from Arendt and Habermas' dualism. Namely, political potential suffuses all realms – institutional and non-institutional – of the world. The conclusion, offering an overall synthesis and closing reflections on political action, as a 'shared ethical activity' (p.210), is included in the part on MacIntyre. The book's overall structure demonstrates a thoughtful design that underlines the discussion of Habermas, Arendt, and MacIntyre. This also aims to improve the accessibility for scholars who are less familiar with the writings of the four thinkers.

Regarding the logic of the book structure, it remains a bit unclear why Weber does not receive a proper chapter and why the closing reflections are subsumed under MacIntyre. For this treatise, Weber is as important as Habermas, Arendt and MacIntyre. Without providing reasons for putting Weber in the shadow of the introduction, this conveys a

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sense of inferior importance. A similar impression results from adjoining the conclusion to the part about MacIntyre with the reverse effect, i.e. elevating MacIntyre.

The density of the writing might arguably present a challenge to interested readers. Breen is careful in explaining the concepts he explores. However, the complexity of the concepts themselves sometimes leads to very dense explanations and slightly unwieldy arguments. For example, he locates 'morality' in 'structural differentiation of the lifeworld' as part of rationalization (p. 30), but explains structural differentiation of the lifeworld in a separate subchapter later on (p. 35) as consisting of 'culture', 'society', and 'personality'. In this case, it might be difficult to fully comprehend his earlier paragraph on locating morality correctly when reading it as important features unfold later on. This means the reader sometimes feels compelled to go pages back in order to combine the understanding of the components of the structural differentiation with rationalisation and relate this to the locus of morality. At other times, when arriving at the synthesis where Breen thoughtfully ties together the overall argument, this density requires the reader to go back to specific parts that had been explored previously.

It would be also interesting to engage Breen's overall critique of politics, subjectivity and modernity with movements and developments that aim to depoliticise specific spheres of life or even distinct political spaces (Evans Geoffrey and Tilley James, 2012; Ferguson, 1994; Mcdonell, 2015; Wai-man. Lam, 2004; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). This often hints at diverse perceptions of politics – or even what 'political' is or means. Where politics has been perceived as oppressive, limiting or distorting, people have been aiming to liberate and open up spaces that contest or avoid what is understood as 'politics' – and established political institutions – altogether. Further engagement with Breen's book might want to consider how his proposition of pluralist politics and pervasive ethics would engage with the perception of the 'political' and 'ethical'. Therefore, this book certainly provides compelling reading for scholars, particularly with an affinity for theory, who are at least a bit familiar with Weber, Habermas, Arendt, and MacIntyre – and are seeking a vibrant discussion of these four still very topical theorisations of modernity, politics and subjectivity.

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