Book Review

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Book Review


“Most thought provoking in our thought-provoking time is that we are still not thinking [and so] every moment the crossroad moves along with us”—Heidegger

Social Theory At A Crossroads is a revision of four lectures delivered at Duquesne University where McBride had a forum for elaborating his programmatic and highly personal assessment of our cultural crisis in general as well as its manifestations in political-social theory in particular. By our cultural crisis McBride means “primarily American, secondarily Western European, and finally global cultures that American and Western European cultures have played a role in defining.” He regards political-social theory as a species of cultural intellectuality, and it is this intellectuality itself, the *sine qua non* of culture, that McBride finds to be flawed. This is so because certain features of our culture promote truncated intellectuality, an intellectuality that is neither comprehensive nor critical, *i.e.*, neither self-critical nor critical of its contemplated objects. As one illustration of his thesis, McBride observes that our culture fanatically pursues only what it regards as practical and so it demands the same from its intellectuality. Accordingly, intellectual life in America suffers from an absence of reflection upon the past, a kind of historical amnesia. Our culture, dancing as it must to the tune of the marketplace, allows historical memory to exist only through such modalities as, for example, nostalgic fads which offer commercial possibilities. Professor McBride is alarmed by the inferior role—indeed, nonexistent role at times—that historical reflection performs in both graduate and undergraduate levels of the humanities and the political-social sciences. Historical knowledge is grudgingly tolerated, but more frequently it is thought to be a waste of time, a luxury that practitioners of specialized and pragmatic expertise can ill afford. This guild mentality, supported as it is by the Anglo-American domination of philosophical positivism,


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utilitarianism, and pragmatism, has repressed historical consciousness and has thereby devastated political-social theory.\textsuperscript{4} McBride remarks, with a modicum of hope, that only Continental-European philosophy—phenomenology, Marxism, and existentialism—have kept alive historical consciousness through their struggle to generate serious philosophies of history.

Not only does McBride see our intellectuality as truncated by lack of historical comprehensiveness, but he also finds it to be a shallow intellectuality failing to push its way into the roots of human existence where human experience is grounded in its fullness. Succinctly put, our intellectuality fails to be sufficiently radical.\textsuperscript{5} McBride suggests that this feature of our intellectuality derives from our uncritical acceptance of the “dominance of . . . the concept of economic value . . . within our society, [as] the fundamental form of value.”\textsuperscript{6} Accordingly, intellectuality becomes a slick, bottomline, manipulative, and managerial mode of thinking which accepts economic reality as the controlling reality and thereby lets this value transform all other values—aesthetic, religious, ethical, and philosophical—into commodities whose essences are bastardized into mere appearances of themselves. McBride acknowledges that in his analysis he is indebted to Karl Marx who interpreted the modern world by utilizing the concept of “fetishism of commodities.” That approach, says McBride:

\begin{quote}
nables us to understand better why certain types of human activities wax and others wane or become suppressed within our culture, on the basis of the perceived centrality of the contribution that they make or fail to make to our complex modern system of commodity exchange, rather than on the basis of their value for human existence. For instance, Marx's approach enables us to comprehend the present decline in liberal education, which is considered comparatively irrelevant for the preparation of persons suitable for work in the more technologically advanced areas of contemporary culture, and might even prove counterproductive if it gives them "strange" ideas. The same approach enables us to understand why services such as health and transportation . . . are skewed in our culture in the grotesque ways that they are: toward the huge and often overbuilt hospital plants, toward gigantic and costly airplanes with high fuel consumption, toward an appallingly wasteful private-automobile industry, which becomes increasingly entrenched as alternative forms of transport are cut off. These are some of the commodity fetishisms, the sacrificing of human needs and values to the needs of the dominant
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\textsuperscript{4} McBride laments that it is now well known that "Wittgenstein . . . read his classics more or less on the sly." \textit{Id.} at 118.

\textsuperscript{5} McBride employs the word "critical"; but the word "radical," which in Latin means "going to the roots," coincides with his intention.

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Id.} at 126.

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Id.}
economic system, that we can understand better once we grasp the broadly Marxian approach to social explanation that I have been outlining.  

This philosophical interpretation is certainly not new to students of Nietzsche or Heidegger, both of whom reflected deeply upon the paradox of the simultaneous fulfillment and exhaustion of the Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian tradition in its contemporary secular manifestations of technology, business, and economics. What is refreshing is that Professor McBride appropriates this philosophical framework to assist him in arriving at an understanding of the contemporary crisis at the heart of his own discipline of political-social thought. That discipline, like Western culture itself, he finds also to be impregnated with provincial (ahistorical) and shallow intellectuality. These elements of McBride's criticism of political-social theory can now be set forth. 

After a brisk survey of the recognized and authoritative Anglo-American literature constituting the bulk of political-social theory from approximately 1945 to the present, McBride concludes that a deep rift separates political-social theorists. On the one side stand the empirical theorists; on the other, the normative theorists, namely, those theorists with a strong philosophical predilection. It cannot be denied that the majority of political-social theorists are, of course, the empirical data-gatherers. They are the ones who "accept certain methodological procedures as canonical for certain purposes, and simply . . . refuse to engage in any philosophical questioning of presuppositions."  

It is this refusal of the empiricists to examine their own foundational presuppositions which calls forth McBride's strongest polemic. He suspects that the concerted refusal of empiricists to examine their own premises is prompted by the fear that their claim to be "value free" or "value neutral" is without real ontological foundation. McBride charges that the empiricists' work product is "frequently and heavily skewed in the direction of a certain [unexamined] set of political and social institutions, namely those of American liberal democratic neocapitalism."  

In short, empiricists who flaunt their authoritativesness by sanctimonious appeals to the purported objectivity of their data have uncritically bound Anglo-American political-social theory to a value-laden liberal democratic framework. This framework

8. Id. at 133.
9. Id. at 6.
10. Id. at 10. McBride examines three classical works in order to find evidence of this uncritical incorporation of a worldview. The works so examined are ROBERT DAHL, A PREFACE TO DEMOCRATIC THEORY (1956); ROBERT LANE, POLITICAL IDEOLOGY: WHY THE AMERICAN COMMON MAN BELIEVES WHAT HE DOES (1962); and DAVID B. TRUMAN, THE GOVERNMENTAL PROCESS: POLITICAL INTERESTS AND PUBLIC OPINION (1951).
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is freighted with unexamined assumptions concerning human nature and society, assumptions which Continental European philosophy has been critically assessing and has found to be philosophically deficient, rooted as it is in a Cartesian worldview reaching its zenith in the skepticism of Hume and his positivist defenders. This state of affairs, the philosophical naiveté of political-social empiricists, has brought about a "crisis of enfeeblement"\(^{11}\) and a "crisis of disorientation"\(^{12}\) within the discipline. The enfeeblement of empiricism derives from a lack of critical thinking vis-à-vis itself and its apprehended objects; the disorientation is occasioned by isolation from Continental European philosophical thought, namely, phenomenology, existentialism, and Marxism.

McBride then utilizes his critique to examine a specific branch of political-social theory, namely, legal philosophy. This field is presently occupied by the work product of the stellar trinity of Rawls, Nozick, and Dworkin. Their respective work products are examined by McBride in a chapter entitled "Injustices and Wrongs: Toward a New Emphasis in the Philosophy of Law."\(^{13}\) This chapter gives a basic review of their respective writings and sets out the critical responses which have so far appeared. McBride concludes that the work of each is "caught . . . between the philosophical demand for powerful and broad generalization, on the one hand, and the natural assumption that a legal philosophy should be rooted in actual legal practices, on the other."\(^{14}\) But the realization of this goal remains quite elusive to the extent that the work of each of these contemporary shapers of legal philosophy has remained isolated from the comprehensive and critical depth of Continental European phenomenology, existentialism, and Marxism. McBride proposes that only when American legal philosophy studies and critically appropriates the Continental European philosophical tradition will we then witness the comprehensive and critical synthesis that was achieved, for example, by Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*, which was "simultaneously a political theory, a theory about morality, a theory about history, a theory about property and economic exchange, and so on, as well as a theory about law."\(^{15}\)

McBride predicts that only when American political-social and legal

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12. *Id.*
14. McBride, *supra* note 1, at 84. This motif, the tension between the concrete and the abstract, has been explored by Cornelius F. Murphy, Jr., in C. Murphy, *Modern Legal Philosophy* (1978).
15. McBride at 89.
philosophers revolt against their unthinking subservience to the Anglo-American philosophical tradition of positivism, utilitarianism, and pragmatism will robust theorizing in the grand manner be again possible.16 Precisely here is the choice or crossroads before which political-social theory now stands.

_Social Theory At A Crossroads_ is but one more book among a growing collection of books that have taken our cultural crisis for their central theme.17 Although McBride confesses embarrassment that the word "crisis" has been monstrously overworked, he nevertheless holds to his argument that our cultural malaise is real, omnipresent, and foundational. Attempting to do justice to both concerns—triteness and reality—McBride rejects the word "crisis" and places us instead at a "crossroads." This change in metaphor, at least suggests, as is appropriate to McBride's intention, that Western culture now confronts a choice. In fact, McBride's work is kept from becoming one more intellectual jeremiad to the extent that he does propose an alternative to our present cultural plight. Yet there are three serious flaws in this book's presentation.

First, McBride tells us that his book is aimed at "providing a basic introduction to its subject matter for an audience assumed to be intellectually sophisticated but not universally well informed about social and political thought."18 So taking McBride at his word, one wonders why McBride expends no effort whatsoever attempting to persuade those who see no crisis whatsoever in Western culture, let alone a crisis amenable to a Marxist analysis. Surely, McBride intends more than to preach to the already converted. Second, if McBride desires to popularize contemporary European philosophy because he thinks it vital to the survival of Western culture, why are we kept in the dark as to McBride's criteria for selecting Jean Paul Sartre among contemporary European philosophers? McBride explains only that Sartre's philosophy has a "singularly important contribution to make to social

16. _Id._ at 40.
17. See, e.g., RICHARD J. BERNSTEIN, _The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory_ (1976); ALVIN GOULDNER, _The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology_ (1970); HWO YOL JUNG, _The Crisis of Political Understanding_ (1979); EDWARD A. PURCELL, JR., _The Crisis of Democratic Theory_ (1973). I do not mean to imply by the mere grouping together of these books that they are all cut from the same cloth. They are not. But the use, however, of the card catalogue of any reasonably good library will reveal an immense seam of material waiting to be mined under the title "(The) Crisis in . . . ." It is essential for those scholars of the history of ideas to investigate the recent plethora of crisis literature in order to unearth both the common and the unique themes and proposals buried in this literature. Only then, can we suggest what the appearance of such literature means or signifies for Western culture.
18. _MCBRIDE, supra_ note 1, at ix.
Europe, however, offers a brilliant array of relevant thinkers including, for example, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Jaspers, Scheler, Ricouer, Habermas, and Heidegger. Third, McBride believes that the direction that Western culture will take is largely dependent upon the kinds of teachers who staff our educational institutions. This belief in the salvific efficacy of education remains an assumption of a liberal democratic Weltanschauung which McBride fails to subject to criticism.

But despite these three defects of omission, McBride’s book is essential reading for those law students, lawyers, and professors of law, who wish to explore possible connections between philosophy of law and the larger philosophical currents of the modern world.

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19. Id. at 41.

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