

REVIEW

Mark Olssen, *Toward A Global Thin Community: Nietzsche, Foucault, and the Cosmopolitan Commitment* (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), ISBN: 978-1594514470

This book re-examines the liberal-communitarian debate, highlighting the limitations of both liberalism and communitarianism, in order to put forth a theory of “‘thin’ communitarianism.” (1) According to Olssen, liberalism and neoliberalism have an erroneous human ontology; that is, they conceive of humans as ‘pre-social’ beings capable of autonomous moral and practical reasoning. Moreover, Olssen criticizes the liberal idea of self-regulating markets. At the same time, he queries certain aspects of communitarianism, such as the idea of an ‘organic unity’ of the community or the communitarian goal to restore moral values. As he says, “the notion of community articulated does not aim to impose any creed or system of values, or to strengthen unity or integration beyond what is necessary for survival and continuance of life forms, whether conservative, with a big or small ‘c’, or concerned with classical or revised conceptions of socialism.” (2) Olssen’s “thin communitarianism” accepts three axioms: First, it recognizes the social and historical constitution of the self, thereby rejecting the liberal conception of the self as an asocial, isolated, and ahistorical being; second, it abandons the quest for “universal naturalistic principles to ground claims,” being “rather a theory which constructs universal principles based on pragmatic grounds of avoiding danger and enhancing security in the quest for survival and well-being;” third, it rejects the neoliberal idea of self-regulating markets, suggesting instead that markets require political direction and control. (2-3) As Olssen says, thin communitarianism is rooted in recent European theory and is based on the ideas of the ‘new liberals’ of the late nineteenth century, such as T.H. Green, J.A. Hobson and L.T. Hobhouse. (4ff) Olssen attempts “to transpose the accomplishments of the social democratic tradition that influenced the development of the welfare state in the twentieth century onto a more realist and pluralist basis” (4); that is to say, instead of looking to representatives of philosophical idealism like Hegel, Olssen makes use of the insights of Nietzsche and Foucault. (4) Olssen’s ‘thin’ communitarianism aims to overcome the problems associated with Hegel and Marx by safeguarding liberty and difference through the development of “a robust conception of democracy.” (5) In particular, Olssen argues, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault hold a complexity theory of reality. (9) Complexity theories “are systemic, or holist, in that they account for diversity, novelty, and unity in the context of a systemic field of complex interactional changes and processes of *emergence*. To represent the world as a complex order of interactions is to challenge traditional notions of determinism and place the genesis of order and design, and responsibility for the future, on human construction.” (67) “Construc-

tivist," for Olssen, "refers to the ontological thesis that the world is meaningless and therefore that meaning must be constructed." (17, note 7)

Olssen sees Nietzsche as "an affirmative thinker" (21); "he is both a complexity theorist and a constructivist." (22) Nietzsche placed on man all responsibility for the future; it was up to man—individually and collectively—"to survive and live his future, to develop, to grow, unconstrained by the past." (22) Nietzsche approved of values that are life-enhancing and disapproved of values that made life miserable and sickly. Regarding Foucault, Olssen argues that his "ethical and political oeuvre can best be represented as a form of non-monistic communitarianism," which he calls "'thin' communitarianism." (38) In 'thin' communitarianism unity and difference are combined, kept in balance. Although difference occupies a greater place than in enlightenment thinking, it is nonetheless "contextualized in relation to a model of community." Olssen suggests that the type of political community Foucault intends is "a form of democratic associationism." (38) So democracy best fits Foucault's politics of difference/community and, Olssen argues, although Foucault did not say so explicitly, he as a Foucauldian does. (60) Democracy suits Foucault's purposes not simply because it encourages participation by all but, more importantly, because "it permits continued debate, modification, rejection, or revision of agreed decisions while enabling a maximum of freedom and autonomy, an ongoing possibility of negotiation and dialogue, and the most effective opposition to possible abuses of power." (60-61)

Olssen supplements Nietzsche's and Foucault's approach with the work of Gilles Deleuze in order to offer a distinctive, post-structuralist understanding of community. Thus, community is defined "as an all-encompassing arena without fixed borders or unity" and consists of a blend of values, norms and institutions that make life possible. (65; Chapter 4) Olssen sees in both Nietzsche and Foucault a concern with life. (Chapter 6, 102-127) For him, "the concept of life constitutes a broad scope and a robust conception of the good." In referring to life as "a substantive conception of the good," he means that "the quest to sustain life is specific enough to prohibit certain actions and specify limits to a conception to the reasonable, and in this sense to function normatively"; still it is broad enough to allow "many different lifestyles and value systems." (110) It is Olssen's argument that, thinking of our future in the horizon that presents itself today, what is important is the good of life's continuance. (114, 125) As he says:

Such a conception will have to be democratically mandated, if it is to be acceptable, which means that it will have to be acceptable to the vast majority of people, and yet it will have to provide a necessary common framework that can both guide and constrain and provide a viable basis for a global polity in the age of terrorism, climate change, and much else besides. (115)

For Olssen, Nietzsche and Foucault are important because they take us beyond the conception of community as it has been traditionally understood, namely as "a closed and bounded totality." Despite the significant work of Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor

and Michael Walzer,¹ their theorization of community is not suitable to the age of globalization. (130) As Olssen says:

Community... in this view, is a constantly changing set of practices that resists unity and closedness. Although all action springs from a cultural and political context, actions simultaneously differentiate, both reproducing and altering existing patterns. Just as community is not confined by space or time, so, too, it does not entail closure or resist change and constitutes an open structure quite consistent with *complexity theory* postulates of uncertainty, non-linearity, unpredictability, and the unexpected assignments associated with unintended outcomes of behavior. (147)²

Olssen puts forth a "continuist ethics" that "incorporates a perspective on life as a will to continue." (153) He believes that a "philosophy of life" informed by Nietzsche and Foucault "can support a normative political theory for global governance." (161) Criticizing the idea of equilibrium in economic theory and the neoliberal view of self-regulating markets, Olssen suggests that there must be political co-ordination at the global level in order to control the irregularities of the market. (Chapter 8, 161- 179) This "normative model of politics is as a complexity management that accepts that all attempts to contain complexity are dangerous (for they risk totalitarianism), as well as provisional (for they guarantee no prospects of success)." (178) A "Foucauldian cosmopolitanism," Olssen argues, concentrates on "a non-economic analysis of power" and emphasizes "its equalization or symmetrical distribution." (201)

In the final chapter, entitled "Toward a Global Thin Community," Olssen suggests that democracy "must constitute a new universal premised on a will to survive." (211) The "principle of democracy" he is advocating "is *non-foundational* but *universal*," by which he means that it does not presuppose a fixed conception of human nature nor a premise of universal (communicative) rationality in the Habermasian sense; rather, it "insists on the protection of human rights, recognizes the distinctiveness of sub-cultures, ensures the universal application of the rule of law and of open dialogue... based purely on a principle derived from a philosophy of life of a mutual interest in universal survival and well-being." (212) In Foucauldian fashion, Olssen claims that one essential condition for preventing unity from excluding diversity is the "principle of *contestation*." (213-214) It is this right to contest that makes democracy robust. Our task should be how to *deepen* democracy and Olssen delineates the major themes with which we should be concerned. These are a new global communitarian ethic, equality and redistribution, the regulation of the global economy, the role of the state, the emergence of a global public sphere and global governance. (216-232)

¹ See M. J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edition (London: Duckworth, 1985); C. Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in N. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); M. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Political Theory*, Vol. 18 no. 1 (February 1990), 6-23 and *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

² My italics for emphasis.

Mark Olssen's book is well researched and erudite. The author draws on a variety of philosophical traditions and offers a highly original theory of democracy. Showing the inadequacies of both liberalism and communitarianism, but also extracting what is valuable from each of these two positions, Olssen articulates a middle position, which, he argues, can meet the challenges of our globalized world (climate change, terrorism, over-population, the depletion of natural resources, poverty, economic instabilities and growing inequalities). Olssen deals with theoretical or philosophical issues and problems of contemporary politics equally well. Not only does he show the relevance of Nietzsche and Foucault today, but he also demonstrates the importance of political theory and philosophy for grappling with the complexities of the global politics of our time. Overall, this is an important, challenging and rewarding book.

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