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The struggle for democracy: Paradoxes of progress and the politics of change

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The Struggle for Democracy: Paradoxes of Progress and the Politics of Change

Christopher Meckstroth

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"The struggle for democracy doesn't have an end date," Dilma Rousseff, former President of Brazil, said in a speech, shortly before vacating the presidential office in May 2016. "It's a permanent fight that requires our constant dedication. It's a fight that can be won, and it is one we will win" (Jacobs & Morero 2016). But which side is actually *democratic*? Christopher Meckstroth's *The Struggle for Democracy* develops a powerful and persuasive theory of democratic legitimacy, working out the elements through novel readings of Plato's Socrates, Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel and then elaborating this theory through case studies including the 1848 Revolution in France, the American Civil Rights Movement, and marriage equality and gun control in the contemporary United States. Presenting a "historical and Socratic theory of democratic change," Meckstroth delivers a cogent response to democratic theorists frozen by democratic paradoxes while also developing an impressive account of how democratic practitioners might struggle more productively over the meaning of democracy.

Meckstroth's "historical and Socratic theory of democracy" marks the primary contribution of this dense but rewarding book. With this theory, Meckstroth introduces a distinctive way of working out what we take democracy to mean, relying not on foundational principles but rather historical change and reflective inquiry. This theory of democracy proposes that two principles can be employed to evaluate claims to democracy: first, a legitimate democracy must respect all citizens' equal freedoms, both in content and in process, and do so through political systems these citizens have chosen for themselves; and second, in contests over democratic change, the party that best meets the first condition along conceptual, practical, historical, and exclusive conditions counts as more democratic than opposing parties. This theory admits many institutional arrangements. Moreover, by proposing the people as a "practical postulate" – "a conceptual constraint we take on when we ask what sort of public decision might be fairly imposed on all citizens" (p.21) – this theory avoids the paradox of authorization by working out the conceptual conditions of any interpretation of political freedom that might hold up as internally inconsistent. In the Socratic spirit, then, Meckstroth proposes reasoning by elimination that seeks consistency within claims to democracy rather than new foundations for establishing who or what the people are.

Meckstroth splits *The Struggle for Democracy* into two parts: a historical and interpretive section that works out his "historical and Socratic theory of democracy" via Plato's Socrates, Kant, and Hegel; and an elaboration of this theory and its two primary principles through philosophical argument and detailed case studies. The readings of Plato's Socrates, Kant, and Hegel develop the basic ideas behind the historical and Socratic theory of democracy, arguing against reading Plato, Kant, and Hegel as "paragons of foundationalist metaphysics" (p.52). Instead, Meckstroth proposes that we can read these thinkers as developing accounts of political judgment that work from

inside the conditions of a political order compatible with a non-foundational conception of freedom.

In his chapter on the Socratic elenchus, Meckstroth advances three claims: first, that positive conclusions can be defended strictly by elimination; second, that whatever conclusions that follow are justified because the elenchus shows no other way; and third, that the "ideas" in Plato are best understood as presuppositions we commit ourselves to in asking certain kinds of questions. Plato's Socrates thus shows us a "method-dependent knowledge" as well as a comparative basis for evaluating argument: arguments are not good or bad on the basis of some foundational notion of correctness but rather because they hold up more or less well when scrutinized. Any claim to knowledge, Meckstroth suggests via his reading of Plato's Socrates, requires an explanatory account as well as internal consistency.

To complement the "Socratic" element of his theory, Meckstroth looks to Kant and Hegel. On Meckstroth's argument, Kant's moral theory turns on an anti-foundational argument similar to Plato's Socrates' approach. The categorical imperative functions as a regulative assumption for interrogating common sense; critical argument allows one to distinguish what is defensible from what is not. Contrary to the still dominant interpretation, Kant's theory does not depend on metaphysics but rather proceeds from working out internal assumptions. Whatever positive conclusions follow stem from presuppositions of universal respect for freedom. Morality remains a regulative principle. Kant does not seek positive foundations but rather asks his readers to free themselves from unwarranted supposition.

This interpretation of Kant calls attention to the influence of ancient skepticism on his ideas. Meckstroth thus illuminates how Kant extends Plato's central methodological insight about the method-dependence of all knowledge. In other words, Kant develops what morality would have to mean if it were to be consistent. What makes an action just is whether or not it can be defended. Meckstroth's Kant also challenges the view of Kant as narrowly liberal. The power of democracy according to this reading comes from its being the only sort of constitution that requires no foundation; it thus seems to follow from Kant's anti-foundationalist approach to morality. Kant himself, however, did not take this path in his political thought. Indeed, Kant presumed an extant regime's morality and rejected revolution. Kant ignores the challenge of arbitrary sovereigns and provides no theory of democratic change.

To elaborate a theory of political change that proceeds from an anti-foundational approach to morality, Meckstroth turns to Hegel. To do so, Meckstroth must again argue against the metaphysical interpretations that have long prevailed in readings of Hegel while also setting aside Hegel's own narrow political thought as presented in the *Philosophy of Right*. Instead, Meckstroth turns to Hegel's philosophy of history as providing a series of provocative examples for thinking through the historical and Socratic theory developed in *The Struggle for Democracy*. This allows for a focus on how Hegel assumes the idea of self-actualizing freedom and then works out a theory of politics on this basis fit to adjudge the present order.

Hegel offers a revolutionary way of thinking about the relationship of freedom to historical change. First of all, Hegel develops a method-dependent account of knowledge, presenting certain regulative assumptions for interpreting history itself. Second, Hegel views reason as the work of social subjects: free individuals in relations of mutual recognition, becoming conscious of their own freedom, and working out its content over time (p.150). Third, Hegel takes the principle of the spirit's self-actualization not as a general cause but rather as a necessary assumption for historical interpretation. Presupposing a final purpose allows us to pick out events that matter for the development of freedom; reason thus functions as a *presupposition* for conceptualizing development. This view of history allows Hegel to focus his readers on the "mechanism" of freedom across history, the conflict of individual wills through which reason is served (p.159).

Rather than tarrying with the specific claims of this story, Meckstroth focuses on how Hegel presents a distinctive sort of interpretive argument. Taking up a form similar to Plato's Socrates as well as Kant, Hegel proceeds, on Meckstroth's account, through immanent refutations of competing claims to represent the citizen body. In other words, political conceptions of freedom must furnish criteria to distinguish free institutions from organized tyranny. One needs a reason to prefer one interpretation over another.

Plato's Socrates, Kant, and Hegel call attention to the active side of reasoning that undergirds Meckstroth's theory. Like Plato's ideas or Kant's categorical imperative, the notion of the people is only a principle of judgment. Because they remain postulates, interpretations of any democratic ideal must stay perpetually open to Socratic criticism and contestation. Abstract concepts such as respecting the freedom of all citizens matter for politics only when citizens act to interpret and apply them. Here lies the key insight from Hegel for Meckstroth: political claims earn legitimacy by providing immanent refutations of historical alternatives; no claims stand outside of the available alternatives nor can any claim be justified independent of such a comparison.

With this theory of method-dependent and historical knowledge in hand, Meckstroth turns to the two principles of his democratic theory, devoting special attention to the four conditions that specify the second of these principles. These conditions name the constraints any consistent claim will have to meet, although Meckstroth leaves interpretation and application for ongoing debate in context (p.177).

The first condition is the *conceptual condition.* This concerns the formal conditions of who is empowered to make a decision attributed to the people. Freedom and equality serve here as "limit concepts on consistent claims of obligation": different combinations of rights and liberties may well result (179 – 181).

The second condition is the *practical condition.* Democratic programs must show "balanced positive empirical evidence" in favor of its claim to enjoy the people's support. Thus social movements must build "democratic vehicles" to provide tangible support for their claims. Again, specific forms of empirical evidence would vary depending on historical context.

The third condition is the *historical baseline.* Here a democratic program is considered legitimate when it respects the results of past democratic struggles in the absence of evidence that the people have reversed course (p.190). There are three kinds of argument here. First, sometimes the baseline simply needs reconstruction and elaboration; however (and second), there are other times when the question of a historical outcome remains controversial from a democratic perspective and thus requires revisiting for this reason. Third, sometimes it is not clear that previous struggles have overcome previous problems and they must then be developed further. The historical baseline thus functions as an immanent constraint of consistency on competing democratic programs (p.194).

The fourth condition is the *condition of exclusivity.* Any democratic program must provide some reason for excluding other possible alternatives. Any admissible ground for excluding an alternative must also demonstrate practical support from the historical baseline. Or, if two programs both prove consistent, that program which can be defended on both sets of starting assumptions prevails.

Meckstroth elaborates these four conditions with a variety of case studies from the last two centuries of Western political history, showing how a "determinate answer" to the question of whose claims are democratic can come through proper application of the theory. As Meckstroth puts it: "Everything depends on working out which side's position is most consistent on a case-by-case basis" (p.218).

At philosophical and theoretical levels, Meckstroth presents arguments difficult to contest. Yet reading *The Struggle for Democracy*, this reader wants to ask, with Emerson: "Where do we find ourselves?" Or, as Sheldon Wolin reformulates it in his review of John Rawls' *Political Liberalism:* "Where do we find ourselves politically?" If the *demos* has been "undone," as Wendy Brown has recently argued, does a historical and Socratic theory of democracy only serve to reinforce a "neoliberal fantasy" or the "cruel optimism" of democratic aspiration? Meckstroth purports to address not just political theorists but also citizens, yet *The Struggle for Democracy* does not speak to the politics of the present moment beyond providing criteria for evaluating claims to democracy. It lacks any real attention to the myriad forms of de-democratization profligate at this historical moment and thus any clear pathways of democratic change for those suffering unequal freedom.

The question of where we are thinking from also has ramifications for the historical analyses that Meckstroth advances. Building his theory through Plato's Socrates, Kant, and Hegel, Meckstroth ignores the significant differences among their *practices* of political theory and the political implications of these practices. Can we combine Socrates' elenchus and Hegel's historical theorizing without due attention to the former's highly particular and individuated mode of engagement in a democratic *polis* and the latter's high altitude philosophizing about mundane human suffering? Many political theorists, myself included, have investigated the democratic valences of Socrates' activity, showing how this presupposed a robust democratic political culture where his interrogations could take place. One could also argue that Marx's criticism of Hegel

stemmed precisely from the latter's overlooking of conditions of unequal freedom not unlike Meckstroth's. To paraphrase Marx: We are not abstract beings, squatting outside the world, but rather in the human world, state and society. Different conditions of existence seem to demand different modes of political theorizing yet Meckstroth's analysis conflates these modes while uncritically advancing his own rather abstract one.

These criticisms aside, *The Struggle for Democracy* presents a compelling and exhaustive response to the problem of democratic legitimacy, one that meets its promises of developing a historical and Socratic theory.

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