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## RADICAL DEMOCRACY'S PAST AND FUTURE: HISTORIES OF THE SYMBOLIC\*

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Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press 2013)

A few decades after the linguistic turn began affecting them, historians are now writing its history. For one of them the linguistic turn meant much more than just an acknowledgement of the importance of language and signs. In his latest book, appropriately called *Adventures of the Symbolic*, Warren Breckman argues instead that the linguistic turn was part of a much broader “symbolic turn” (266). His book is a rich collection of previously published articles that all deal with “the symbolic” in different times (from the eighteenth century till today) and places (mainly France and Germany and to a lesser extent the UK). That survey begins with the Romantics, whose focus on the symbolic dimension was criticized by Hegel and Marx, but praised by Leroux. The concept resurfaced in France, first with Durkheim and Mauss and later with Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty and Lacan, who in turn influenced Castoriadis and Lefort. These last three thinkers all had a significant impact on the following generation represented by Gauchet, Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek, to whom Breckman devotes the second half of his book.<sup>1</sup> One merit of his book is that Breckman analyzes and presents figures like Leroux, Castoriadis, Lefort, Gauchet and Laclau who are important

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\* I would like to thank Samuel Moyn for his helpful comments on a previous draft of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> In his analysis of the origins and evolution of that turn, Breckman doesn't mention the role the symbolic played in cultural history and cultural anthropology from the 1970s onwards, in, for example, France or the US. This is a strange omission because it is especially in that field that it may indeed be more appropriate to speak about a symbolic rather than a purely linguistic turn.

for political theory and intellectual history, yet remain under-researched and relatively unknown.

Although the thinkers discussed by Breckman all write about symbols or the symbolic, they often mean very different things by it, depending on their view of the power of symbols and language in shaping the world. Not that this plurality of meanings bothers Breckman. On the contrary, rather than looking for a single definition he intends to highlight the diverse meanings that the noun and adjective “symbolic” took and he wants to “hold onto this sense of polyvalent, overlapping and sometimes conflicting concepts of the symbolic” (19). “Symbolic” can indeed mean either passively expressing or denoting something else—like a flag that symbolizes a country—or else actively shaping something, as in a specific way of organizing, shaping and legitimizing a society, which explains why it is archaic or modern, totalitarian or democratic. In that sense perhaps many symbolic turns existed, not just one, expressed in various thinkers who at some point or another were fascinated by a symbolic dimension of reality. Aesthetic theorists, political philosophers, structuralists, post-structuralists, postmodernists, phenomenologists, Lacanians, German pre-Marxist Romantics, Western Marxists, post-Marxists and even Marx himself all developed at some point or another theories of the symbolic and often meant different, often contradictory, things by this term.

While Breckman often suggests that he merely wants to do justice to the sheer plurality and complexity of the notion of the symbolic, he also has an implicit twofold normative agenda. Throughout the book he first criticizes the structuralist idea of the symbolic order as a rigid structure that limits agency, represented by Lévi-Strauss or Althusser, while defending the idea of the symbolic dimension of reality as a creative source that questions that order, represented by Mauss (e.g. 17–18, 88–9 or 266). The underlying suggestion is that the structuralist variant reduces the symbolic to a stable essence, thus forgetting that the symbolic always refers to something that eludes any final definition and therefore remains subject to conflict (this becomes clear in, for example, Breckman’s discussion of Castoriadis’s rejection of structuralists and functionalists at 113–16).

The book is also normative in a second way. It begins by discussing thinkers of the symbolic that have little to do with democracy. But in the third chapter on Castoriadis the focus of the book shifts to theorists of the symbolic that defend democracy. From that point on Breckman no longer just presents the sheer plurality of ideas of the symbolic, but instead specifically looks for concepts of the symbolic that are compatible with what he calls “radical democracy.” This is why in the second part of his book Breckman is less of an intellectual historian looking at the past and becomes more of a political theorist examining the present by identifying concepts of the symbolic that can help us reinvent radical democracy and agency beyond the Marxist framework.

This tension between the present and its past, between political theory and intellectual history and between theorists of the symbolic that defend radical democracy and those that were still indifferent to it prompts a few (methodological) questions. For one, what is the relationship between a-democratic thinkers of the symbolic and their democratic “successors”? On the one hand, Breckman suggests, in line with his defense of a plurality of notions of the symbolic, that there is no explicit connection. As he explains, “The point is not to argue for direct lines of influence. Rather, in keeping with my remarks on the insurmountable polyvalence of the symbolic itself, to mobilize the symbolic is to play with a range of meanings from the algebraic to the sacred” (22; see also 8 and 270).

Yet on the other hand Breckman still relates “a more or less coherent narrative that has something like a beginning, a series of variations that rearticulate that first insight, and a conclusion that returns to that beginning in order to reaffirm its basic insights” (8). One narrative that runs through the book is the shift from the condemnation of the symbolic by Marx to the subsequent triumph of post-Marxist theories of the symbolic over Marxism (e.g. 268). Yet alongside that narrative there are also, as we have seen, two implicitly normative narratives: one which opposes “bad” structuralist views of the symbolic to their “good” Maussian counterpart that respects agency, and one that is about attempts to find a theory of the symbolic that serves as a basis for radical democracy. That second narrative could be told in two ways: either by suggesting that theorists of the symbolic who were indifferent to democracy paved the way for the triumph of democratic theorists of the symbolic, as a classical teleological account would have it, or else by stressing that they didn’t, as a critical Nietzschean genealogical account would emphasize. Despite the fact that he denies “direct lines of influence,” Breckman does implicitly seem to adopt a teleological account, whereby earlier thinkers prepared the way for the later triumph of radical democracy. Yet as we know this implies the risk of anachronism, whereby thinkers of the past are used in a struggle that was not theirs. This happens, for example, when Breckman suggests (at 28) that “Feuerbach anticipated possibilities for conceptualizing the link between philosophical meaning and emancipatory politics that resonate with radical theory in the period of Marxism’s collapse.” Yet such a history of “anticipations” risks doing injustice to the thinkers of the past (whose concerns were different from ours) while masking the fact that some of the thinkers discussed had hardly any sympathy for democracy as we know it.

Alternatively, research that does not presuppose “direct lines of influence” could examine past thinkers in their own context. For if they are not merely precursors for our democratic cause, then why did they care about the symbolic? Breckman partly deals with that question of context, focusing in particular on the changing intellectual context, invoking “sea changes” (e.g. at 183, 266 and

elsewhere) mostly at the level of ideas, not so much in society or politics. Yet the reader still wonders if his teleological focus did not prevent him from seeing any undemocratic motives in pre-democratic thinkers of the symbolic. The fact that, for example, many Romantic thinkers were good at conceptualizing transcendence yet not so good at *not* filling it with religious content (which is required by secular radical democracy) would suggest that their ideas and motives may have even been incompatible with radical democracy.

For all the lack of “direct lines of influence” Breckman does not, of course, deny that some thinkers influenced others. He mentions the case of Lacan, who exerted a strong influence on Castoriadis, Lefort, Žižek and others. He could also have mentioned Heidegger as one of Lacan’s sources of inspiration and also a source of inspiration for Lefort, mostly through Merleau-Ponty’s later work. Yet even in such cases where there are clear antecedents and lineages of theories of the symbolic, Breckman’s teleological account risks avoiding some difficult questions. For one, if thinkers such as Heidegger (and to a lesser extent Lacan) who are known for their anti-liberal, conservative and even anti-democratic ideas did influence the leftist freedom-loving founding fathers of radical democracy, then how and why were these illiberal ideas turned into democratic ones and to what extent were these illiberal origins essential for democratic theories? Is it a coincidence that the sources of radical theories of democracy are hostile to radical ideas of democracy, and, if not, to what extent are radical theories of democracy still haunted by their illiberal origins? By avoiding these questions Breckman’s teleological approach may divert our attention away from radical democracy’s uncanny origins, thus emphasizing instead continuity and teleology rather than discontinuity and contingency.

Breckman’s central question, especially in the second part of the book, is how radical theorists of democracy relate to concepts of the symbolic. At first sight, the answer to that question seems clear. For Breckman the symbolic that democratic societies need requires externality (like the Romantics said, but unlike the structuralists), but not in a religious sense (like the structuralists and unlike the Romantics) (see 116–17). As it implies externality and transcendence—the impossibility of society of ever fully controlling itself—the symbolic requires democracy, as opposed to totalitarian regimes that deny this transcendence. And as its transcendent nature makes the symbolic elusive, it ensures that the meaning of society remains subject to debate and critique, which implies that democracy should be “radical” and make room for contestation. It is easy to see why this definition was conceptualized by former Marxists (“post-Marxists”) who break with Marxism while still keeping radical ideals and ambitious explanations of society and history alive. Like Marx, these post-Marxists want to understand society’s and history’s ultimate driving force without referring to divine forces. But against Marxism they argue that an empty secular version of the political

or the symbolic shapes history and society, not its economic infrastructure. This symbolic process is deemed “originary” or irreducible, which means that it cannot be derived from any prior (economic) process. This view is especially original today, as we are accustomed to believe that the ultimate driving force behind our history is “the economy” or “the market(s)” and in that very basic sense we have perhaps all become “Marxists.” If we now believe that the economy has taken over, then we simply forget the free market’s origins and the basic democratic truth that everything in democratic societies should be subject to political debate. For post-Marxists such as Lefort it is, after all, modern politics that allowed different spheres—including the free market—to develop independently.

Yet on closer inspection this connection between a precise definition of the symbolic and post-Marxist radical democracy is not as clear as it may seem, which explains why so many different theorists had different views of the symbolic and therefore also meant different things by radical democracy. What kind of democracy are we talking about? How radical should it be? And what sort of concept of the symbolic will foster and preserve it?

One thing that democracy in general and radical democracy in particular require is the possibility of protesting, critiquing and contesting the status quo and the agency to change things. We already saw that Breckman criticized the structuralist tradition for a lack of agency and creativity and instead sympathized with Maussian traditions of the symbolic. When it comes to theorists of democracy that stress agency, Castoriadis and Žižek spring to mind. Yet by looking for radical forms of contestation and agency, these thinkers run the risk of rejecting non-radical mainstream democratic practices and institutions. Indeed, the more agency and democracy are located outside regular democratic institutions (“the system”), the more excessive agency becomes, which also makes it less effective. Breckman rightly cites in this context Martin Jay’s analysis of “postmodernism’s celebration of excess” or “the manic-depressive temperament of postmodernism, which mixes celebration of excess with apocalyptic visions of obliteration and dispersal” (191–2, 95). Similarly, and again in psychological terms, Breckman correctly points to a central problem of applying Lacan onto society, agency and contestation:

Yet, if Lacan’s depiction of a symbolic network enveloping the individual thus reshaped the sensibility of many left-leaning French intellectuals after 1968, the abiding leftist investment in progressive change produced a certain kind of schizophrenia: Precisely the omnipresence of the symbolic order prompted ideas of total escape, a leap into another way of being and speaking. (130)

As a result, “the idea of revolutionary change had to migrate to a neverland bounded by its own pristine impossibility” (130). While Breckman suggests that Castoriadis managed to escape the sirens of revolutionary excess by looking

for a middle ground, he also admits that when it comes to agency Castoriadis still offers a rather “bleak assessment of the present” (135) given that “relative affluence, consumerism, television, and leisure, as well as the decline of working-class politics in the postindustrial context, have produced a dominant tendency toward a passive, privatized citizenry and complacent immersion in the technical imaginary” (135). Despite this, Castoriadis allegedly continued to believe in the “project of autonomy,” yet it remains unclear what this meant in reality. Perhaps Breckman underestimates the extent to which the radical nature of Castoriadis’s project (“radical imagination”) still made it hard to reconcile with “normal” democratic institutions and practices, thus making it necessarily excessive, despite its alleged attempt to prevent postmodern “schizophrenia.”

Breckman investigates a similar tension in Žižek’s work. But whereas he argues that Castoriadis still escaped the appeal of excessive (and thereby ineffective) agency, in the case of Žižek he suggests the opposite. In Žižek’s more recent work, making democracy more radical or revolutionary means making it less institutional or “liberal.” Radical democracy then paradoxically becomes anti-democratic, thus throwing out the baby (democratic institutions) with the bathwater (lack of militant politics). Little wonder, then, that Breckman finds Žižek’s later radical writings, in which he “declares his opposition to the very notion of democracy” (232, see also 240), deeply problematic.

Castoriadis and Žižek thus show that when radical democracy becomes too radical or excessive it may lead to a fascination with excessive yet inconsequential agency and suspicions vis-à-vis ordinary “liberal” democracy. As a result, we end up with something that is, paradoxically, neither democratic nor radical. Not democratic because it is at odds with democratic institutions and practices, but not radical either because—despite all the radicalism associated with radical agency—it turns out to be so excessive that it becomes ineffective and thereby paradoxically maintains the status quo rather than structurally challenging it. Given that a theory of the symbolic by definition also necessarily implied a certain degree of externality and transcendence, one can also wonder to what extent such theories are still “symbolic,” if “symbolic” means resisting the temptation to identify “the people” with one of its particularly excessive manifestations (thus appropriating what should remain indeterminate and subject to debate).

This, then, prompts the question whether it is possible to defend a form of radical democracy without at the same time rejecting democratic institutions. In other words, can we have non-excessive forms of agency and criticism? Put another way: can we imagine a theory of the symbolic in which the will of the people remains subject to debate and which therefore accepts that there will always be various incarnations of the people, both radical and institutional ones? The affirmative answer to these questions can be found in the work of Castoriadis’s

contemporary and oftentimes intellectual rival, Claude Lefort, who is perhaps the hero of Breckman's book.

Lefort not only successfully applied Lacanian ideas of the symbolic to democracy, but also, much more than Castoriadis, influenced thinkers outside France like Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek, to whom Breckman devotes the last two chapters of his study. Lefort thus figures as a sort of bridge between francophone and anglophone traditions of the symbolic (e.g. 208). What is characteristic for Lefort's theory of the symbolic and of radical democracy is not only that it remained conceptually consistent since the 1970s but also that it emphasizes the need for symbolic externality—represented by the state—as a way to guarantee contestation, i.e. radical democracy. Lefort (and his students) also referred to the symbolic as “the political,” i.e. ideas and representations that precede, legitimize and shape economic reality. These ideas and representations are called symbolic, as opposed to the reality they shape. The symbolic becomes that which shapes and expresses a pluralist society without coinciding with it. Lefort's crucial suggestion is that the symbolic order necessarily transcends attempts to grasp or define it. While many invoke symbolic terms like “the people” or “the nation,” no one knows for sure what they actually mean. Typical of society's unity or totality in democratic societies is precisely the transcendent or indeterminate nature of these ideas. They drive politics—all political parties refer to the people and the common good—and guarantee plurality, as long as no party pretends to truly know what the people want.<sup>2</sup> Democratic societies thus revolve around these terms to which they owe their meaning, but which remain empty, which is why they can symbolize (in the sense of keep together and shape) diverse societies.<sup>3</sup> This allows for conflict, diversity and the development of different semi-independent spheres (law, art, science, economy, etc.). For Lefort—and this is important—it is the state that prevents society from occupying these symbolic entities like the “people”: no contestation and radical democracy without the modern state. Both the emphasis on transcendence of the symbolic and the importance of the democratic state differentiate Lefort from Castoriadis or Žižek (but also from Arendt or self-management activists in the 1970s). While Breckman analyzes this feature of Lefortian theory, he perhaps could have done more to explain (also in

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<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the category of the symbolic as something which we need yet which escapes our grasp is anticipated not only by Romantic thinkers but already by Enlightenment philosophers like Kant and his so-called regulatory ideas.

<sup>3</sup> These ideas play a role in Lefort's work that is similar to the Lacanian “real” that is dear to Žižek. Unlike Breckman (at 154), I believe that the “real” does play an important role in Lefort's work, to the extent that these “empty” symbolic terms—like the Lacanian real—resist appropriation and challenge society, and when appropriated can potentially threaten and undermine it, as totalitarian adventures have shown.

terms of context and biography) how and why Lefort and Castoriadis ended up disagreeing about this. It was probably because of this difference that Castoriadis's theory was unable to fully overcome the aforementioned "celebration of excess." Unlike Castoriadis, Lefort suggests that democracy and the symbolic need *both* the state (to prevent society from coinciding with itself) and grassroots movements contesting the status quo.

Breckman seems to have most sympathy for Lefort's position. Yet both Lefort and Breckman face a double problem when it comes to the symbolic and radical democracy. First, they both assume that any form of contestation will serve radical democracy's cause. But what if contestation and radicalism undermine democracy rather than serving it—for example because those defending their rights or demands have a hard time accepting any compromise because they assume that their particular needs are absolute? Such radical protest movements weaken democracy's symbolic dimension by completely identifying with it ("we *are* the people"), leaving no room for other views, and thus for compromise. While Breckman approvingly discusses the Occupy Wall Street movement at the end of his book (279–85), that other grassroots protest movement the Tea Party is arguably much more influential than its leftist counterpart. The Tea Party, after all, managed to obstruct normal democratic agency and decision-making. It thus seems that one needs to differentiate between different protest movements and carefully assess their compatibility with (radical) democracy.

The second problem is that the sort of radical protest movements that Breckman has in mind rarely transform into real, institutional change. Breckman refers in his book to Tahrir square and the Occupy movement, yet now that these movements have lost much of their steam one can wonder what has come of these protesting voices. To contest a policy is one thing, to develop and implement alternatives another. And to the extent that grassroots movements do influence politics, they may end up actually *blocking* radical democratic change and collective agency (think again of the Tea Party).

Lefort himself never appeared to have been sharply aware of these problems, but two of his most important followers clearly were. Marcel Gauchet and Pierre Rosanvallon are not only Lefort's most gifted (former) disciples but also offer interesting diagnoses and remedies for the two problems just mentioned. Moreover, they are also France's leading political theorists and public intellectuals who today *de facto* occupy the position held in previous generations by Foucault or Bourdieu. Breckman does not think much of Gauchet and hardly mentions Rosanvallon, and instead suggests that the symbolic turn, as successfully represented by Lefort's *oeuvre*, has now become ineffective in France, as Gauchet's *oeuvre* would show. This is why, after discussing Lefort and criticizing Gauchet in the fourth chapter, Breckman turns to anglophone political theorists and

public intellectuals in the final chapters of his book. Yet if we take a brief look at Lefort's students it may become clear that fruitful reflections on contemporary democratic societies can still be found in today's France and that these students may help to see and solve problems that Lefort left unsolved.

Interestingly, Breckman complains about Gauchet's "strikingly restricted and minimal conception of democracy," which he calls "rigidly formalistic, homogeneous, and reified," and he likewise laments "the narrow terms in which Gauchet has confined his thinking about democratic politics" (180). However, it is important to recognize that for Gauchet it is his fellow citizens who hold this narrow view of democracy. Gauchet himself, by contrast, continues to develop one of the widest possible definitions of democracy, which allows him to criticize the prevalent thin conception while explaining why the wider "symbolic" definition of democracy has been forgotten.

Breckman is right to suggest that Gauchet, who remains faithful to the structuralist project, tends to identify the symbolic order with the state, which explains why he may underestimate the potential for social creativity. Breckman adds that "there is no mistaking that Gauchet's emphasis lies on the legitimizing function of symbolic form and not on the transformative possibilities of collective activism" (179–80). While Breckman admits that Gauchet "speaks frequently of collective action," he further adds that "collective action seems more like a strictly symbolic performance transacted within the representational domain of transcendent democracy" (180). Yet I believe that Gauchet still advocates real collective action, which is why he deplores that today's protest movements have become an impediment to collective action rather than its embodiment. Contrary to what Breckman suggests (e.g. 178, 180), and unlike Castoriadis (135), Gauchet sees no decline of civic activism, and nor does Rosanvallon. On the contrary, like Lefort they believe that there have never before been more civic activism and protest movements (thanks in part to the social media). The problem lies not in the amount of civic participation, but in its nature. Both Gauchet and Rosanvallon argue that it has become too negative or individualistic: individuals participate in public life (e.g. by criticizing their politicians on the Internet or by defending their rights or the rights of the groups they belong to), without connecting their particular grievances to a common narrative that keeps society together. For Gauchet and Rosanvallon, the way people feel connected to society depends on how people see themselves (for Gauchet), and how intermediary associations and institutions are operating (for Rosanvallon). Whereas Lefort still saw conflict between different groups in civil society as a way to invigorate democratic debate and maintain symbolic unity (because different groups invoke the same common good), Gauchet in particular thinks that such debates today

reflect and enforce an individualist logic.<sup>4</sup> By differentiating between different forms of contestation and showing why they can be problematic for democracy and the symbolic, Gauchet and Rosanvallon add a diagnosis that seems to be lacking in Lefort's and Breckman's account of radical democracy.

Based on Gauchet's theory one could offer the following diagnosis and remedy of democracy's ills. If it has become harder for politicians to act and govern, this may be in part because individuals demand that their particular needs are met. Think of how in the US and in Europe politicians have a hard time finding compromises because they believe that their constituencies (be it Tea Party radicals or German taxpayers) will be unforgiving whenever they "give in" in the interest of the wider American or European common good. One effect of this particularistic logic is that people complain about politicians' lack of power without realizing that it is the citizens themselves who deny politicians the ability to act in favor of the common good. For Gauchet this is just one big misunderstanding. If only, he suggests, citizens realized that they create their own disappointment, they could perhaps be willing and able to solve it. They could be convinced that it is in their interest to give up part of their own rights and agency (their demand that their particular voices be heard at all costs) as they would gain a much bigger collective agency in return. While Gauchet may not have many concrete solutions to offer, his ideal of collective agency embodied by politics and the state seems more effective than, say, Žižek's or that of the Occupy movement. Rather than focusing on agency at the micro level (protest movements), Gauchet and Rosanvallon in particular explore ways to contribute to democracy's ability to act collectively and structurally.

There is one further similarity between Breckman and Lefort. Both offer a genealogy of the symbolic by mainly focusing on theorists who are seen as forerunners of today's democracy. But where Breckman looks for precursors in German Romanticism, Lefort finds these origins in thinkers like Machiavelli, Tocqueville or the French Romantic tradition (e.g. Michelet). Yet here, too, Gauchet and Rosanvallon move beyond Lefort and Breckman. Whereas Breckman's *Adventures* consists of a rather traditional history of ideas about the differences and (possible) interaction between various ideas of the symbolic, Gauchet and Rosanvallon write a history that shows how the symbolic itself actually shaped a specific social and political reality and set of ideas. Such a history of the symbolic or the political is not a history of ideas about the symbolic but rather a revision of traditional history from the perspective of the primacy of the symbolic or the political. There is, then, not just a history of the symbolic turn, as documented by Breckman, but also a turn by theorists of the symbolic

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<sup>4</sup> See also their important disagreement on the symbolic and human rights (not discussed by Breckman).

towards its history, as exemplified by Gauchet and Rosanvallon. Both write, in a way, a new form of “adventures of the symbolic.” Unlike most of the other theorists which Breckman discusses, Gauchet and Rosanvallon indeed historicize and contextualize their ideas of the symbolic and see how it shaped society in past centuries. Such a history of the symbolic is, in fact, no less than a new genre, the history of democracy. As Rosanvallon once nicely put it, not only does democracy have a history, but “democracy *is* a history.”<sup>5</sup> The truly radical change in the recent history of the symbolic may thus not be theoretical in nature but rather methodological or historical. Political theory then becomes inseparable from historical analysis, thereby combining political theory and history in yet another way.

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, ed. Samuel Moyn (New York, 2006), 38, original emphasis.