

The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future.

John Milbank & Adrian Pabst. 2016. New York: Rowman & Littlefield. ISBN 978-1-78348-649-6. \$39.95 (paper).

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The theologian John Milbank and political scientist Adrian Pabst have collaborated to write a wide-ranging critique of western liberal social thought, and to provide an alternative to modern liberalism. They argue that a problematic kind of liberalism has come to define the politics, philosophy, and culture of western societies. This liberalism is facing a “metacrisis,” by which they refer to a set of systemic contradictions that lead inevitably to reoccurring crises and conflict. The solution to this metacrisis is to adopt their “post-liberal” alternative, which calls for revival of tradition, virtuous aristocracy, corporatism, and small-scale socialism.

The book is aimed primarily at those interested in political philosophy, and includes extensive historical and comparative analysis, whereas interaction with economic thinking is thin. Moreover, while this book shares many arguments with Milbank’s earlier writing, there is less emphasis on theology, and a decidedly practical bent in some sections that will make the book easier to read for traditional social scientists. For Christian economists interested in the economic systems debates happening across the academy, this book will likely be valuable (especially the first four chapters), though not light, reading. The book is organized into five parts with two chapters in each part. The five parts are politics, economy, polity, culture, and the world. The first chapter in each part discusses the metacrisis associated with the part and the second chapter offers their post-liberal alternative.

Liberalism

After a valuable introduction, the first part of the book lays out the authors’ primary thesis about the metacrisis of liberalism, and the basics of the “post-liberal alternative.” The authors claim that both liberalism on the left and liberalism on the right share an emphasis on individualism and negative liberty. They argue that liberalism is optimistic about technological progress, but pessimistic about human nature; liberalism assumes that human beings are “self-interested, fearful, greedy and ego-

tistic creatures, unable to see beyond our own selfish needs and, therefore, prone to violent conflict” (p. 21). This combination is rooted partly, they claim, in Calvinist and Jansenist theologies, which substituted for traditional ideas about original sin an extreme vision of total depravity. After surveying a variety of historical strands of liberalism, the authors conclude that there is a kind of unity in liberal thought that is at the heart of their critique.

The authors argue that liberalism is characterized by a retreat from “substantive” commitments toward materialism and procedure. Left behind are deference to tradition, religious metaphysics, and a recognition of virtue. Instead, we imagine the project of politics and economy to be amoral, with problems to be solved by balancing and channeling conflicting desires. This move away from substantive consensus results in an almost inevitable tendency toward rationalism and technocracy. Absent a substantive vision of the common good, or a long cultural tradition, society is left with no source of unity, and so the state and the market take over all of society. The economy moves toward individualist materialistic consumerism, and the state moves toward a technocratic oligarchy. The left and the right disagree about the balance of power in state and market, but they share the basic terms of debate and structure of society.

Ultimately, the metacrisis of liberalism stems from civilization-level problems that all trace themselves back to this abstraction away from of a substantive vision of humanity, simultaneous with a reduction of public life from the pursuit of the common good to a simple materialism. The authors’ solution is to return to a politics of virtue that unites greater economic justice and social reciprocity. This includes “a reciprocalist model of sharing risk, responsibilities and resources wherein reward is reconnected to personal requirements for varied self-fulfillment and for rendering a social contribution” (p. 3).

The post-liberal alternative focuses on universal human flourishing that can be attained if we adopt a view that there is a true end (*telos*) for society. A shared set of goals for human society allows the discernment of the different roles required to achieve these goals. We could then speak meaningfully of the common good as different from the summation of individual goods determined by self-interested individuals. This section returns to a familiar emphasis in Milbank’s work: gift. “Society is a spiral paradox of ‘non-compulsory compulsion,’ in which the giving of gifts (and every act and speech act is a gift) half-expects but cannot

compel a return gift. This is the very fabric of all human society” (p. 71).

Just as their critique is broad, so too is their solution. In the second chapter, they outline the contours of a social and cultural move away from liberalism. To counter the materialistic motives created by the liberal order, they advocate a renewed culture of honor. They propose to prioritize community and virtuous practices, devaluing equality of opportunity and social mobility. Rather than expecting and rewarding greed, the authors propose a “true” socialism of trust and reciprocity. They prefer a mixed constitutional monarchy over pure democracy, and a corporatist cooperative economy instead of antagonistic state-market conflict.

Economy

The second section of the book focuses on the economy and the “metacrisis of capitalism.” Here the authors argue that market economies have an essential tendency toward financial crisis, inequality, and social conflict. These problems, the authors argue, have their root in an economics that is overly abstract, prioritizes individuals over corporate bodies, and assumes / creates a fundamental scarcity of resources. They argue that this kind of economic thinking results in a commodified economy that is indifferent to social relations, symbolic meaning, tradition, duties, or purpose. Ultimately, they paint the picture of a capitalist economy that is at odds with the market: The actual provision of goods and services is undermined by the tendency toward individual accumulation and instability.

The bias toward abstraction and individualism, according to these authors, explains the recent financial crisis. They argue that we have witnessed a tendency toward the expansion of the financial economy, as opposed to the real production of goods and services. In the extreme, they argue that financial markets become untethered from the real economy, leading to increased speculation and layers of systematically connected risk. In this, they argue that the state is often complicit, by pointing to a long history of government bailouts, and state power growing with the expansion of public and private debt.

At the same time, as the real economy is devalued, the authors argue, following Marx, that the system requires a constant downward pressure on wages, and that there will ultimately be insufficient demand for real goods to sustain the speculative growth. Consumer debt grows, fueling the financialization of the economy even as it props up demand. Ultimately,

the consumption and production become unsustainable, and the economy falls back into a temporary crisis (recession), even as the larger structure continues to hollow the substance out of the economy (metacrisis).

As an alternative, in chapter four, Milbank and Pabst advocate for a civil economy as articulated by a group of Italian economists, beginning with Antonio Genovesi, a near-contemporary of Adam Smith. They contrast Genovesi and Smith: “For Genovesi, society is not primarily about the division of labour and the harmonious balances of rival self-interest in the marketplace (as for Smith). Rather, human beings have shared needs that can only be satisfied through mutual assistance” (p. 140). They continue: “If human beings are naturally political, social and gift-exchanging animals, they need to cultivate habits of personal and communal living that sustain the polity, society and the economy” (p. 141).

How can a civil economy be built? They suggest tying the lending of money to real investment and having banks invest in the enterprises themselves to expand shared ownership. They want to see debt treated very differently—as part of the logic of gift-exchange that generates a social bond, “whose essence is a grateful promise to make a counter-payment in the future” (p. 157). They further argue that society should collectively imagine a shared scale in determining value, to result in more just wages and prices. Most notably, perhaps, they picture a return to free guilds and a new type of corporatism. They write: “A certain subordination of technology to relatively stable human ends might be served by bringing new technology within the scope of existing guilds: we could then more easily ask, for example, *what* social purposes the mobile phone and the computer precisely serve and under what best permissions and restrictions” (p. 151).

Overall, while the authors’ suggestions for a new economy are numerous and broad, their primary goal is to undermine the connection between profit and conflict, which results in an arbitrary “aristocracy without honor.” Instead, they wish to ground all economic decision-making in more communal practices oriented toward the common good. In this economy, profit would reward genuine contribution to society, honorable practice, and sustainability. At no point is there any indication that the authors recognize any material cost to their suggested changes. Indeed, the idea that we would have to forgo wealth to pursue their communitarian goals runs directly counter to their thesis: true wealth does not require a conflict between efficiency and equity. This, they argue, is a false

choice that is created by the self-perpetuating assumptions and required practices of liberalism.

Polity, Culture, and International Affairs

The third section focuses more directly on politics. Milbank and Pabst argue that democracy under liberalism is unable to sustain true representative government. In particular, they claim that as a result of the liberal retreat from a shared substantive teleology, there is no source of unity. If we cannot assume that humanity has a shared, knowable purpose, then we cannot expect any consistent shared pursuit of the common good. Instead, politics becomes a battle for power. Each level of government is a site of a conflict between individual wills, and stable outcomes take the form of a majoritarian tyranny, a balance of competing powers.

Paradoxically, the authors give an extended argument for a mixed government (aristocracy and parliament) as a better way to secure democratic representation. In particular, they point to the functions of a monarch or hereditary aristocracy in pointing the parliament toward more permanent commitments in society, especially toward the protection of the particularities of individual communities. Similarly, the establishment of a state church, they argue, can provide a kind of official representation for a kind of interests that are lost in the material political struggle of democratic politics. If modern conservatives tend to argue for a limited government in favor of broader freedoms for markets, these authors want a very different kind of limited government. They argue for more local control, but also more varied sources of power, with cooperative governance and representation of firms, communities, religious bodies, and other institutions.

The fourth section of the book focuses on culture and education. The reign of liberalism in culture is marked, according to these authors, by rejection of religion, tradition, culture, and hierarchy. The reductionism of liberalism collapses these cultural structures in favor of a commodified and libertine consumer culture. Their key argument here is that culture operates as a kind of formation, or education, that happens both in and outside of schools. Liberal culture is at odds with transcendent truth, beauty, and, ultimately, humanism. To recover a culture that educates and forms virtuous people, the authors argue that culture and education need to escape the confines of the limited goals proscribed by the state and the

market. In particular, the authors propose a wide array of reforms, mostly aimed at the UK, which would expand connections between schools and virtuous practices, reconnect schooling with longer traditions, and move closer to the kind of Christian liberal arts education sometimes found in the United States.

Finally, the authors apply their critique of liberalism to international affairs, delving at some length into European unity and the challenge of conflict with Islam. Here, they argue that the international order suffers from an increased connectivity, but a diminished unity because of the liberal retreat from any substantive vision of the common good. This combination results in ever increasing negotiation of power with less consensus. Indeed, the Westphalian move toward nation-state sovereignty is ultimately undermined by the connectivity of peoples across borders, and the ultimately arbitrary expressions of an anarchic world order. The authors propose a re-embrace of empire in the form of a commonwealth, where countries are freely cooperating toward shared ends, and a neo-medieval international affairs characterized by strong cities, empires, and churches, not just nation-states.

Conclusions

While the authors have clearly provided a rich set of arguments for scholars to grapple with, economists will not find the authors well-versed in the contributions of economic scholarship to these questions. Indeed, at times the argument proceeds in spite of clear data and scholarship to the contrary. For example, the authors make passing reference to “The Great Enrichment,” but then ignore the fact that not only in the West, but also in large parts of Asia, hundreds of millions of people have been pulled out of poverty. Their argument leans heavily on the assumption that liberalism cannot truly produce wealth. They are thus forced, midway through chapter three, to respond to McCloskey (2011) by arguing, not on the basis of data, but on the basis of underlying metaphysics, that capitalism must produce conflict and poverty. Similarly, they note in passing, in chapter one, that violence is broadly increasing, while not noting declines in violence, by most measures, even as liberalism has matured. The data do not seem to back up even their most fundamental claim that financial crises and recessions have increased in frequency. In these and other areas, the argument could use strict scrutiny by economists.

Ideologically, the book is very difficult to pin down, especially in the landscape of the United States, where there are few who argue for an inherited aristocracy, an established church, and against social mobility. These arguments place them in debt to an older school of European conservative thought. At the same time, while they clearly owe an intellectual debt to Marx, and are happy to embrace a kind of socialism, they remain deeply suspicious of the modern state, observing that “liberty and equity cannot be rendered fully substantive by a programme of liberal statist equalization that has always proved to engender a new tyranny exercised by an elite of state functionaries and party cadres” (p. 69).

Because the authors move across history, philosophy, religion, politics, and economics at a quick pace, few outside the academy will find this book helpful. Moreover, we cannot recommend this as a good introduction to the study of these big questions in political philosophy, virtue ethics, or economics. However, for those scholars that are invested in continental political theory, particularly the economic dimensions, this will be a fruitful book to study. For Christian economists invested in the study of virtues in the economy, this book does provide a detailed study of the way ideologies, institutions, laws, and markets can impact economic culture and support virtuous practices. In this niche, the book may have a lasting impact.

References

McCloskey, D. N. (2011). *Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. ■