

Leadership At The Apex: Politicians And Administrators In Western Local Governments

Book Reviews | Political Theory

POLITICAL THEORY

Mestizo Democracy: The Politics of Crossing Borders.
By John Francis Burke. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002.
320p. \$39.95.

—Romand Coles, *Duke University*

This book gathers the diverse genres of the Latino heritage of *mestizaje* (the lateral mixing of cultures) in order to fashion a comprehensive political theory of "substantive pluralism" that would challenge the dominance of assimilationist and separatist frameworks, which, in John Francis Burke's view, underpin too many of the perspectives in contemporary U.S. politics. Drawing upon philosophers, theologians, poets, and activists, he articulates a vision of "unity-in-diversity" in which ethical, political, and religious life develops through continual vibrant interchange between different constituencies. Such interchange is often difficult and full of tensions and ambiguities that never wholly resolve, but it offers our best hope for forging substantively just agreements around key issues: it is vital for reducing inequalities and suffering in a world where these are distributed along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and class and it is a dynamic process through which the richness of human possibilities for flourishing might unfold. Far from picturing the 500-year-long Latin American *mestizo/a* tradition as an insignificant "minority" phenomenon that should be assimilated into U.S. liberal or republican traditions, Burke argues that *mestizaje* has long been a vital mode of being for millions of Americans and is crucial to the future well-being of the United States and beyond, as numerous minorities grow in numbers and as state sovereignty is impinged upon by multiple forces of globalization.

In the first of three sections, Burke develops "Mestizaje as political theory" as a way beyond the impasses of the "culture wars." His position has some points of contact with liberalism's dynamic elements, but he argues that this dynamism is understood too much in terms of the choices of abstract individuals. While he shares the communitarian sense that we are socially embodied, he consistently faults these theorists for rendering such embodiment in overly singular and homogeneous terms. While he articulates themes of difference, hybridity, agonism, and affectivity in ways that resonate with many postmodern theorists, he generally faults the latter for overemphasizing incommensurability and too thoroughly deconstructing reason. Within the European tradition, he expresses most affinity with philosophers like Hans Gadamer, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Hannah Arendt, whom he reads as striking the right balance between deconstruction and construction, conflict and hope, reason and ambiguity. From Latino Catholic theologian Virgil Elizondo and Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, Burke argues for a theory and politics of agonial engagement that develops significantly by means of affective-aesthetic practices.

In the second section, he articulates a "Post-liberation theology" that draws from earlier liberation theologians' critique

(from Bartolomé Las Casas to Enrique Dussel) of cultural and economic inequality, their "preferential option for the poor," and their focus on radically democratic base communities in contrast to established church hierarchies. Yet Burke's rendering has a more cultural accent, and he makes a greater attempt to develop and affirm the indigenous contributions to popular religion than did many of his theological predecessors. His religious sensibilities are explicitly syncretistic.

The third section of the book looks at practical applications, ranging from a close examination of a multicultural relations committee he chaired in a Catholic parish in Houston during the 1990's to rather quick, though interesting, discussions of the politics of language, equal opportunity, housing, and so forth.

I found many of Burke's themes and arguments compelling, and his sustained effort to bring in works outside of the genre of "political theory" in order to creatively engage central contemporary debates concerning community, the self, reason and affect, nation, religion and politics, practices of democratization, and so forth is commendable and refreshing. The book intelligently articulates themes proximate to many theorists of postcolonialism and radical democracy—and slowly but surely, such efforts are forcing more mainstream theorists to respond to new questions and alternative visions of political life that are increasingly important, in my view. Yet one of the book's virtues—its synthetic integration of many different genres and discourses—is entwined with a weakness. Too often I found myself wishing for more careful, developed, and probing discussions. Many of the basic themes alluded to above are quite widespread in academic literature these days. Burke pursues fascinating directions by initiating an important set of contacts where new questions and fruitful lines of inquiry may be pursued. Yet much of the hard work that matters most—the devil is in the details—remains to be done.

For example, in terms of philosophical debates, Burke repeatedly, but with too little evidence, characterizes "post-modernists" as entirely rejecting rationality, all consensus, and hopefulness. Yet many important theorists commonly called postmodern (e.g., Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, William Connolly) are far more nuanced and interesting than this in ways that would enrich Burke's text, if they were really engaged in the spirit of *mestizaje* he recommends. Similarly, while Burke's evocation of the aesthetic-affective registers is profound, particularly in relation to indigenous contributions to the ethos he envisions, this reader was left yearning for more development: How, more precisely, do the aesthetic-affective dimensions of political, ethical, and religious life interact with the more abstract, conceptual, symbolic registers (beyond lending passion)? How might we rethink the arts of political judgment in light of these interactions? Similarly, as Burke attempts to articulate the democratic politics of the *mestizo/a* vision, he suggestively sketches some of the grassroots democratic practices developing in urban areas throughout the southwestern United States. Yet his discussion remains rather sketchy. This reader was left

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