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Liberalism's Lawgiver Problem: Villa's *Teachers of the People*

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## REVIEWS

### Liberalism's Lawgiver Problem: Villa's *Teachers of the People*

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Dana Villa, *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville and Mill*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2017, 367 pp. ISBN: 978-0-226-46749-8

A familiar paradox lies at the heart of Dana Villa's *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill*. Villa simply calls it "Rousseau's paradox" because its canonical articulation is Book II, Chapter 7 of the *Social Contract*, where Rousseau writes that "for a people to be able to relish sound principles of politics and follow the fundamental rules of statecraft, the effect would have to become the cause; the social spirit, which should be created by these institutions, would have to preside over their very foundation; and men would have to be before law what they should become by means of law." Or as Rousseau restates the problem in the same chapter: "How will a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wants, since it rarely knows what is good for it, by itself execute so great and difficult a project as a system of legislation?"

This paradox has been explored and contested at length by contemporary democratic theorists, where it is usually said to model fundamental dilemmas of authorization that haunt the theory and practice of democratic politics. Rousseau invoked the great lawgiver in response to this paradox as a way of dramatizing the unauthorized heteronomic requirements of democratic autonomy. Villa, however, is not primarily focused on these debates or on the dilemmas of popular authorization that they emphasize. Instead, he turns to the educational project Rousseau assigns to the lawgiver, namely the ability to "so to speak, change human nature itself."

The project of creating a people capable of ongoing practices of collective self rule—of giving shape to "the people" properly so-called—was a central preoccupation of political theorists and activists across the ideological spectrum as popular sovereignty emerged as a hegemonic legitimating norm in the nineteenth century. As Villa writes, "an autonomous and self-governing people must first be taught to be autonomous and self governing" (29). Villa's examination of what constitutes this "teaching," and what kind of epistemic or moral authority can be claimed by these "teachers" in a rapidly democratizing political context, is one of the most illuminating aspects of this learned and engaging book.

*Teachers of the People* explores how the problematic of "education to autonomy" came to preoccupy four canonical political theorists—Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill—in the era of democratic revolutions in the West, which witnessed the epochal shift from royal to popular sovereignty, from feudal heteronomy to democratic autonomy. While we can clearly see antecedents to this general problematic in the ancient world—whether in the Book of Exodus, say, or in the problem space of Plato's *Republic*—and while it becomes an essential

feature in the early modern revival of classical republicanism, with Machiavelli being its essential figure, according to Villa, it assumes a distinctively modern form in the era committed (at least in principle) to universal civil equality and popular sovereignty. In this context, political theory no longer offered advice to princes, Villa argues, but became centrally preoccupied with “the question of popular political education” (6).

After examining Rousseau’s theoretical articulation of the problem in Chapter 1, Villa devotes the bulk of his book to three important—and I want to stress broadly liberal—attempts to navigate the theoretical and practical dilemmas it poses without falling back on what each of these thinkers perceive, in different ways and along different theoretical registers, as the premodern and illegitimate “formative projects” of classical republicanism and premodern political theory more broadly construed. It is important to stress the liberal orientation of the book, even if Villa himself never explicitly articulates or defends this orientation. Villa views the problem posed by Rousseau’s paradox from the perspective of liberalism in two different senses. On the one hand, his three chosen theorists after Rousseau are canonical nineteenth-century liberal theorists who in their different ways would agree with Tocqueville that they needed to construct a new political vision around a modern conception of individual freedom that exists in tension with the “formative,” “moralizing,” “paternalist,” “technocratic,” and “authoritarian” dimensions of so-called “political education” (to quote some of Villa’s descriptions). But Villa also examines *and judges* these nineteenth century liberals from what he himself describes as a “contemporary liberal perspective” (183). Villa does not seem to approve of these educative projects, in general. He both describes and critically evaluates earlier liberal theorists’ attempts to come to terms with the political salience of his framing problem, and their differently unsuccessful efforts to engage the dilemmas it poses to democratic politics, on underspecified “contemporary liberal” grounds. This raises unresolved questions for the book’s central argument.

Villa’s double liberal perspective, which provides the book’s logic of selection, on the one hand, and the normative position from which it is written, on the other, is instructive insofar as it demonstrates that some of the most profound thinkers of the liberal tradition have recognized the need to seriously engage with the formative dimensions of political life. We could, of course, add many other figures to the mix, thinking about Locke’s educational writings alongside his political theory, for example, or Kant’s aesthetics, which initiated prominent romantic projects of aesthetic education such as Schiller’s and others, alongside his moral and legal philosophy. The book’s liberal focus, in other words, has the salutary effect, although it is not Villa’s stated aim, of further demonstrating that the principled freedom at the heart of the early traditions of political liberalism is far from a feral libertarianism, and is poorly understood as simply antithetical to training, discipline, education, and authority. Inasmuch as we are formed to freedom, as so many contemporary theorists from Foucault on have emphasized (although it is unclear whether Villa wholly concurs), the key problem for liberal democrats becomes how to educate a people to freedom and autonomy without engaging in some illiberal forms of authoritarianism, paternalism, technocracy, and elite rule. How do we legitimate educational authority, as Villa puts the question, “when fixed

natural hierarchies and God-given patterns of authority and obedience had irretrievably broken down" (174).

This is the task these thinkers set for themselves, and Villa elaborates their varying attempts to navigate the problem—and, perhaps more importantly, their failures. Whether these failures are inevitable is a question raised by the book, but not one it openly engages or directly answers. So, on Villa's reading, Hegel replaces Rousseau's lawgiver with the multi-staged and decentered historical process of socialization itself, where understanding and social integration, not self-government or autonomy are the ultimate goals. Tocqueville is torn between privileging the bottom-up active learning of associational life and the more clearly paternalistic intervention of "propagandistic faith based commitments" (206). Mill, who is at least comparatively the hero of the book, is admired for his commitment to the kind of individualistic and Socratic opposition to the despotism of custom and received opinion that Villa had celebrated in his earlier book *Socratic Citizenship*, but is chastised for his commitment to indirect forms of popular instruction through the technical solution of institutional organization and weighted voting procedures favoring the educated (not to mention the more interventionist authoritarianism he argued was wholly legitimate in the uncivilized spaces of the British colonies).

On all of these fronts, Villa finds these liberal thinkers of political education wanting, albeit on underspecified liberal grounds. In the book's conclusion we get a better sense of the position from which Villa has approached his three thinkers and judged their failures, but it comes from a certain presentation of the thinking of Hannah Arendt, hardly a representative of the "contemporary liberal perspective." A central ambiguity at the heart of the book remains unresolved, even in this concluding discussion. Does Villa ultimately believe that Rousseau's paradox, translated as the problem of "education to autonomy," is a genuine and unavoidable problem that liberal political theorists, too, *must* address (if they are going to be liberal democrats, in any case)? Relatedly, are the three liberal attempts to address this paradox that he explores in the book—and their shared inability to successfully navigate the tensions involved—indicative of the inevitability of the failure to successfully navigate these tensions on liberal grounds? I was left with the sense that the formative project is an inevitable problem of democratic politics, and that reflective liberal theorists should engage with it directly, even if it confronts them with substantive commitments to people formation that they cannot fully justify on liberal grounds. But Villa never makes that argument.

As noted above, the problem of "education to autonomy" that Villa illuminates was a widespread preoccupation in the postrevolutionary political contexts that set his historical frame. In particular, the general problematic of collective self-formation was central to the radical republicanism of this era of revolution. Theorists and activists committed to the emerging radical democratic idea—an idea so widespread that François Furet called it the "revolutionary catechism"—that collectives could act deliberately, indeed, heroically in taking their own political destiny into their hands also emphasized the expressly educative dimension of this project. In the third of his *11 Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx wrote that "the materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men who

change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice." By the time Marx wrote those words in 1845 there was a robust discourse on the politics of individual and collective self-formation, whether in the heroic *montagnard* celebration of the people's self-emergence at the barricades, or the writings of radical egalitarian educational reformers like Joseph Jacotot, who Jacques Rancière examines in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (an unmentioned book that explores in very provocative ways with the issues Villa engages with here). Indeed, Marx himself had explicitly engaged with Rousseau's discussion of the lawgiver's capacity to "so to speak, change human nature itself" at the conclusion of "On the Jewish Question" (1843), but he did so to critique the emancipatory potential of a merely "political education."

These radical egalitarians also wrestled with the paradoxes of the "education to autonomy," in other words, but they did so from beyond the purview of liberalism. Had *Teachers of the People* investigated how a more ideologically diverse group of theorists and political actors engaged with its central dilemma, it might not only have deepened our sense of the dilemma's intractability and persistence, but brought more clearly into view the specificity of the liberal engagements with it, on which the book focuses. This could provide clearer answers to the unresolved questions posed above. Some consideration of these radical egalitarian attempts to wrestle with Rousseau's paradox would indicate the particular ways it appears from within the perspective of liberalism, and how it might appear and be navigated from a position beyond that frame.

## Circulating Authority: On Jill Frank's *Poetic Justice*

Christina Tarnopolsky

Jill Frank, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's Republic*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. 251 pgs. \$30.00 (pbk). \$90.00 (hc). ISBN: 9780226515779 (pbk) and 9780226515632 (hc).

In recent decades, scholars such as Peter Euben, John Wallach, Arlene Sax-onhouse, Sara Monoson, Christopher Rowe, and Elizabeth Markovits have read Plato's *Republic* for democracy by challenging the canonical view of it as an anti-democratic treatise that champions authoritarian rule by philosopher kings. This new democratic reading of the *Republic* has been made possible by employing one of two methods. The first takes the dialogical and dialectical structure of the *Republic* seriously in order to distinguish between the