

BOOK REVIEW

Scorza, Jason A. *Strong Liberalism: Habits of Mind for Democratic Citizenship*. Medford: Tufts University Press, 2008.

In *Strong Liberalism*, Jason A. Scorza suggests that “the question facing liberals” during an open-ended war on terror “continues to be whether democracy can be made *stronger* and more *secure* without undermining the fundamental purposes and prohibitions of liberalism” (193). His timely account suggests that liberals should attend more closely to what he calls the “inner life of politics” in order to take advantage of the stabilizing possibilities inherent in pluralism.

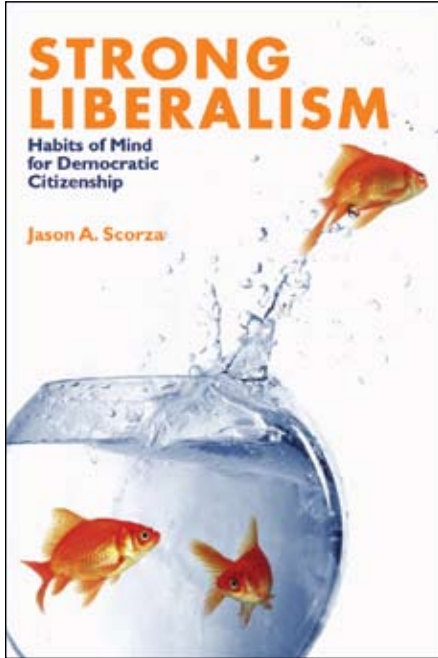
Examining these possibilities is especially necessary in the face of stultifying anxieties that inhere within modern political life—anxieties that take the form of fear of extraordinary oppression and anarchy, as well as the more ordinary fears of acting in the public realm. These fears produce not only political apathy, but the everyday experience of politics as “an empire of fear,” to be avoided.

Changing this experience of politics is not simply a matter of shifting structural components. As Scorza cogently argues, political philosophers should attend closely to the inner life of politics and the “habits of mind” that can train citizens in liberal virtues. Building on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s legacy of self-reliance and “democratic connectedness,” Scorza seeks to intervene between the warring camps of civic liberals, who often find a role for mandatory civic education in

a democratic state, and skeptical liberals, who usually deny that any such role should exist.

Scorza enters this debate by proposing that each side misses the intrinsic value of civic pluralism, the “idea that there are numerous reasonable and decent ways of being a good citizen in a representative democracy” (5). In contemporary civic liberal proposals, Scorza sees mostly futile attempts to shoehorn a diverse citizenry into a single mode of democratic life, no matter whether this mode is based on the irreducibly liberal value of tolerance or a somewhat longer list of core values. Instead, Scorza proposes “strong liberalism,” a program that emphasizes the resources of civic pluralism and requires a set of habits of mind that will give shape to the structure, but not the content, of civic life. These habits “enable citizens to think seriously about politics, discovering and choosing among various reasonable—but nonideal—ways of actualizing their citizenship” (6). Among possible habits, strong liberalism calls for civic toleration, self-reliance, civic friendship, courage, and irreverence as antidotes to the challenges presented by contemporary political fears.

The core of the book elaborates on the habits of mind constituent of strong liberalism. Each chapter is elegantly written and surprises the reader. To take a single instance, Scorza builds his account of civic friendship from a close reading of a few of Emerson’s poems and essays, arguing that Emerson’s dual norms of truth and tenderness hold keys for democratic civic life that would address, if not fully satisfy, the concerns of communitarian or neotraditionalist critics. These norms, for example, lead Scorza to argue against John Rawls that frank political speech



and mutual respect demand that we not deprive “our fellow citizens” of the “right to express their deepest and most passionate commitments in the public sphere,” even if these commitments are based on non-public reasons (110).

In the concluding chapters, Scorza anticipates two potential criticisms of strong liberalism that bear comment. First, Scorza seeks to avoid the trap of civic monism, the belief that a single conception of citizenship can sustain a democracy, into which he believes most accounts of civic liberals fall. Instead of imposing a single model of citizenship, strong liberalism’s habits are “adverbial,” in the sense that they address how democratic deliberation is conducted, not what the content of that deliberation should ideally be. Whatever political position a citizen takes up, she should act with courage and self-reliance, and in a spirit of friendship and irreverence. These habits, once taken on by citizens, can be refined

and employed for myriad civic purposes within a liberal democracy. They become facilitators for a robust civic pluralism, not impediments to it.

It is not clear, however, that Scorza’s invocation of the adverbial nature of his habits excuses him from the criticism of skeptical liberals, who are, like Scorza, wary of state control of civic ideology. Even if strong liberalism mandates no prescriptive catalog of virtues, its habits would tend to cultivate certain modes of civic action at the expense of others. To take one example, the habit of irreverence that has animated political comics from Aristophanes to Stephen Colbert could clash with the demands of a wartime state. State sponsorship of the habit of irreverence would amount to an agenda that might have felicitous consequences for the democratic polity, through an increased skepticism of the need to go to war, but it might not foster plural notions of citizenship.

The other, and perhaps more serious, tension within strong liberalism is the relation between the presumably thickly woven “inner life of politics” whose habits are vital to liberalism’s strength and the thin conception of civic life to which Scorza at times adverts. The habits of strong liberalism “are concerned entirely with critical reflection on the norms of citizenship, not on all aspects of life” (191). The thinness of these habits, which are specifically trained only on the civic sphere and no others, is necessary for Scorza’s defense of civic pluralism, which values a variety of conceptions of good citizenship and even the good life.

Yet strong liberalism’s defense against political fears, namely the development of a democratic personality capable of political self-reliance, demands inward,

thick habits. Developing these habits could not help but transform the norms of most social relationships for most citizens in addition to the purely civic norms that Scorza intends to adjust. These changes would likely be emancipatory for many men and women who live in traditional or neotraditional communities. But it is unlikely that the state could inculcate political self-reliance without radically altering the structure of these communities, which seems to run counter to Scorza's proposal for civic pluralism.

Strong Liberalism's proposal that we attend to the inner life of politics is a timely account of the psychological foundations of liberal democracy. What remains unclear is whether its celebration of civic pluralism is ultimately compatible with its demand that the state foster the habits of liberal democracy.

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