Exceptional Americanism

Simon Stow


George Shulman has written a brilliant book that is at once both classic and timely. While offering new and undoubtedly enduring insights on American politics, political rhetoric, and democratic theory, Shulman also ably embraces one of the most enduring tasks of political theory: explaining the polity to herself. At a time when the election of America’s first black president has produced thousands of column inches, blog posts, and hours of cable-news punditry on the emergence of a supposedly ‘post-racial’ America, Shulman ably reminds us of both the persistence and costs of the trope of racially neutrality in American politics. It is, however, not only what Shulman does in American Prophecy that marks it out as an essential read for scholars of American politics and culture – regardless of their disciplines – but also the way in which he does it. One of Shulman’s central claims about prophetic criticism is that, contrary to the dominant understandings of the genre, it can open up and invigorate democratic debate in a way that brings life to the public sphere. In this sense, perhaps, Shulman’s measured tone, careful arguments, and provocative rereadings of key figures in the history of American thought, along with his compelling case for the inclusion of Toni Morrison within that canon, ultimately serve to make American Prophecy an example of the thing that it studies.

As Shulman notes, there are certain registers of voice that liberal democracy deems illegitimate, regardless of the moral righteousness of their cause. Such critics of the status quo often are condemned for their methods at the expense of a consideration of their claims: from Frederick Douglass’ 4th of July Address, through Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter from a Birmingham Jail,’ to Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddamn.” Prophecy has long been considered an illegitimate register, understood as either a theistic genre concerned with seeking obedience to divinely given laws – Jonathan Edwards calling on sinners to come to the Christian God lest they be consumed by hellfire – or as the voice of fanatics or scolds unable to engage in the rational discourse of liberal-democratic society. In American Prophecy, Shulman convincingly recovers both types of prophecy for democracy, although it is the latter that he finds most intriguing.

While noting the scriptural and textual evidence for the theistic view of prophecy as a matter of conveying and establishing fidelity to objective laws – a view espoused by, among others, Leo Strauss, Norman Podhoretz, and Jerry Falwell – Shulman, drawing on
William Blake and Martin Buber, nevertheless identifies the conditional registers of voice even in prophecy’s most theistic forms. This offers, in the process, a much broader definition of the genre. Prophecy, he argues, should be interpreted as an “office,” one “that involves making certain kinds of claims in certain registers of voice: as a messenger bearing truths we deny at great costs, as a witness giving testimony about the meaning and costs of conduct, as a watchman who forewarns of danger to forestall it, as a singer whose lamentations redeem the past for the present” (232). By opening up the definition of a genre that he calls “capacious,” Shulman is able to incorporate into it a number of figures who have previously been excluded from the canon. In so doing, Shulman offers a compelling account of prophecy as a source of “democratic authority;” one whose intense rhetorical register is that of the more traditional theistic account, but which nevertheless opens up democratic possibilities. By demanding recognition of the ways in which what appears given, natural, or normal, is constructed (often in deliberately exclusionary ways), Shulman suggests, prophecy seeks to overcome the “motivated blindness” that underpins the exclusions and contradictions of liberalism.

In *American Prophecy*, Shulman focuses on the ways race is excluded from the Eurocentric political thought that founded the nation, but his is also an argument that expands outwards towards, and resonates with, recent democratic theory. Indeed, citing an affinity with William Connolly’s agonistic understanding of democracy, Shulman notes that race might serve as “a kind of trope for the issue of power, to suggest why politics, while it always must concern modes of being and becoming that emerge among interlocutors in dialogue about plural identities and faiths, also must be something else: adversaries struggling to reconstitute regimes that privilege some by subjugating others” (242). Shulman is ultimately concerned with the ways in which such relations are intensified by race in the peculiar context of American politics. Bringing together political theory and American studies, Shulman fleshes out this argument by identifying the different ways in which a number of key figures sought to highlight this subjugation and bring about change through prophetic speech and prose.

Shulman begins his revised account of prophecy with a re-reading of Thoreau. Rejecting Sacvan Bercovitch’s claim about the “ritual of consensus” in American politics – in which the narrative of the American Revolution ritualizes disagreement, ultimately making any summons to dissent a means of control – Shulman shows how Thoreau offered a mode of dissent that transfigured American political understandings. Far from being a dogmatic scold whose mode of speech was antithetical to democratic politics, Thoreau’s engagement with the prophetic idiom led him to position himself as a fellow citizen whose words and speech sought to provoke his neighbors to self-reflection and engagement: seeking solidarity both to create power and to provoke political dialogue. In this, Shulman suggests, Thoreau offered a new kind of prophecy, one in which the authority of the prophet rested not upon the divine origin of his moral claim, nor upon any claim to special knowledge, but rather upon his position and particular experience. Central to this effect was the prophet’s use of idiomatic language: the power of his poetry to resonate with others and to invite their response. Crucially for contemporary politics, however, Shulman notes that poetry – which today appears a more abstract and elite practice than it was in Thoreau’s day – should also be understood as vernacular and
vulgar language, as the register of everyday speech. It is through this medium that the prophet positions him or herself to address her fellow citizens: to provoke and demand their engagement.

Demonstrating, however, the continued power of the ritual of consensus in American politics, Shulman notes the ways in which both Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Baldwin have been domesticated in and by American culture at the expense of each man’s commitment to a democratic vision beyond liberal proceduralism. On this reading, Shulman observes, King has become an icon who lived and died so that the nation’s progressive narrative might live; while (courtesy of Richard Rorty’s misreading in particular) Baldwin has become a critic who stood up for universalism in America’s national consensus, one with the apparently simple goal of “achieving our country.” Subsequently, however, Shulman saves both figures from this deradicalized, deracialized, and – in Baldwin’s case – desexualized, reading by identifying each man’s reworkings of the prophetic tradition, showing how each employed a particular form of love to democratic effect.

King, Shulman argues, negotiated multiple tensions – between theism and post-war liberalism, between black, white, and national audiences, and between the effort to transform blacks into redemptive protagonists and the need to transform liberal society – to translate prophecy into political action. Central to this approach, Shulman suggests, was King’s rejection of fundamentalism and scriptural literalism in favor of agape. By employing this particular brand of love in politics, Shulman argues, King advanced his moral principles in democratically useful ways; by upholding a faith committed to equality, dialogue, and non-violence, King demonstrated the ways in which absolute or declarative claims do not necessarily end debate but can frequently provoke it. In this way, Shulman suggests, King stepped outside the idioms of liberalism, but not those of democratic discourse.

Noting that King’s Christian love nevertheless still moralizes politics in a way that is problematic for many, Shulman shows how James Baldwin reinterprets love as an acceptance of actualities that have been denied. By recognizing the ambiguities and ambivalences of love, Shulman argues, Baldwin makes love a tragic language by which to theorize politics. Furthermore, rather than simply embracing a story of a providentially chosen people who redeem themselves by making good on their liberal creed, Baldwin identifies a “racial state of exception”: depicting a nation founded in genocide and slavery whose ideals have never been practiced, or which have been practiced only in exclusionary ways. Thus Baldwin rejects the idea of invoking a true America to criticize the actual one, articulating instead a constitutive history and relationship to others which must be owned by all. In this, Shulman suggests, Baldwin shares much with Toni Morrison. Whereas Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King seek a return to origins by reinterpreting first principles long practiced in reified ways, Baldwin and Morrison depict coming-to-terms with a past that is haunting and horrific precisely because its has always been denied.
Fittingly then, Shulman begins the final chapter of *American Prophecy* by noting that the idea for the book first arose from his reading of Morrison’s *Beloved*, which, more effectively than any other text, “dramatizes the redemptive language and longing that has driven American culture and that has twinned white and black” (175). A central problem of the narrative turn in political thought is, of course, the tendency for critics to make the text say what they want it to say, to fill any political or theoretical hole that they want it to fill. As Shulman notes, *Beloved* itself has fallen prey to this approach among those who would read it as a novel of redemption for the American nation. Shulman rejects this account of the text, not to replace it with another equally reductive or theoretically expedient reading of his own, but rather to show how the text refuses to be categorized in such simple ways. While addressed to African Americans, Shulman suggests that the novel invites its white readers to “make contact with the unspeakable,” not as a way of substituting literary experience for actual suffering, but as a way of inviting whites to hear black stories and to think about them. “In this way, perhaps,” writes Shulman, “Morrison allows for differences in audience and experience that are erased by theories of deliberation” (214). The novel points to a dialogic community beyond the text where the real political work is to be done: provoking democratic discussion by leading whites to bear witness, often perhaps, against themselves.

Hanna Pitkin once described political theory as being concerned with those things that might be different if we chose to change them. *American Prophecy* is concerned with showing how prophetic narrative might itself be considered a form of political theorizing. By tracing the ways in which prophecy can and has been used to generate political change in democratically productive ways, George Shulman has not only achieved this goal, he has potentially expanded the field itself. In this, *American Prophecy* is a remarkable work both of, and about, political thought and action.

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