

Sapiential Voices

George A. Panichas

The Myth of Democracy, by Tage Lindbom, with an Introduction by Claes G. Ryn, *Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996. v + 130 pp. \$14.00.*

The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience, by Francis Canavan, *Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995. xi + 164 pp. \$59.50/\$22.95 paper.*

OF WISDOM, HUMAN AND DIVINE, there is always need. In an age of negations this need is far more acute, even as the sources of wisdom are manifestly diminished by the swift growth of secularization. Indeed, in the religious realm itself, in which the sapiential voice has traditionally been heard, that voice has been unusually silent—or silenced. Clearly, wisdom speaks to the interior, spiritual self, but that self has been relegated to abstraction or irrelevance in the modern age. The self that we see prized today is the sensate, external self, the self that is a servant, even a prisoner of the temporal world. And, invariably, that

world dismisses wisdom from the lexicon of life and conduct. Likewise, teachers and thinkers “filled with the spirit of wisdom” are dismissed by principalities and powers that legislate diverse ideological systems, particularly liberalism and socialism. “Terrible simplifiers,” not men and women of wisdom, regulate the rhythm of socio-political life under the banner of democracy, which in reality, as the Swedish historian and philosopher Tage Lindbom (b. 1909) attempts to show, is “the myth of democracy,” words he uses as the title of his book.

In both purpose and achievement Lindbom’s book explodes this myth. Eloquence of argument, force of belief, wide and reasonable disquisition identify the strengths of *The Myth of Democracy*, and also its remarkable discriminations and judgments. For contemporary readers it has urgent interest, especially if the present outlook of Western secularism is to be perceived in all of its threatening symptoms. At a time, too, when those who shape opinion and define attitudes of taste and thought possess imperial power and influence, we need to ponder the writings of brave dissenters like Lindbom challenging a regnant modernism that insists on “human supremacy as our ultimate aim.” These dissenters are, as Lindbom writes, “Men of tradition [who] are now in a serious situation.” This “situation” is further exacer-

GEORGE A. PANICHAS is editor of *Modern Age*. His latest book is *The Critic As Conservator*, and he has edited, most recently, *In Continuity: The Last Essays of Austin Warren* (Mercer University Press, 1996).

bated by the phenomenon of contemporary man usurping the place of God. Lindbom critiques this phenomenon in its historical process and consequences; that is to say, he traces in convincing ways the process of secularization.

Thus, Lindbom points to some of the major inaugurators of this process: Roger Bacon, in the thirteenth century, who believed that through mathematics it will become possible to secure knowledge equal to divine truth; William of Ockham, in the fourteenth century, whose nominalism was a hard blow against the conception of creation as a total unity; René Descartes, whose *Discours de la Methode* (1637) was a fundamental document of modern scientific positivism; John Locke, whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) brought sensualism to its philosophical perfection. In short, what we see transpiring in secularization in the Western world is the reduction of man to rationalism and sensualism, and the rise of a spirit of doubt and denial eroding belief in the transcendent and divine Reality. This erosion, of course, prepared the way for radical historical movements and happenings, and for a revolutionary change in man's view of himself, of the world, of God. The French Revolution of 1789, hence, was to condemn the old traditional order and proclaim a new world view, in effect moulding the modernism that discredits the belief that divine power is at the center of creation and that there is a perennial cosmic equilibrium that provides man with principles of order. Lindbom aptly sums up the revolutionary transformation that occurs in human history and destiny in these words: "For the modernist, history is the story of rapid change in which all things are relative; and these he considers as permanently necessary conditions, necessary in order to open new and expanding fields for human activity."

What we often speak of as the crisis of modernism is one in which the image of the City of God fades as the foundations of the City of Man are erected. Lindbom sees the City of Man, modernism, and democracy as a "trinitarian' Gestalt" aggressively emerging in the years following World War II, with the extinction of the last remnants of order in the West. In this connection he singles out Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) as "the Philosopher of the City of Man" denying not only the existence of any higher powers or higher values, but also dualities like spirit and matter, good and evil. For Lindbom, Heidegger's mechanistic world view provides an ample and representative statement of "the new outlook," in other words a new and raw secularization increasingly characterized by the belief that truth is the world of phenomenon, of sensation and perception, and that any acceptance of the "permanent things" is insupportable and irrelevant. "Western secularization is at the threshold of its fulfillment," Lindbom declares, "and Martin Heidegger provides the philosophical formulations for this decomposition." Heidegger's horizontalist philosophy, he contends, removes all points of reference from the human consciousness, and at the same time it provides a consciousness of chaos and disorder, of man's rootlessness and homelessness. Heidegger's atheistic existentialism glorifies the self that man in the modern world seeks in his individual self, which, to recall here Marjorie Grene's apt comment in her book *Dreadful Freedom* (1948), "he must forge for himself out of such senseless circumstances, such meaningless limitations, as are given him."

Heidegger's place in modern philosophical thought epitomizes for Lindbom the negations that are at the core of the crisis of modernism, and of the consequences that emerge from a view of human existence founded on the belief

that, as Lindbom cogently expresses it, "There are no firm points in our existence; all is flux." Lindbom, in this book, is measuring the results, historically and morally, of a philosophy like Heidegger's, proclaiming as it does "a one-dimensional existence and, consequently, total subjectivism in a continuous stream." Perhaps the most alarming feature of this consequence in modern thinking is the grim spiritual deorientation that ensues: the repudiation of "eternal laws"; the growing disorder and the disharmony in life as men and women surrender more and more to the profane dialectics of a modern cosmology (as it is conceived by a Sartre or a Heidegger), which proceeds to create a world of "dead souls."

For Lindbom the new world order, ahistorical, or posthistorical, in character and temper, has no stable point of reference, no genuine metaphysical ground of being, no commonly accepted universal values and verities. "In its pseudo-metaphysical Gestalt, democracy is the City of Man; in its existential Gestalt, it is modernism." Democracy becomes static and non-historical, a myth without reverence for the future or the past. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Lindbom believes, has thus won his victory; his myth of sovereign Man expresses what constitutes the true power in the world and also discloses the two "archetypes" of liberty and equality. Liberty, Lindbom asserts, echoing here Eric Voegelin, is an energy, or dynamic, that invariably seeks to free itself from the structures and systems of order, to create a "life without prejudice"—and the consequences are telling, as "the myth of liberty becomes anarchy." This democratic myth, Lindbom argues, has to have another foundation stone to guarantee its triumph and to display its own order: equality, but this is quantitative equality, to be more precise, that belongs to the utopian dream world, but that also

dominates the polity, re-defines and re-structures moral systems, and translates power, in meaning and application, into something that is numerical and statistical, evidenced in the Popular Will, in the mass-man and mass-mind Ortega y Gasset has portrayed with prophetic insight.

A major strength of Lindbom's critique is that it helps remind us how a false metaphysics proclaims its own ideological systems and its own gods, as well as its own intellectual monisms. The prime casualty of this process is the Kingdom of the Spirit, now replaced by the Kingdom of Man in which, especially as conceived by Karl Marx, all life has its basis in biological and sensory reality. Whether in the form of liberalism, socialism, or Marxism-Leninism the "self-idolization by man is Luciferism, pure and simple." And because of progressive secularization, and what emerges from it, the West has been trapped in Luciferism, the full consequences of which we have been confronting throughout the twentieth century. Lindbom prompts us to take inventory of these consequences, not only in the social-economic sphere, but also in art and letters, now being pushed to their Luciferian limits, with distinctions between good and evil, beauty and decadence being annulled. Anti-art, anti-novel, anti-music are the solipsistic effects of a wanton secularization. "When the divine is totally denied," Lindbom stresses, "the ineluctable consequence is that there is nothing else to take its place but the spirit of negation, the satanic."

Of Lindbom's significance to us, Professor Claes G. Ryn, in his exceptionally full and astute introduction, writes: "He incisively confronts dimensions of problems with which Western intellectuals are increasingly unable or unwilling to deal but which require close attention." *The Myth of Democracy* puts us in con-

tact with the philosophical mind and the moral and spiritual vision of that great tradition that, in this century, includes a Nicolas Berdyaev, a Romano Guardini, a Gabriel Marcel, a Max Picard. And no less than these great men of wisdom, Lindbom helps us to discern the tragic fate of civilization in its "flight from God." The specificities of this fate in terms of contemporary disorders, devolutions, confusions, and misdirections are found in Father Francis Canavan's *The Pluralist Game: Pluralism, Liberalism, and the Moral Conscience*. The thesis of this distinguished collection of essays is that we have no alternative but that of seeking for "a better intellectual and moral foundation for polity."

Lindbom's sapiential reflections on secularization, and, in turn, on "the degradation of the democratic dogma" which the historian Henry Adams had focused on in his time, help us to penetrate the peculiar rhythm of this degradation as it is specified in *The Pluralist Game*. Father Canavan, a political philosopher and teacher, illustrates the alliance between liberalism and secular monism, an alliance that Lindbom diagnoses in its metaphysical contexts. Father Canavan enables us to pinpoint what this alliance brings about in secular pluralist society in its contemporary American version. Above all, he demonstrates that even in a pluralist society there must be a public morality; that the law itself, as the conscience of the community, has a worthy function in the realm of public morals and can proclaim a public moral standard, especially in a time of moral liberalization, when rationalistic and utilitarian suppositions dominate the "public square." Father Canavan holds resolutely to an axiomatic position, in short, to a moral standard, increasingly imperiled in American pluralist society:

All that attacks or corrupts life and all that weakens the institutions that shelter

and foster life, is evil. Only when modern men regain this vision can we stem the tide of opinion that is now undermining Christian morality and is therefore sweeping away the legal structures inspired by that morality.

As Father Canavan counts up the costs of secularization at all levels of American life, it is not hard for a reader to see how Enlightenment views give way to the demonic distortions that Lindbom warns against. In the "segregation of religion from the nation's public," especially as seen in the light of Supreme Court decisions on religion, he discerns the establishment of "the religion of secular humanism." Father Canavan stresses that our pluralism, as it has evolved, has reached a point when there are now millions of Americans who are left "with the feeling that they are now strangers in their own land." He also notes that the neutral state that we have inherited is the liberal state, that liberal government is neutral government, and that the ultimate liberal ideal is one of "normlessness." This specious neutrality, as it is unmistakably made clear both in *The Myth of Democracy* and in *The Pluralist Game*, ends in the final and absolute repudiation of any assumption of truth and any idea of value. Father Canavan's book identifies the shapes and forms of the secular process of disintegration and destruction that Lindbom calls "the bitter harvest of Luciferism." "...[T]oday's pluralist society," Father Canavan writes, "is not merely the result of the loss of faith by multitudes in the past. It is also an advanced stage on the way to a post-Christian secular culture."

What Father Canavan has to say about life-norms becoming more secular and post-Christian as we move into the twenty-first century should be of great importance at this stage of the American experience. In particular he warns that churches seeking to accommodate the new morality risk their true religious

mission and character. The pervasive tendency to accept artificial contraception, pornography, pre-marital sexual intercourse, remarriage after divorce, and legalization of abortion, he stresses, underscores the decline in the institutional life of the Church in America. "The pluralistic society, therefore," Father Canavan declares, "stands upon no moral principles but is unified only by the procedural principle of an official neutrality that treats all beliefs equally." This "pluralist game," in effect, has no common standards, no absolute values, thus carrying with it the inevitable consequence that pluralism will degenerate into mere individualism, that is to say, a curious mixture of libertarianism and egalitarianism that is at once vacuous and yet destructive, and concludes in the dissolution of norms, or as Father Canavan notes: "We lack...an ordering principle [that is, a common moral principle] because we are so devoted to liberty and equality as the supreme norms of a democratic society that we will not admit their subordination to any higher norms."

No less than Lindbom, Father Canavan is deeply preoccupied with the problem of liberty in a democratic society. And for both commentators liberty, when lacking some inner check, or restraint, leads to the excesses now found in the attitude that rights transcend obligations, moral laws, moral virtues. The belief that there is an irresolvable conflict between individual rights and public morality is central to the liberal ideology and its unceasing effort to establish what Father Canavan terms "a purely procedural and substantively neutral model of society." This belief now fashions the new morality of the Western world in general and of American society and culture in particular. *The Myth of Democracy* scrutinizes the metaphysical dimensions of "the Luciferian process"; *The Pluralist Game* measures this process in its distinctly American con-

stituents, as a case study, so to speak. It is a real privilege to have in hand two books which complement each other in powerful ways, and help one to see the nexus of causes and effects. That which, finally and firmly, unites these two books is a common concern with the moral virtue of order in the soul and in the commonwealth. How liberty plays a fateful role in the order of human existence has an overarching part in this concern. Tage Lindbom and Father Francis Canavan never forget these words of Edmund Burke: "But the liberty, the only liberty I mean, is a liberty connected with order, that not only exists with order and virtue, but which cannot exist at all without them."

A Hyper-Darwinian Enterprise

JOHN C. CAIAZZA

Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life, by Daniel C. Dennett, *New York: Touchstone Books, 1995. 521 pp. \$30.00.*

THIS BOOK FEATURES more than usually extravagant blurbs on the covers of its paperback edition, not only from professional biologists who might be expected to know about Charles Darwin and theoretical biology, but also from figures such as Richard Rorty and Joyce Carol Oates. This is all the more remarkable for the book does not fulfill its promise to utilize Darwinian theory to explain virtually every important aspect of human life, well beyond Darwin's original purpose to explain the origin of species. There is no patience or modesty in Daniel

JOHN C. CAIAZZA is an administrator at Tufts University.