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Criticism and Politics: A Polemical Introduction (Book Review)

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Bruce Robbins, *Criticism and Politics: A Polemical Introduction*. Stanford University Press, 2022. 272pp. 978-1503633209. Reviewed by Shaun Stiemsma, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English, Dordt University.

Reading through *Criticism and Politics*, I was reminded of my fraught position as a literary critic who is a person of faith. My deepest convictions must undeniably impact my work as a literary scholar and teacher, and, if those convictions are truly deepest, they must give purpose to that work.

I am reminded of this difficulty not because Bruce Robbins, the author of the book and a literature professor of some twenty years at Columbia University, is a Christian (his book certainly seems to indicate that he's not), but because the premise of his book is that one's personal convictions—in his case, generally progressive political ones—ought not merely to impact one's scholarly work but must define its purpose. Although I do not agree with many of his particular conclusions, and I find the logic he bases them on less than compelling, the book is an earnest effort to make sense of the relationship between the fairly obscure realm of literary scholarship and the everyday world of politics, economics, and personal identity.

Robbins intends the book to address the purpose of literary criticism, but the book is truly driven by anxieties about a life spent in service of a politically motivated criticism. The question that overtly drives the work is what the role of literary (and cultural) scholarship is, relative to the larger society, but this question itself emerges from at least two apparent anxieties. First, Robbins anxiously asserts progressive political goals despite the presumed opposition between a privileged academic elite and an oppressed world of economically and politically underprivileged groups. Second, he grapples with the fear that literary criticism as a whole is turning away from the political agendas that have animated Robbins' life's work and that of his contemporaries.

This existential crisis seems to drive the entire work, a kind of late-career angst from a scholar approaching retirement, defending his life's work and trying to make sure it is perpetuated by scholars going forward. It is this element in the book that most makes its shortcomings worth examining from a Reformed perspective, as his apparent anxieties and account of himself offer much to consider regarding critical engagement with the larger world, even as he seeks ends not altogether compatible with our own Reformed concept of cultural engagement.

Throughout the work, which he subtitles *A Polemical Introduction*, Robbins attempts to navigate and respond to new and old perspectives in defending the political utility of criticism, suggesting that it can concretely contribute to the central human purpose, as he sees it, "to govern others," and to do so differently than we have thus far. Robbins longs for progressing toward a more democratic world in which the voices of those who have been oppressed and repressed are heard. He proposes that literary criticism can help achieve this by carrying forward the emphases it has built on since the cultural movements of the 1960s, developing what he calls "cosmopolitical" and "transhistorical" ideals to teach the broader culture to govern better. Although his convictions are not wholly compelling to me as a literary critic, the book serves as a helpful contribution to a conversation about making meaning from literary texts while striving to make a difference in the world.

Robbins situates his work as a response to recent trends in literary criticism, especially the post-critical stance in the last decade that "attempts to de-politicize the practice of criticism, and even to carry forward the right-wing culture war's attack on the humanities" (7). The book's main purpose is to reverse this shift away from "critical theory" in literary studies, particularly by Rita Felski, whom Robbins claims has "led the charge" against "critique" (65). Her attempts to examine "love" instead of "power" in literary scholarship move away from a context-driven critique that finds fault in the revered works of the past, and instead seeks to find aesthetic value and even delight in the task of literary scholarship. Robbins argues that such a move not only makes the central task of criticism irrelevant but also undoes all the critical ground gained by New Historical, Marxist, deconstructionist, feminist, queer, and other perspectival readings

in the sixty years since the popular movements of the 1960s made their way into American (and global) political life and academic culture. His book outlines his design to extend the critical work that grew from these movements into the future. Criticism should thereby continue to refine itself as it progresses toward its ideals.

He also argues that the kinds of readings encouraged by Felski and others are not as apolitical as they claim, but instead they are reactionary, mired in the same politics of conservativism that led to the dominance of close reading, the "false universality" of human nature available in texts of the canon (62), and the presumption of a perspectiveless neutral reader who best asserts the meaning of the text. To Robbins, these assumptions can do harm, excluding any minority or alternate perspective from the dominant voice of inherited meaning (typically from a Euro-centric, white, and male construction). Criticism in his view ought to give a platform for the voices of those groups who realize that "those who were in the habit of speaking for everyone were not necessarily speaking for *them*" (62). He cites the traditional role of the critic vis-a-vis Matthew Arnold as the detached keeper of a sacred past who attempts to enlighten the debased present, an essentially elitist position that academia has frequently embraced for itself.

Robbins' ideal of political engagement for criticism—and his essential defense for the entire endeavor of literary criticism—is that of committed critics who embrace identity politics, though qualified in their commitments by intersectionality, which he defines as "a willingness to expose the taken-for-grantedness of class self-interest or class identity to the scrutiny called for, in a given political moment, by the practical desire for coalition with other collectivities" (117).

This self-critical perspective, according to Robbins, enables critics of contemporary culture to show how we have progressed beyond the works of the past and to find previously silenced voices and emphasize previously repressed perspectives to move a not-yet-fully developed present into a more progressive future. He even suggests that a central value to the study of world literature is to uncover "the history of those cultural norms that have made it possible to condemn violence even when it is we who commit it against someone. Wherever, whenever, and however such norms developed, we and our students need to know more about them" (206). He puts his faith in the study of world literature to find these norms, which are central to the Christian ideas of sin, repentance, and restoration, without realizing the irony of his position, as he elsewhere expresses the hope that "divine intervention in the affairs of men will … subside as an active hypothesis both inside the academy and … beyond it" (126). If he hopes literary criticism might help eliminate faith in God in time, perhaps we can also hope that the divine intervention which permitted us to condemn our own violence—nowhere clearer than in the Apostle Paul's life and application of Christ's teachings—might also be shown through this critical endeavor and affirm the centrality of divine intervention to the possible progress of the human race.

Robbins does not only negate past and present critical ideas about the universality of human nature but also constructs his own version of a more progressive literary criticism that inclusively and carefully navigates sameness and difference with his notions of "transhistorical" and "cosmopolitical" criticism, with the first addressing difference and continuity across time and the second across space. The "transhistorical" suggests that, rather than a timeless, universal humanity, the critic ought to seek to show a story of progress towards a more inclusive and enlightened human governance. Robbins attempts a nuanced position, claiming that "the single great collective story … offers an attractive answer to the thorny and long-delayed question of 'why past texts matter and how they speak to us now'—in other words, that is a way of historicizing transhistorical sameness" (176). Similarly, "cosmopolitical" criticism is inclusive of all traditions in finding a truly "world" literature, one in which national boundaries and specific cultural traditions matter less than the contributions of all toward the literary recounting of human progress. He acknowledges that such solidarity at a global level is difficult to achieve, but that the commitment to politics must remain, with the hope that "the dark cloud of global capital" might have a "silver lining" in becoming the basis for "world-

scale solidarities" (213). Robbins, thus, outlines a critical vision, not only to deny universality in time and space but also to escape temporal or spatial provincialism of modern, liberal Western intellectuals, though his principles for doing so are unsurprisingly closely aligned with those of modern, liberal Western intellectuals.

The book's attempts at sophistication too often come across as either special pleading to uphold ideas he wishes to insist upon while seeming to incorporate criticisms of those ideas, or as being so nuanced as to say almost nothing at all. His reworking of the concept of intersectionality as primarily *self*-critical is unlikely to satisfy those who embrace intersectionality or those who consider it anathema. Or when he claims, based on following his notions of historical difference and sameness in criticism, "The value of the knowledge gained by bringing in previously silenced perspectives and relativizing universal judgments may be, in truth, inestimable" (186-87), one suspects that he might even be conscious of disingenuousness of the claim, as who can estimate, and by what system of value, the relativizing of universal judgements?

Logical problems of this kind abound in the book, but its apparent incoherence is perhaps no more logically problematic than some of our own Reformed views, such as the belief in cultural transformation through Christ without an affirmation of overall progress through human history. Robbins' writing, strained as it may be at times, is quite earnest in defending critical practice that has brought about desirable outcomes, such as the exposure of exploitation and manipulation.

Robbins' focus on the social usefulness of such critical outcomes attempts to take on "the professional-managerial class," as he terms it, on its own terms, but also to claim a space for critics to sharply and negatively criticize that class, in the interest of better governance. Thus, he wants a revolutionary stance, but not one that is so revolutionary that it would eliminate the centrality of social utility that guides the political philosophy of those who have power.

The book is a tough one to recommend, not because of the number of its ideas that I or readers of this review might disagree with, but because of the incoherence of their articulation. But for all its disorderly and inconsistent handling of its purpose, the book is useful to challenge our own settled assumptions and the presumed superiority of a Reformed perspective, though not as he intended to—such as the way his nuanced incoherence reminds me that my own nuanced beliefs would certainly seem utterly incoherent to him. He articulates a solution to the problem of the irrelevance of literary scholarship and suggests that some commitments must enter into any critical perspective. For example, we are all ultimately political animals, in his terminology, or, as I would term it, we are all religious, and everything we do has ultimate consequences.

As a Christian and a literary critic, do I then pursue a course and encourage a course that replaces the missionary zeal for Robbins' progressivism with one for my own Christianity? I hope not, or at least not fully in the straightforward way he recommends. While his book calls people to action under an ultimately incoherent combination of social constructionism and of progressive outcomes—and these depend entirely on people taking actions to bring about his "democratic ideal"—I do not believe that the possibility of meaning in history and of direction in culture depends much on my own action, nor do I believe that the ultimate goal of my work is "the governing of others," differently or otherwise.

As Christians in the humanities, we cannot subscribe to either Arnoldian or progressive ideals, but instead live in the midst of devastating honesty about the deplorable state of our present world (and the no-less deplorable—if differently deplorable—state of its past), and still yet harbor a scandalous hope about the possibility of genuine growth in love, mercy, and justice in the present and future: positions no more coherent than Robbins' own.

Thus, I wish to use scholarship and teaching to lead others to read better and to govern *themselves* differently as a response to better reading, to understand and live out a devastating honesty and a scandalous hope. That through reading—and even through criticizing as I've done with this book—I might criticize myself and expose my own assumptions and impositions as a response to better reading and better critique. Though the humanities have had this "humanizing" role for centuries, I would argue that the need for such training and

understanding—practically worthless as it might be to "the professional-managerial class"—has never been more insistently relevant. And this method of criticism does not elide difference or assume universality: it seeks to make us critics, first and foremost, of ourselves, even as Robbins repeatedly calls on his readers to do, though he provides no basis or method for doing so.

But it is this kind of criticism that I intend in my work in the humanities, and succeeding in it might ultimately contribute more to the governing of others than that which makes politics its central purpose.