

Book Review: Saving Liberalism from Itself: The Spirit of Political Participation¹

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Timothy Stacey's *Saving Liberalism from Itself* issues a call for liberally oriented people to political participation (1) that pursues universal values by embedding them in particular communities and institutions (2) through compassionate engagement with real people and their stories, (3) honouring the role and power of narrative and myth rather than negating them for abstracted theories and rootless justice.

Stacey opens his book with a brief glimpse into his own story—mistitled, I think, “Acknowledgements” because he jumps into a helpful modelling of his particularism from the outset. His delightful story-telling spills into chapter 1, “Alternatives on the Horizon,” with beautiful descriptors of places, people, and cultures familiar to me in Greater Vancouver.

He also lays out his primary critique of western liberalism—that precisely as an *-ism*, its procedures and policies have displaced real political participation. Thus, they theorize and liberalize the abstract Individual while discouraging actual people to uproot themselves from the soil that has actually sustained them, demoting the institutions and practices of religion, class, family, and politics to “oppressor” status. The rationalist-empiricist wing of the Enlightenment attempts, therefore, to frame our “irrational” elements (myth, ritual, tradition, magic) as backward, superstitious, even dangerous, and thereby hope to secularize those who hold them.

Instead, Stacey “advocates for people to re-embed themselves in their institutions and communities, largely through the telling of stories. I was pleased that he identified his locale as “the traditional and unceded territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh” indigenous people—and not as a mere formality or virtue signaling. He knows these folks and their lands, including their old growth forests and inner city streets. Grounded there, Stacey hopes to bridge the canyon that divides liberalism and its post-liberal critics.

¹ Timothy Stacey, *Saving Liberalism from Itself: The Spirit of Political Participation* (Bristol University Press, 2022)

That said, effective peacemaking requires rigorous honesty, which the author brought to both Neoliberalism and its detractors. The following chapters comprised a worthwhile effort to “sit in a room with those we radically disagree with and practise imagining alternatives together.”

A recurring theme through the book was how “the liberal project” claims to offer equal dignity to a generalized *all* or “*anywhere*” that “seems to require that no people or place take priority” and espouse universals (e.g., freedom, equality) rather than people or places. By contrast, the “*somewheres*” are more localized, often marginalized, and their unique cultural/religious heritage may be washed out as illiberal.

My own observations on this point relate to the tragic genocide of Indigenous children in Canada’s residential schools. The fact that the agents of these horrific crimes of extraction, abuse, neglect, and death were primarily religious and, in fact, “Christian” (Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist), is inexcusable. But how self-righteous “progressives” can pass themselves as “allies” who incite outrage and denigrate actual reconciliation is cruelly ironic. The Canadian government’s call to “kill the Indian in the Indian” was none other than European liberalism’s anti-religious guillotine, extended and amplified across the colonies against First Nations spirituality and culture. That the church participated is contemptible, but now their ignorance is mirrored by the failure of progressives to see their own complicity in the foundational, colonizing philosophies that instigated assimilation from the outset.

But back to Stacey, now. In his engagement with liberal and post-liberal interlocutors, he dares to question those who denounce and shame anyone who questions the current dominant ideology. But then he writes positively about those who have “noticed the gap between liberalism and the reality of how people make their lives meaningful.” While these voices hope to build a civil religion around liberal ideals, they fail to “reflect on the stories that liberally minded people are creating on the ground.”

From his “critique of critiques,” Stacey moves on to his alternative approach. He begins on the ground, among people whose myths, rituals, and traditions become a “Capilano Rope Bridge” (my term) that span universal ethics and locally rooted histories. Specifically, the author focused on interviewing thirty-six grassroots activists who participate in the Metro Vancouver Alliance (MVA)—religious groups, unions, community groups, and schools working for the common good. They showed him how to think globally while and by acting locally—a variety of liberally minded approaches expressed in idiosyncratic diversity without either erasure or insularity.

In chapters five to eight, Stacey details the traditional stories and rituals that contribute meaning to his friends’ work and “champions individual dignity.” He points out that, in fact, we all

live inside of mythical worlds—isn't that exactly what political propaganda is? But the Achilles' heel of liberal and post-liberal ideology is its cunning lack of self-awareness on this front. He says,

... myth is an ideology whose myths have become so deeply ingrained as to hold sway over our understanding of what is real. Yet liberalism is special in this regard because one of its central myths is that myths themselves are dangerous, divisive and, most fundamentally, can be and have been overcome. Instead, I have argued, if myths are so fundamental to the way that we act in the world, then the aim of peace-loving people should not be to build a world without myths, but to replace divisive myths with hopeful myths.

Stacey regards chapter eight as his “heaviest work” toward the claim that that self-expression requires being embedded in a community. Indeed. Despite Vancouver’s up-close faces of diversity and densification, the cultural gravitational pull is toward isolation and a distrust of community (while desperately longing for it). Radical individualism and alienation militate against authentic participation, but perhaps *some* will bottom out on that mode of perishing and move forward by moving toward.

The author’s solution (chapter nine) addresses two liberal ideas of truth that have proven problematic: (1) *rationalism-empiricism* and (2) “*confessional truth*”—defined as “what feels true to me” (à la identity politics). Surprisingly, rather than simply debunking these, Stacey proposes to *complement* them with a third understanding: *compassionate truth*. That is, “the truth we experience when we engage with the being before us from their perspective.” This kind of empathy is elicited precisely by the myths, rituals, magic, and traditions he has described in the previous chapters. While liberalism has razed these community components in its obsession with progress, Stacey argues that reconnecting on that plane is the optimum meeting place for reconciliation work. Really, how can you despise a human being’s cultural and spiritual core while claiming to uphold their personal dignity? Liberalism has, for too long, made inclusion dependent on expunging—“liberating”—them of the glue of one’s personhood!

No, secular rationalism will not save us from the revival of populism. It hasn’t. In fact, it drives us into a deeper polarization of “the deplorables.” But political participation that draws on *compassionate truth* and a deeper attention to the deeper wells of the other and their culture... that seems worth trying for liberal minded peacebuilders who care about doing justice and loving mercy among real people with whom we’re willing to foster a living connection.