

BOOK REVIEWS**WHEN THE STATE MEETS THE STREET: PUBLIC SERVICE AND MORAL AGENCY****Bernardo Zacka**

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017

Street-level bureaucrats are an intrinsic part of modern democracies. Police officers, nurses, and caseworkers, among others, are essential for delivering the many state services nowadays taken for granted. Without them modern states would be unable to function. Despite their portrayal as mindless drones implementing the law, they actually exercise significant discretionary power. For instance, a caseworker can choose to overlook a citizen arriving a minute late to re-schooling class or impose the mandatory fine. Such a decision can have a significant impact on the citizen in question in a precarious situation, such as living in poverty. Despite their power over citizens, democratic theory has almost completely overlooked street-level bureaucrats.

In *When the State Meets the Street*, Bernardo Zacka sets out “to bring street-level bureaucrats into the fold of democratic theory, and ... to offer at once a theory of their behavior and a framework for morally assessing it” (p. xi). The book brings to life the dilemmas facing street-level bureaucrats and examines how they can and should deal with them in a morally sensitive manner. In addition to drawing upon literature from various disciplines, Zacka undertook anthropological fieldwork for this rich study. Combining philosophical rigor and a clear and engaging writing style, this excellent book delivers upon its promise, as well as exemplifying the potential of realist approaches to normative political theory.

The book's point of departure (chapter 1) is a critical examination of the compliance model of bureaucratic responsibility within which street-level bureaucrats must operate in accordance with commands from their superiors. Most democratic theories implicitly rely upon this hierarchical model, which may explain the focus of democratic theory on the institutions at the top of the pyramid. Zacka argues, however, that this model is not only empirically false— as has been well established among governance scholars—but also normatively undesirable. For instance, even if it were possible to follow orders, most democratic citizens would not want their civil servants to implement the law mindlessly in the most efficient manner. Liberal democracies raise additional normative expectations in the implementation process, such as fairness, responsiveness, and respect. Street-level bureaucrats should exercise discretionary power when implementing the law to take seriously these normative requirements as well as technical considerations of efficiency. The upshot is that they have to make moral judgments about specific cases.

The rest of book investigates how street-level bureaucrats should and can sustain sensible moral agency in everyday situations. In chapter 2, Zacka considers what is required in order for them to make balanced judgments, while acting with limited resources, such as money, time, and emotional energy, at their disposal. Rather than start from an abstract ideal, he shows that, in practice, bureaucrats often fall back on three dispositional orientations: indifference, caregiving, and enforcement. He argues that each disposition can be valuable. Some clients require tough love, while others can be indifferently processed without any harm done. A street-level bureaucrat should, however, be able to switch between these dispositions between cases, and sometimes within the same encounter, since, as Zacka shows, bureaucrats' dispositional orientation governs their sensitivity to the facts before them. A police officer who seeks only to enforce the law will jail a father who attempts to steal a single loaf of bread while overlooking the hardship that leads to such desperate acts.

Zacka subsequently explores the individual preconditions for moral agency (chapter 3). In contrast to Arendtian autonomy or MacIntyre's virtues he proposes a gymnastics of the self. He suggests that a street-level bureaucrat should engage in regular exercises in reflective self-awareness. Some may wonder whether a degree of autonomy is

necessary for this or whether the ability to switch dispositions and avoid extremes constitutes virtue. Despite acknowledging some degree of overlap between his ideas and those of Arendt and MacIntyre, Zacka argues that these exercises are more realistic and desirable prescriptions than theirs, in part because they already exist in practice. In the following chapter he draws out the importance of peers in everyday moral reasoning. Street-level bureaucrats create informal taxonomies and apply casuistry that guides their moral reasoning across cases. Many a Kantian philosopher may be uncomfortable about this casuistic approach to morality, yet it enables bureaucrats to deal with cases that procedures do not cover when the rules run out. This approach, moreover, ensures a degree of consistency across bureaucrats, thus avoiding arbitrariness. This structure relies on and functions as an informal system of peer accountability. Zacka submits that heterogeneity within the organization is a necessary precondition for it to function properly. Otherwise, dispositional pathologies will be replicated on the organizational level, such as a police force exclusively concerned with enforcement.

Chapter five explores the top-down perspective, placing street-level bureaucrats within their democratic environment. Zacka focuses on impossible situations in which their superiors place too high a demand on street-level bureaucrats. He shows that the framework of role conflicts, for instance, does not do justice to these impossible situations. Bureaucrats do not suffer from having to meet conflicting demands between distinct domains (e.g. between family or political loyalty) and their professional ethics. The point is that the bureaucrat is placed in a situation in which it is impossible to follow orders and perform their core tasks. When a chief of police argues that police officers should not have to enforce a new immigration law, she is not making a political statement, let alone challenging the law's legitimacy. Rather, Zacka submits, the police chief believes that the police will no longer be able to perform their central duties. In this case, the new immigration law undermines their ability to enforce criminal laws and assist people in need. The police will have to disobey their superiors or neglect their core duties, with neither prospect being desirable from a democratic perspective. Zacka thus hints that some bureaucratic pathologies result from democratic aspirations.

In addition to these novel lines of argument, two strengths make the book stand out from others in democratic theory. First, in reflecting on practices, Zacka draws upon his first-hand experiences working in an anti-poverty agency in the USA, where he undertook anthropological fieldwork in addition to drawing upon the materials from various disciplines. Moreover, Zacka's clear and engaging writing style brings his and his colleagues' experiences to life. By focusing on stories, the book gives us a look into the lifeworld of street-level bureaucrats. More importantly, many of his insights seem impossible to extract from studying document alone. Without being in the workplace over an extended period of time it may be hard to realize that there are moral codes underlying seemingly unimportant conversations about cases with issues and deciphering the patterns. These insights constitute an invaluable contribution to democratic theory.

Another strength of the book is that Zacka shows how realist philosophers can theorize democratic norms grounded in practice without losing their critical edge. As illustrated above, he often shows how previous theories fall short in interpreting real-world practices in order to offer alternative, and, I would add, often more convincing interpretations. In this, Zacka draws out the desirability of some existing practices. More important, he shows how a realist political theory can critique existing practices. An example of this is that Zacka raises serious doubts about the informal characterization of suspects as "assholes" in some police officers (p. 194). This informal labeling with its negative connotations results in a strong dispositional bias. The resulting lack of sensitivity is incompatible with his realist justification of discretionary power, namely to be responsive to normative demands in the implementation process. Zacka's book is a standout case in-point to show that realist theory does not have to result in a defense of the status quo.

In *When the State Meets the Street*, Zacka effectively brings street-level bureaucrats back into the fold of democratic theory. Often democratic theories rely on idealizing full compliance by bureaucrats using discretionary power to implement policy most efficiently. Yet Zacka starts from the expectation that the policy implementation process in democratic states involves many possibly competing normative demands. Having discretionary powers enables street-level bureaucrats to address the moral questions that arise from these demands. The book shows how these bureaucrats can and should exercise their moral judgment. Drawing from first-hand observations adds an anthropological sensitivity to

the book, in the process showing that political philosophers have much to gain from venturing into the real world. The result is an original book that most democratic theorists should read, especially those interested in moral reasoning in everyday life. Moreover, it provides students with easily accessible examples of realistic normative theorizing.

Jan Pieter Beetz

Utrecht University

DOI: 10.1111/1467-8675.12383

TOWARD NEW DEMOCRATIC IMAGINARIES – ISTANBUL SEMINARS ON ISLAM, CULTURE AND POLITICS

Edited by Seyla Benhabib | Volker Kaul

Basel: Springer, 2016

The chapters included in the volume were all published in special issues of *Philosophy and Social Criticism* between 2011 and 2014. They are the result of a series of seminars started in 2008 that aimed, in the words of Seyla Benhabib, to

provide a counter-narrative to the then very influential theses of “the clash of civilizations” ... and ... “Islamofascism” ... by showing not only that conversations and cooperation across civilizations and cultures had existed throughout millennia but that these traditions of dialogue urgently needed reviving.

The seminars brought together philosophers, intellectual historians, political theorists, sociologists, and anthropologists. One can imagine how fruitful and exciting the conversations were for the participants. The gains for readers are somewhat more uneven.

One difficulty is the format. On the upside, an advantage of the format is that all contributors had to spell out their positions on the question of democratic imaginaries engendered by and through Islam. This is useful because important differences are highlighted in the process that may have otherwise not been readily visible, especially among those who may claim an affiliation with critical theory. On the downside, a disadvantage of the format is that the chapters are very short. They are best characterized as thought pieces. Most authors are able to lay out only the bare outline of their arguments, but cannot provide detailed support or evidence for these. This works better in some cases than others.

One important concern highlighted in this volume relates to the limits of a theoretical and conceptual understanding of democracy, as well its practice. This concern is expressed almost exclusively by scholars of Islam (though not by all of them). Asma Barlas interrogates the very premise of the seminars, suggesting that “framing the 2012 theme as ‘The Promise of Democracy’ puts the very thing in which we are called on to have faith beyond critique itself by treating it as a given.” She demands greater scrutiny of affiliated concepts such as secularism, which seem to be intrinsic to democracy in Euro-American political thinking. Akeel Bilgrami wonders if a democratic struggle is just a numerical one between, say, the majority of ‘moderate’ Muslims and the minority of hard liners, or whether it is in fact a psychological battle with more complex dynamics. Faisal Devji contends that the War on Terror has failed to fill the void of politics at a global level. After more than a decade of this war, there is, he argues, neither a new global order nor a new global politics. Devji does not make it explicit but his implicit question seems to be whether democracy can be imagined at all within this void. Irfan Ahmed reminds us that democratic practice in predominantly Muslim countries has been actively stymied by USA and European meddling through their support for *coups d’état* against democratic leaders such as Mossadeq and support for dictators such as Saddam. In his view, it is not just a matter of the theoretical compatibility between Islam and democracy, but of actual practices that undermine democracy in Muslim countries undertaken by democratic states such as the USA.

Lisa Anderson alerts us to fundamental transformations in states in the Middle East. Providing a very quick historical overview, she points out that "what makes the Arab uprising unique is the fact that this tumult also marks the beginning of the end of the state system introduced into the Middle East by the twentieth century imperial order". Ayelet Sachar, too, grapples with the changing nature of the state to, in her case, a neoliberal one, and its implications for the management of diversity, and so also for democracy.

Of the scholars who do not work on Islam or predominantly Muslim countries directly, only Fred Dallmayr acknowledges the importance of thinking about the implications of transformations and debates in Muslims societies for Euro-American conceptions of democracy. Towards the end of his promising discussion, however, his proposal for modifying the Iranian constitution suddenly shifts gears and seems simply to reinforce the superiority of the British model. Readers unfamiliar with Dallmayr's larger body of work could find this quite misleading.

For Michael Walzer democracy and religious revival cannot go together. It is unclear whether Walzer is arguing that democracy cannot germinate without some dampening of the religious fervor that insists on a single truth, or that even if religion and democracy do cohabit for some time, ultimately religion will have to be sequestered if democracy is to be fostered. It is somewhat dispiriting to have a fine scholar such as Walzer engage so unimaginatively with this question. Walzer falls back on a comfortable but now-contested reading of European history and continues to take it as universalizable, without seriously thinking through the implications of different historical experiences in other parts of the world: the lack of insistence on a single truth to be enforced by the church state, the lack of interest in the regulation of individual conscience manifested in the institution of the inquisition, an absence of normative and legal frameworks viewing diversity as a problem. He does not wonder if religion means the same thing around the world. Even more disturbingly, he does not engage with the problem that democracy seems to beget religious revivalism and politicized religious identity precisely because there are very rarely ready majorities in a polity. Throughout the 20th century the key effect of democratic politics, in countries as diverse as the USA, Nigeria, and India, has been to make public, and thus political, almost all aspects of human life, from sexual preferences to gender and ethnic affiliation. In short, the relationship between religious revivalism and democracy is more complex than Walzer acknowledges.

Charles Taylor builds explicitly on his experience in Quebec but is much more aware than Walzer of the specificity of the debates and more cautious about the value of insights generated by these experiences. In a clearly argued piece he makes the case for using the term interculturalism rather than multiculturalism in contexts where the narrative surrounding multiculturalism has become acrimonious and divisive. He draws attention to several challenges arising in Quebec, including the difficulty of organizing interactions on an equal footing between different communities facing varying pressures. Recognizing these as intercultural challenges may make it easier to address both these and similar challenges arising elsewhere.

Taylor's piece is helpful because of its modesty and economy. Moving in a direction somewhat orthogonal to Taylor's focus on communities, Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that a fundamental problem is the singularity of spirit, which a nation is imagined to possess. Appiah is not alone in suggesting that Johan Gottfried Herder is an important source for the idea that cultural unity is the basis of political unity (for a nation, or an even more amorphous entity, the West). He emphasizes, however, the importance of thinking about this heritage as "choices, not tracks laid down by a Western fate" to help us move beyond the idea of an unambiguous, unified West against the rest.

Richard Bernstein highlights the role that the idea of incommensurability plays in placing cultures in opposition to each other. Bernstein moves away from substantive debates about Thomas Kuhn's influential *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to the book's reception, in order to argue against the idea of incommensurability. However, it is not clear whether he is arguing that the enthusiastic reception of Kuhn's ideas reinforced an existing binarism in European thought or introduced it. Many scholars who engage with marginalized traditions of thought are familiar with a long-running criticism of European thought as being excessively reliant upon binaries.

David Rasmussen argues for a more fluid understanding of the political, as an unfinished, continuously emerging arena. Khaled Abou El Fadl looks for epistemological sources supporting multiplicity in Islamic thought and practice, and proposes that the coming together of *haqq* (truth) with *hikma* (wisdom and balance) through the contextualization implied by *ma'arifa* (knowing) allows an acceptance of multiple truths appropriate to specific times. These chapters fit

well together in their insistence on ambivalence and multiplicity that have been sidelined in the discussions about the clash of civilizations.

The volume is rich in provocation and suggestion. I have mentioned here only some of the articles contained within it. It is perhaps best seen as a snapshot of debates about the relationship between Islam and democracy that have been pervasive in Euro-American academia in the aftermath of the War on/of Terror. The debate remains unresolved, in part because of the still continuing struggle to decolonize European theory while retaining a critical eye on global political structures. We need now to ask different questions: Are the transformations in the idea of the state in the Middle East of greater generalizable value than the experiences of European states today? May notions of *hikma* and *ma'arifa* help resolve the fixation on incommensurability within European thought? Could Islamic thought and practice help identify limitations of democratic theory and provide solutions that are not just for Muslims?

Humeira Iqtidar

Department of Political Economy

King's College, London

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Humeira Iqtidar is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Political Economy, King's College London. Her most recent publication is *Tolerance, Secularization and Democratic Politics in South Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).