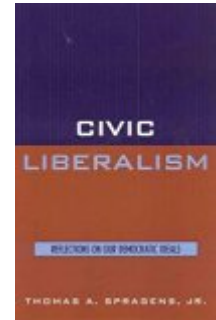


Thomas A. Spragens, Jr.. *Civic Liberalism: Reflections on Our Democratic Idealism.*
New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999. xviii + 271 pp.
\$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8476-9611-6.



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Published on H-Ideas (February, 2001)

Liberalism's Fifth Way

Anyone tempted to see the contemporary hegemony of liberal thinking in the United States as belated confirmation of Daniel Bell's 1960 assertion of American ideological uniformity should read *Civic Liberalism: Reflections on Our Democratic Ideals*, a valuable primer on liberal theories by Thomas Spragens. Focusing more on the rarified community of political theorists than on politicians and the ideological public, Spragens divides that community into four schools of thought that endorse different conceptions of such liberal mainstays as individual freedom, equality, representative democracy, and civic responsibility.

By devoting the first half of the book to identifying what he perceives to be the virtues and flaws of each school of thought --liberal realism, libertarianism, liberal egalitarianism, and liberalism of difference -- Spragens sets the stage for elaborating liberalism's fifth way. Calling his formulation "civic liberalism," the author seeks to reconcile the liberal goals of individual freedom, greater political and social equality, enhancement of civic friendship, and mental and moral

progress of all citizens. In the introduction, Spragens discloses the ideological platform from which he critiques these four prevailing schools of liberal thought. That platform affirms "liberalism's dedication to individual rights and civil liberties together with an insistence upon the parallel importance of a strong public sphere inhabited by social equals and directed toward perpetually evolving and dialogically contested common purposes" (p. xv).

The author acknowledges the perils associated with social pluralism in his positive nod toward liberal realists. While rejecting their belief that democracy is simply the best way of containing conflict among persons naturally inclined to seek their own advantage, Spragens sees the realists' emphasis on toleration and restraint as needed counterweights to the liberal tendency to indulge the countervailing desires and ambitions of individuals. Further, he uses this group as a foil, foreshadowing what he describes as civic liberalism's utopian aspiration for human progress by criticizing liberal realists for accepting the social status quo.

While he criticizes liberal realism for its complacency and fear of destabilizing political change, he disapproves of the readiness of difference liberals to undermine the tenuous coherence and authority of an inclusive national community. Influenced by postmodern critiques of socially constructed political privilege, difference liberals believe that American democracy is unbalanced to the detriment of particular racial, gender, and sexual identity groups, whose just inclusion in American politics can only be guaranteed through targeted recognition, affirmation, and empowerment. Spragens indicts this program as a means of suppressing rather than encouraging human diversity -- a prized value of civic liberalism -- but he applauds the benefits identity politics have had for historically oppressed American minorities and shares difference liberals' recognition that individuals are largely defined by their social experiences.

Although he devotes equal space to the two groups discussed above, Spragens focuses more on libertarians and liberal egalitarians so that he can construct a middle way between the spectral opposites of their "nightwatchman" and "welfare" models of the liberal state. He defines civic liberalism's key tenets of autonomy, equality, civic friendship, and civic virtue by contrasting them with ideas held by libertarians and egalitarians.

While he agrees with several pillars of libertarian thought -- its concern that democratic decisions can violate some individual rights, its rejection of command economies as infirm, and its view that material inequalities are practical necessities -- Spragens disagrees with its emphasis on maximizing individual autonomy. Treating autonomy as a constitutive good that mutually reinforces other democratic values, civic liberalism sees an individual's abilities as self-governing, that is, not as an absolute goal set by a "circumscribed privatistic world," but as a core norm they achieve through the aid of nurturing social institutions (e.g. schools, libraries, museums, etc.).

Civic liberals believe that a liberal society "should seek to provide its citizens with the capacities and the requisite space and opportunities to act autonomously" (p. 124). But they do not agree with egalitarians, caricatured by Spragens as narrowly focused on state-engineered reduction of market-driven economic inequalities, who would presumably identify economic equality as a strict precondition for individual autonomy.

Associating liberal egalitarians with John Rawls's ideas on distributive justice -- again, narrowly interpreted as achieving social justice by limiting economic inequality -- Spragens disagrees with the goal of maximum equality. Although civic liberals morally regard all people as inherently and equally valuable and see social and political equality as instrumental to civic friendship and virtue, they do not embrace egalitarians' rosy calculus concerning economic equality. Regarding economic distribution as a "messy and contentious process of moral contestation, pragmatic calculation, and interest contention to be a permanent feature of democratic politics," Spragens argues for a well-ordered citizenry who support economic desert for individual effort but whose sense of justice and deliberation will lead to policies that minimize disruptive economic inequalities. Recognizing that virtue alone cannot guarantee such a propitious outcome in an imperfectly pluralistic arena, civic liberals, to the dismay of libertarians, insist on regulating financial contributions to political candidates so as "to insulate the decision-making process from the distortions of unequal power, social standing, and wealth" (p. 163). Spragens further admits his personal support for an expanded earned income tax credit and higher tax rates on high incomes and wealthy estates. Civic liberals, however, would respect their contemporaries autonomy and equality by appealing for these policies in deliberative forums open to compromise rather than imposing them by fiat.

This respect and readiness to subject their policy preferences to public deliberation is consistent with the civic liberals' belief that civic friendship and virtue are not only possible in a heterogeneous democratic society but also essential to such a community. Spragens acknowledges that civic friendship, "a condition of mutual enjoyment, affection, and good will among [citizens]," is severely challenged by pluralistic competition, but he does not accept other liberal thinkers' insistence that such friendship should be consigned strictly to the private realm (p. 179). Rather, civic liberals embrace the liberal triad of liberty, equality, and fraternity and see each element, when embraced ideologically and institutionalized in the public realm, as mutually reinforcing.

Spragens makes the provocative if not wholly convincing argument that civic friendship would enable the realist's urge for security and toleration, the libertarian's thirst for prosperity and limited government, and the egalitarian's goal of reducing social discrimination and economic inequality. How such friendship would be institutionalized publicly is unclear -- a significant practical weakness of his account. Perhaps Spragens believes that civic friendship, like civic virtue, would take root not through administrative initiative but through a widespread embrace of the civic liberal's exalted notions of autonomy and equality. While this belief constitutes a leap of faith, his seductive "enabling state"--one that provides people with the resources and institutional framework to help themselves--would admittedly require a healthy measure of civic friendship and such virtues as: "responsible self-reliance, respect for the human dignity of all citizens, law-abiding self-restraint, democratic humility, reasonableness and good judgment, neighborly [good will], and the public-spirited willingness to participate in civic service" (p. 229).

Thomas Spragens' account of liberalism's fifth way is pragmatic in the traditional sense of the word. Like William James, who argued that an

idea is true only insofar as someone feels that it is true and useful, Spragens crafts an ideology that uncharacteristically privileges subjective rather than absolute truth. He explains that his ideas about civic liberalism developed after pragmatically "asking myself what sense and what force the liberal democratic norms of liberty, equality, community, and civic virtue have in the context of my own intuitions about the good society" (p. xiii). Even more Jamesian is his admission that "any attempts to persuade the reader must likewise invoke an appeal to his or her parallel intuitions" (p. xiii). While this pragmatic stance remains true to Spragens' defense of moral subjectivity, it left this reader confused as to how a citizen's often countervailing and even inimical moral stances could peaceably coexist in a civic liberal society. He admits, for instance, that civic liberalism provides a roadmap only into rather than through the muddles of abortion or public vs. home schooling.

Spragens' agenda is pragmatic too in the more contemporary sense that he delineates a "practical middle ground" between the libertarian night-watchman state and the egalitarian welfare state (p. 262). But it is also unclear how this "enabling state" would become a practical reality: do the institutions of this state emerge spontaneously from a polity schooled in Spragens' versions of autonomy, equality, and civic friendship and virtue? Do these four ideological principles spread by the guiding influence of public institutions? Or do the interdependent institutions and principles of a civic liberal society need to evolve simultaneously? Further, although he clearly dissociates civic liberals from communitarian and Rawlsian philosophers, once their state came to be, how would its policies differ practically from those advocated by these other thinkers? In particular, how would civic liberal economic policy differ from that delineated by John Rawls's "difference principle," which accepts a state of economic inequality just as long as it provides the highest pos-

sible standard of living for the people on the lowest rungs of society's economic ladder?

Perhaps these practical questions demand too much from a book of political theory. But Spragens opens the door to such query by admitting his pragmatic inclinations and writing a concluding chapter that applies civic liberal thinking to a range of important current issues. While his discussions of welfare, social security, health care, and immigration policies do not explain how a civic liberal society can come into being in America, they add fresh insight into these contentious issues and would make Op Ed pieces good enough to clip and save from any daily newspaper. Insofar as I, an American historian relatively new to the discourses of political theory, could read through and profit from *Civic Liberalism*, Spragens succeeded in writing a book I would recommend for intermediate to advanced students of political theory and for informed and concerned democratic citizens. These audiences would not learn which politicians and publics have embraced liberal realism, libertarianism, egalitarian liberalism, or the liberalism of difference or how such people applied these theories politically in recent American history. But they would get a terrific primer on current liberal thinking and get a compelling argument on how liberty, equality, and civic friendship and virtue, when "properly understood," can collectively support a national society with a strong public sphere and a dedication to individual rights and civil liberties.

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Citation: James Spiller. Review of Spragens, Thomas A., Jr. *Civic Liberalism: Reflections on Our Democratic Idealism*. H-Ideas, H-Net Reviews. February, 2001.

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