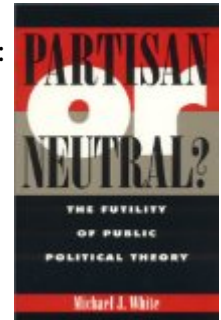


**Michael J. White.** *Partisan or Neutral?: The Futility of Public Political Theory.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. xiii + 193 pp. \$87.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8476-8453-3.



**Reviewed by** Greg Moses

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The futility that Professor White has in mind is the futility of anyone providing a complete theory of community that would win actual consensus from any real political body. Praiseworthy principles may be proposed, and actual agreements may be secured, but it would be futile to suppose that actual agreements are based in theoretical consensus. I would interpret this to mean, for instance, that even in the case of a 9-0 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, we are likely to find various reasons put forth by various justices. It would be most unusual to presume that nine justices each proposed the same line of argument toward their mutually agreeable conclusions. Likewise with all kinds of political agreements that hold us together, we would not expect to find that our practical coalitions indicate theoretical solidarity.

If the above example reflects the gist of Professor White's thesis, then I think he has said something interesting and important about political theory, but I would not agree that political theory is therefore futile. Thus the conclusions of this book tend to confirm what feminists and multicul-

turalists have been arguing, or what DeToqueville once said--that behind the good intentions of every liberal theory of politics lurks a threat. Principles get abstracted too much, majorities rule too firmly, and the so-called neutralities of theory and practice mysteriously reveal their usefulness to some particular group. Theoretical work is never as omniscient as it should be, thus every grand design that is humane must yield to the practical pushes and pulls of conflicting social interests. The title of Professor White's book--*Partisan or Neutral?*--is a question about political theory that reminds us once again that theoretical neutrality is never absolute.

Yet even the reader who is familiar with the broad theoretical issues will find them reworked by Professor White in interesting ways. Professor White's position, for instance, has intriguing filiations with Catholic intellectual traditions via St. Augustine and natural law. And this appears to be the particular tradition which animates Professor White's own wary sensitivity to theories that pretend to provide a universal point of view. Readers

who are not aware of the neo-natural law movement will find the book instructive on this count.

For Professor White, public political theory is a term that classifies liberal theories which aspire to complete community. Such theories presume a unified body politic and attempt to resurrect a unified, community soul. It becomes the self-appointed task of public political theory to save that soul. In the process, writes White, such theories lose touch with concrete pluralities, diversities, or conflicting goods.

The danger of public political theory is that it tries to do too much. It reaches deeper than it has to, projects principles more sweeping than they have to be, and imposes answers before questions are fully aired. Such theories, in their quest for perfection, seek to stop history instead of allowing it, imperfectly, to proceed.

The technical strategy of the book's analysis is to hoist liberal theory upon the horns of a destructive dilemma. Liberal theory cannot rest content only with outcomes of liberal processes, because, for instance, it must be possible to suggest that a majority can be a tyranny, too. Yet neither can liberal theory embrace any particular conceptions of social perfection. True believers in such utopian schemes tend to forget that their principles were invented in a particular time and place. But a liberal theory that cannot provide either an ideal process or an ideal outcome may not have anything left to do.

Within the less-than-perfect parameters that are left for it, liberal theory may seek its proper work. But any time its principles are advanced as good once and for all, it becomes public in a bad way. One might say that Professor White has shown how liberal theory can only be contingently public. But one would be using the term public in a way contrary to what Professor White has in mind. In other words, we might suggest, as an alternative to Professor White, that political theory should do all of its work in relation to the particular public issues of its day, taking care to make ex-

plicit note of the contingencies that underlie its logic. But in the very use of the term public we must be careful not to assume what makes Professor White wary--that there is ever a single, universal public to address. For this reason, Professor White insists that America has no soul. If we mean a single, universal soul, indeed it is presumptuous to talk of such a thing.

Professor White does a service to liberal theory and illuminates issues that will be helpful to nonliberals, too. But the lay reader may be cautioned that the circle of liberal scholarship which attracts Professor White's attention is a partial sample of political theory today. For the beginning theorist, some supplementary reading is required. For instance, how do we work out a pragmatic or contingent domain for political theory, yet ignore Dewey? How do we investigate the persistence of class conflict, yet pass minimally over Marx? And how do we, as scholars, talk about the limits of abstract liberalism without reference to Allison Jaggar? Finally, if we want to see how to get much further along with our positive political doctrines in a pluralistic world, how do we proceed without Locke? Not John Locke, but Alain Locke, where sensitive investigation of pluralistic imperfectionism may fruitfully begin.

In summary, Professor White's book makes a serious contribution to meta-theory, because he traces the limits of what a political theory may be.

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