

Book Reviews

Andrew Fiala, *Tyranny from Plato to Trump: Fools, Sycophants, and Citizens*, 2022. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 256pp. ISBN: 978-1-5381-9806-3 (pbk)

The challenge of political philosophy, at least as it is articulated in the Western environment that we inhabit, has been on two fronts. The first concerns the attempt to find the proper equilibrium between tyranny or the autocratic/dictatorial use of power in the public sphere and no use at all, either in the form of anarchy or democracy, in the public sphere. The question in this first concern is whether there should be governance in the public sphere. Once the public use of power has met the first of the challenges, the domain of governance, it meets the second front, the concern of who uses the power and how to justify that use. Political philosophy in this second sense considers the issue of representation. In short, political philosophy, given these two fronts, concerns the justification for the use of power in the public sphere.

This timely book by Andrew Fiala covers a good cross-section of the philosophical exercise in governance as the use of power in the public arena. It is a well-written and researched compendium of Western political philosophy. *Tyranny From Plato to Trump* presents material that can serve as both a source text for a history of political philosophy seminar and a critique of the contemporary and continuous exercise in American Democratic governance. In reading this text, we come away with an understanding that tyranny is a significant tendency in political philosophy. From the ancient Western philosophy tradition to contemporary texts, many thinkers have favoured a benevolent and concentrated seat of power.

Plato is the best representative of that tradition although he sprinkled in the concept of virtue/wisdom. In contrast to this concentrated view of governance a student of Plato, Aristotle, sought to expand his tutor's proposal and loosen the grip of 'the wise ones' by introducing



a component of the *demos*, the people or citizenry. The version of the political exercise we have inherited from Aristotle made governance more expansive but it conditioned that expansion on property ownership, even if it meant the ownership of other human beings. So, from Aristotle on, our efforts in political philosophy have been to determine the limits, as in the constituents, of the citizenry. Democracy as a counterweight to tyranny depends thus on how broadly we conceive of the citizenry and on our efforts to make the practice of democracy inclusive of all the members of the populace.

Nevertheless, it remains that the move from tyranny to democracy is a contentious one. Democratic theories and philosophies of democracy have thus struggled to disentangle the grip of concentrated power. Fiala's text goes a long way to document this progress from benevolent, and at times not-so-benevolent, concentration of power to a more democratic polis. He also fortunately considers one of the weaknesses of procedural democracy, i.e., when exclusion threatens to lead paradoxically to tyranny. The contemporary flirtation with autocracy in the United States (US) is one such case, although that predilection is not unique to the US.

Fiala's book is a political philosophy text sectioned in three parts. The first considers the history and sources of tyrannical tendencies from Plato to Trump. The second part demonstrates that tyrannical governance cannot get off the ground without the confluence of what Fiala deems to be the tragic trio of 1) a tyrannical ambition, 2) an audience of fools willing and needing to be entertained by the foolery that passes as policy however repugnant, and 3) sycophants who are not as foolish as the crowd/the mob but who are as opportunistic and self-regarding as the tyrant himself. The sycophants are both instruments and complicit agents. In the third part of the book, Fiala offers remedies that, in effect, consist of virtuous individuals who are properly trained in civic-mindedness and morality, and in institutional guardrails such as the constitution. These virtuous individuals hold the truth that political philosophy is the project of mitigating between tyranny and the will of the people. The virtuous lot stand between governance and representation.

Andrew Fiala's take on these issues forms a helpful companion to our contemporary trauma, as embodied in the person of former US president, Donald Trump, who is running for re-election at the time of writing. It explains, first, why the latter's attack on the

democratic polity was only aspirational and a failed one, and, second, that we have guardrails that would keep us from succumbing totally to the aspirations of autocrats and would-be dictators of the future. We should then be comforted by the belief that the Trump ‘wannabes’ will always fail.

I am less convinced by what I take to be Fiala’s conclusion because I believe that his optimism, an optimism that I share, draws from a narrow conception of the reality that made the ‘Trump era’ possible. In my sense, the xenophobia and racism that are constitutive of the contemporary period in the United States will, if left uncontested, till the soil for future autocrats and they might very well be successful. My optimism, though consistent with Fiala’s, rests on the belief that democracy will be true to its meaning and encourage all to participate. If true, then the repulsiveness of Trump’s politics will continue to animate our polity, rather than constitutional guardrails or legal institutions, for these too could be made exclusionary.

I am thus optimistic about representation but not about governance. Governance tends towards autocracy or dictatorship. The problem is that representative democracy, although an improvement on autocracy, is inherently exclusionary. Fiala, however, maintains that despite the weaknesses embedded in democratic theories, practically, democratic approaches have in many instances developed guardrails. In the case of the US, the Constitution is such a guardrail. Despite the not-so-distant attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, that sought to undermine and negate the people’s will, Fiala contends that the Constitution held firmly to prevent our descent into tyranny. Unfortunately, it seems to me that Fiala’s analysis of the circumstances of the recent US democratic challenges overlooked a significant constitutive factor of the American populace. The fundamental racism that Trump harbours, and which his sycophantic allies and the foolish mob prey on to undermine the democratic polity, is overlooked in Fiala’s analysis.

As I contemplate the concept of governance that moves between the poles of tyranny, as the brute use of force and power, and democratic representation, when it can be achieved, I read Fiala’s text as an exposé of the history of governance and of the forces necessary to keep governance on a course to facilitate inclusive participation and representation. From that perspective what occurred on January 6, 2021 is exemplary of the natural course of vertical governance to

want to be in concentrated hands, and to move power from leader to presumed subject.

To the extent that the march to autocracy was delayed or pushed back, that interruption was, in my view, reflective of the willingness to come to terms with the reality that governance needs to be both vertical and horizontal, that is, that power must be exercised to reflect the representation of the plurality and diversity of the demos, however momentary that realisation. If correct, it is not the guardrails in place that kept autocracy from taking hold of the country. I am thus hopeful for the success of a plural democracy but not of the constitutional type. The danger of the latter democracy is proved considering the prospect of a future Trump presidency. The Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025* would appear to propose and favour instituting changes that would be consistent with Constitutional guardrails but that would also make autocracy more likely.

The questions that must be asked in the present are a) what makes politicians move to place certain guardrails rather than others? and b) why are those guardrails deemed acceptable only to some portions, albeit a large portion, of the populace? The answers that I run to when considering the case of the US in recent years are those that point to the undercurrents of patriarchy and racism. The guardrails that are being considered in documents like *Project 2025* have at their core an appeal to a population that truly believes that governance must work only for 'their' group alone. It has a narrow horizontal concern. That tendency in turn has, at its source, a dissection of the population into an 'us vs them' disposition and that dissection is true and present in all autocratic worlds or political environments. It is, however, a particularly subterranean aspect of the current American polity.

I thus come away with the sense that Fiala's book is timely and serves as grounding for the student of political philosophy with the bonus of relating well, and directly, contemporary events to make the case for a representative democracy constructed with a crucial grounding in morality. Simply put, the only guardrails available to counter the brute use of power are the demos and, in the American context, echoing the belief of someone like Bryan Stevenson who holds the view that a true American democracy will not be realisable until there is full recognition of the genocidal conditions upon which it is built, and the full demos is exorcised of its racial and xenophobic demons. That, I believe, is the best antidote to a Trumpian or any

other aspiring tyrannical tendency that will periodically surge during the progress of this American project in democracy. Fiala's text, and as a result these guardrails it offers, do little to prevent the descent in tyranny if they do not tackle the impediments to plural inclusion.

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Alan N. Shapiro, *Decoding Digital Culture with Science Fiction. Hyper-Modernism, Hyperreality, and Posthumanism*, 2024.

Transcript Independent Academic Publishing, 374pp. ISBN 978-3-8394-7242-2 (e-book PDF)

Shapiro's four-hundred-page book is a *tour de force* of twenty years of media theory on the influence of digital media in 'hyper-modern' Western societies. It aims to develop a different model of society based on an alternative media practice.

The book is divided into three parts which are all driven by three overall concerns: 1) an expanded epistemological role for science fiction beyond literature and film; 2) the significance of digital technologies for a new understanding of the relationship between reality and the virtual and 3) the potential of 'Creative Coding' for transdisciplinary computer science with an 'upgraded' concept of code – built 'on top' of the existing concept which is a merely formal, logical, numeric, combinatorial, calculating, notational system – and instead one 'that is re-embodied', ethically embedded, ambivalent and 'musically resonant' (18, 320).

Shapiro's central ideas are outlined in the introduction and throughout the rest of the book, his multi-layered, rhizomatic approach is fast-paced. He draws on an extensive repertoire of texts from philosophers such as Plato, Kant, Leibniz, Marx, and Hegel to 'technoscientific' thinkers including Haraway and Latour.

In section one, Shapiro outlines what he considers to be the mutually productive relationship between science fiction studies and media theory. While defining the concept of digitalisation, Shapiro sees a tendency toward 'self-aware technologies' in what he calls 'hyper-modernism' (37). The concept of hyper-modernism and its

design is elucidated via the example of self-driving cars and the ‘mobility of the future’ in various (popular) cultural media (37). These analyses serve to explore the question of whether science fiction is a mode of thinking that is productive for cultural-theoretical reflection and research. Shapiro explores science fiction ‘not so much as a genre, but as an epistemological mode’ by examining a range of Hollywood films (10). In addition, he draws attention to the need for ‘narrative-centered creative coding’ and advocates for a critical analysis of code as the central way of producing the world (98, 100). A major presence in the book is Baudrillard, who is dealt with specifically in section two. The notions of hyperreality and simulacra are, for Shapiro, the ideal starting point for the development of science fiction studies. Baudrillard should be viewed as a science fiction theorist, as he makes future-oriented scenarios the basis for unfolding his (past-present) theory. Baudrillard’s discourse is reconstructed as an early theoretical starting point for a creative approach to code: ‘[Baudrillard] defines the conditions for an alternative philosophical informatics which goes beyond the notion of intelligence to that of thinking’ (140). According to Shapiro, these ‘conditions’ lie above all in the facilitation of ambivalence and a shift in meaning – only in this way would the ‘insurrection of language against its own laws’ be possible (140).

Shapiro is particularly interested in defending Baudrillard against his critics, for instance against the ‘degrowth’ economist Serge Latouche who ‘misreads’ Baudrillard as ‘disparaging of the ecology movement’ (194). He does a sustained job of tracing the importance of Baudrillard’s thinking and critiques Hayles’s reluctance to see the transformative potential in Baudrillard’s thought (127). In the process, he identifies in Baudrillard’s work the starting points for a creative approach to simulacra and its coded reality, which are characterised by competition, demarcation and binary opposition.

It would have been interesting had Shapiro clarified his position regarding Baudrillard’s critique of the convergence of genetics and linguistics. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Baudrillard plays with the (French) acronym for DNA: ‘ADN’ and ‘ADoNai’ – the latter means God in Hebrew. In *Forget Foucault*, Baudrillard goes on to suggest that on the most microscopic level of the molecular, the DNA code dominates and controls behaviour. To focus on a ‘micropolitics of desire’ as Deleuze and Foucault do (says

Baudrillard), might be to advocate a politics of liberation in a sphere which coercive and unknown powers control.

In the final section, Shapiro examines specifically the theoretical reference points of Creative Coding. Here Shapiro brings together his thoughts (already alluded to in the previous two parts) on a poetology of code and advocates the creative use of software as a meaningful cultural practice. He formulates an argument for acknowledging the agency of 'self-aware intelligent entities' (58) based on post-humanist discourse. Importantly, he draws on the historiography of twentieth-century computing by Wendy Chun, and how software is evolving towards less 'programmable' systems (212-213). The section dealing with Angerer's critique of Hayles goes on to detail how the former favours a thoroughly post-human, subject-free approach that destroys the 'autonomy of code' and lifts the barrier between software code and the programmer based on 'affective movements' (252). Shapiro does a good job, however, of positioning himself vis-à-vis the German sociologist Armin Nassehi, whose work on digital society and complexity lacks sufficient cultural emphasis in Shapiro's view.

Shapiro's poetics of coding certainly enriches the scientific and philosophical debate in view of the fact that artificial intelligence (AI) is now considered a sparring/ jarring partner. Thanks to Shapiro's background in the philosophy of science, the book mobilises an impressive array of theoretical references bridging any so-called divide between Continental and Analytic Philosophy. His manifesto-like style is energetic, and his rhizomatic framing is original. All three parts of his oeuvre discuss (explicitly and implicitly) the creative handling of code and advocate for the foundation of a new conception of the code as an ambivalent, de-pragmatised form of expression by identifying sites that prefigure creative coding. As a software developer, Shapiro is an insider to computing, coding and AI, and he infuses an important interdisciplinary perspective. Those interested in technology will find themselves reading about unexpected aspects of art, history and culture, while readers interested in philosophy, culture and history will gain an understanding of the various aspects of digital media technologies coding as well as debates in AI.

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