
Review

American prophecy: Race and redemption in American political culture

George Shulman

University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2008, xvii+315 pp., \$25.00

ISBN: 978-0816630752

Contemporary Political Theory (2015) **14**, e1–e4. doi:10.1057/cpt.2013.47;

published online 21 October 2014

George Shulman's *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* is a beautiful work of political theory, political theology and American studies. Through a critical analysis of biblical and contemporary prophetic traditions, Shulman reworks the sometimes suffocating terms of prophetic discourse in order to address and redeem suffering engendered by racial domination in the United States. *American Prophecy* performs what it describes: it is a work of prophecy in ways that Shulman does not acknowledge, and it displays the same tensions in and limits of prophetic thinking that he illuminates. Shulman's prophetic voice is at times uncomfortably close to the ones that he resists. Sometimes he appears to foreclose rather than invite engagement with others, and so occludes the democratic possibilities he wants to open up. I think this occlusion is a symptom of Shulman's own, tense relationship with prophecy: he is a reluctant prophet.

For Shulman redemption means, first, purification in order to expunge the stains of racial domination; and second, meaning-making in order to render historical suffering intelligible and so lamentable and bearable. Both practices hold promise (of return, renewal and the reconstitution of a broken community) and danger (purification can be exclusionary and genocidal; historical closure can silence suffering voices, while deafening us to their persistent urgency). Redemption is tied to prophecy, because prophets are those who guide us toward redemption.

Shulman offers us two versions of the prophetic voice, one that he resists and one that he wants to take up. The prophetic voice that Shulman resists is represented by the American evangelical right: a cramped, stingy and exclusionary voice that reinforces, rather than resists, domination. Returning to the Hebrew bible as a neglected source for political theory, Shulman reworks prophecy in the name of social justice. He argues that prophecy is an office, a calling (p. 4). Prophets call for their audiences to make 'fateful collective decisions'. First, they are 'messengers who announce truths their audiences are invested in denying'. They expose and challenge

our willful blindness. Second, prophets bear witness, they ‘testify to what they see and stand against it’. Third, they are ‘watchmen who forewarn’. Finally, prophets are ‘singers’. Through poetry, they ‘ask and answer the question, what is the meaning of our suffering’ (pp. 4–5).

Prophecy deploys three primary forms: theodicy, jeremiad and lamentation. Theodicy explains suffering as God’s punishment for human evil, especially injustice and idolatry (pp. 6–7); redemption comes through doing just deeds and returning to God. A jeremiad is a narrative of ‘decline from origins’ that stakes the fate of a community upon a decision that can endanger or redeem it; redemption here means ‘deliverance from sin’ (p. 8). A lamentation, finally, depicts suffering and dramatizes loss (pp. 10–11); redemption sustains ‘a people in the face of traumatic dispossession’.

To exemplify these forms and illustrate his argument about the link between prophecy and social justice, Shulman stages lovingly detailed conversations between four thinkers in the American prophetic tradition: Henry David Thoreau, Martin Luther King, Jr, James Baldwin and Toni Morrison. He shows how they rework prophecy as a way of resisting racial domination, and – much more clearly in Thoreau and King – how that reworking is limited by their own internal tensions and resistances. Shulman displays a special affection for Baldwin and especially Morrison, whom he partly credits with inspiring the book. While he is unfailingly careful in all of his readings, his interpretations of Baldwin and Morrison seem more generous, the tensions he uncovers both weaker and more productive than those he finds in Thoreau and King.

A strand of ambiguity runs through Shulman’s argument, always signaled by the qualifier ‘partly’. For example, in his discussion of Baldwin’s reflections on blackness, he writes: ‘Partly, blackness is linked to death’; ‘partly’, he quotes Baldwin, ‘there is a sense in which it can be said that my black flesh is the flesh that Saint Paul wanted to have mortified’; and ‘partly, a liberal culture idolizes self-mastery as sovereignty’ as against ‘the chaos and insanity lodged in racialized others’ (p. 145). Shulman suggests that the three claims are linked by Baldwin’s understanding of blackness as a figure of disavowed finitude while whiteness is emblematic of fantasized sovereignty, but the precise relationships between these claims remain unclear: Is death the end of mortification, or is the pain of mortification its own end, with death either the gift of the arbitrarily powerful or an accident that undermines their exercise of power? Must that which is chaotic be killed? Maimed through mortification? Is mortification intended to produce a docile subject upon whose back self-mastery can be assured? Shulman’s ‘partly’ does not help us answer these questions, which seem crucial for understanding black suffering and the possibilities of its redemption.

What is the source of these ambiguities? Might it stem from Shulman’s ambivalence about declaring himself more firmly? Shulman’s book is prophetic in a way that he does not recognize, and maybe does not want to. This is why I call him a



reluctant prophet. First, like a prophet, he responded to a call: 'To face race in America is to be compelled toward prophecy'. In addition, he 'conceived a book about "prophetic narrative" because [he] was so profoundly affected by Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*'. Morrison called to him, as Thoreau, King, Baldwin and Morrison were likewise called. Shulman announces, or insists upon, the truth of race and racial domination that liberal political theory and institutions are invested in denying. He bears witness and stands with Thoreau, King, Baldwin and Morrison as witnesses to the suffering of black and other racial minorities in the United States. Indeed, by summoning those thinkers to bear witness with him, by calling upon them, he names, hails and authorizes them as prophets. Shulman is also a watchman who forewarns: he invokes 'the value and danger of prophecy as a language in and for politics', and says that 'we must not pass by or ignore this story, but nor can we simply bequeath it to others unchanged' (p. xvii). Finally, Shulman's is a poetic work. Not only is it poetic in the literal sense that it is made, but it is also inspired by poetry – of Ginsberg, of Simon and Garfunkel and others.

Shulman also employs the narrative forms that he associates with prophecy: theodicy, jeremiad and lamentation. He deploys these forms in secularized terms, in the tradition of post-Nietzschean political theology. His secular theodicy consists in an account of the source of the evil of racial domination. In Sartrean terms, self- and other-injuring desires for mastery bespeak a human desire to be God. Shulman's jeremiad takes a different form from the theological ones he traces in the bible and in contemporary evangelical thought. He rightly does not depict a decline from a previous state of racial harmony to one of racial domination; but his account of the stakes for *political theory* of thinking prophetically is itself a jeremiad. Shulman finds rich resources for political theory in the Hebrew bible, laments (the second narrative form of prophecy) its absence from canonical political theory and calls for its reinclusion; in this way he joins earlier thinkers like Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt, who likewise lamented the turn in political thought away from early sources – for them primarily (though not only) ancient Greece and Rome. Indeed, Shulman claims that '[t]o turn to American politics is to *recover in its wholeness* [to redeem] a biblical prophecy' (p. 13, my emphasis).

Why does Shulman occlude the prophetic dimensions of the book? One possibility is that he is more anxious about the risks of prophetic thinking than his argument suggests, even though he acknowledges those risks openly. Perhaps they constitute a truth that he is 'invested in denying'. Shulman's anxiety is implicit in the equivocations I noted earlier. There are also moments when Shulman's defense of prophecy undermines its own best insights. Despite his call for a more democratic and inclusive prophetic politics, he seems uncharitable to contemporary evangelical versions of prophecy that, he says, justify exclusion (p. x). For example, he makes no mention of Christian love, which teaches us to hate the sin but love the sinner. Perhaps from his point of view this is a love unworthy of the name. But Shulman never tells us precisely what is wrong with this corrective, redemptive love, and how

it differs from the corrective, redemptive love we find in, say, *Beloved*. Shulman's own turn to love suggests an affinity with evangelical prophecy, but his silence about it suggests a disavowal of that affinity. He confesses that he writes 'more generously about' Thoreau, King, Baldwin and Morrison than about the biblical prophets and claims that 'biblical attacks on idolatry seem to discredit a pluralism I value' (p. xii). But isn't his lack of generosity toward conservative prophecy itself a form of exclusion, a closing down of conversation that discredits his claim to appreciate pluralism?

American Prophecy is an extraordinary and important contribution to political theory. In beautiful, passionate prose, and in conversation with a wonderful cast of characters, Shulman turns to biblical sources for political theory and reworks prophecy in the name of social justice. The tensions I find in Shulman's argument do not bespeak a failing on his part; rather, they expose and dramatize the tensions of prophetic thinking in contemporary America, between our desires for redemption and the risks of exclusion and deafness to the claims of others that are written into the very grammar of prophecy. Shulman has done us an invaluable service in helping us to better understand the times in which we live.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Jack Turner for very helpful comments on an early draft of this review.

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