
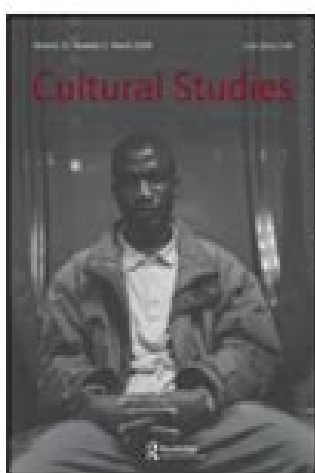


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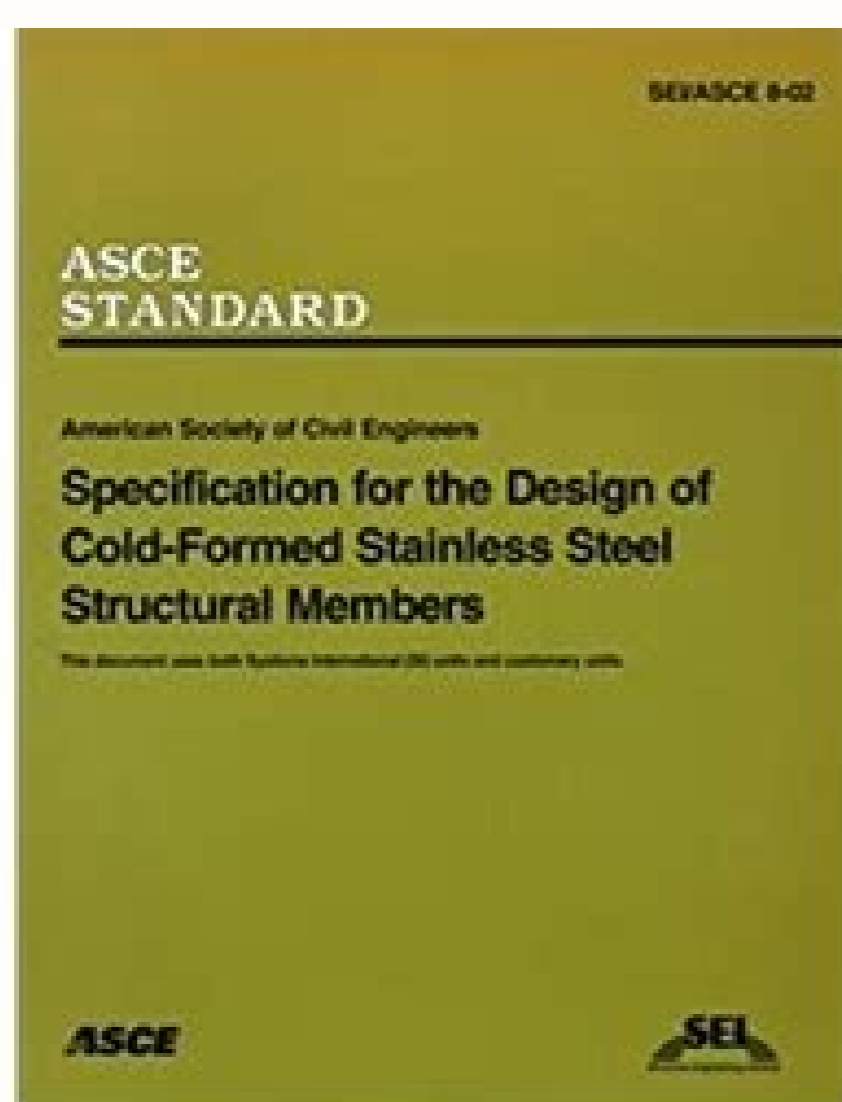


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 Megan Boler
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Pragmatism and Democracy: Assessing Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*

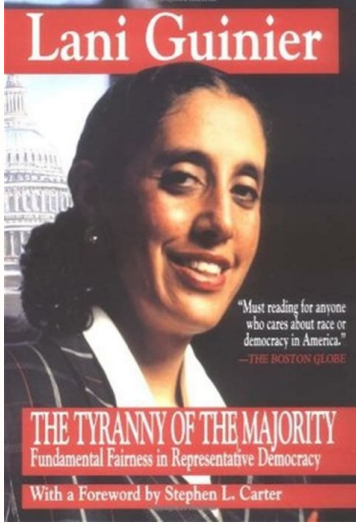
Jason Springs, Editor
 Cornel West, Richard Rorty, Stanley Hauerwas, and Jeffrey Stout*

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Jason Springs

Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* intervened in debates that had extended for more than two decades across the fields of religious ethics and the philosophy of religion. A central aim of the book was to mediate a long-standing impasse between theological traditionalists and liberal secularists. The former often described liberal democracy as inhospitable—if not positively antithetical—to the substance and particularity of theological claims. For the latter, democracy required the

*Jason Springs, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA. Cornel West, Center for African American Studies, Stanhope Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA. E-mail: cwest@princeton.edu. Stanley Hauerwas, 308 Old Divinity, Duke Divinity School, Duke University, Box 90967, Durham, NC 27708, USA. E-mail: stanleyhauerwas@duke.edu. Jeffrey Stout, Department of Religion, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544-1017, USA. E-mail: stout@princeton.edu. Jason Springs, Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, 305 Hesburgh Center, PO Box 619, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA. E-mail: jspring@nd.edu. The panel took place at a session of the "Pragmatism and Empiricism in American Religious Thought" group at the 2003 AAR Annual Meeting in Atlanta, GA. The session was coordinated by Eddie Glaude, David Lambert, and Frederick Ruff, and was recorded by Darryl Smith. Thanks to Wayne Proudfoot, who moderated the session, those who attended and those who participated in the Q&A. [0] Note that the original order of presentations (Hauerwas, West, Rorty, and Stout) has been altered to improve the transcription's clarity for a broader audience.



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A good starting point to read about the conversation between Democracy and Islam is the book by Yusuf Qaradawi, "The Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase."In the spirit of Socratic questioning we must ask, "what is an authentic and truly prophetic model, organic to the historical paradigm of Muslim nations?" "Why should Muslims take on models and concepts from the West and show greater confidence in them than the West has revealed a deep distrust and lack of confidence as highlighted by many of its own scholars and intellectuals" and "since the historical trajectory of the Islamic civilization is different in many ways to that of the West and its relationship with religion don't calls from Westerners for democratization lack historical knowledge and reek of paternalism." To his credit West does say that "Western style democracy has no future in the Islamic world."I think the most salient point in the book and where he is his finest is when talking about our problems at home. West, Princeton philosophy professor and renowned public intellectual, follows Race Matters (1993) by once again addressing important social and political issues, this time integrating concerns of all races regarding democratic ideals. . And, as with Sophocles' Creon in Antigone, the preoccupation with might easily leads to myopic arrogance and hideous hubris of nations and persons. While this audiobook makes some excellent points, West would benefit from a good editor to help him deliver his points with more impact. Needless to say, it sends an explosive message to the most vulnerable that they neither count nor matter. He omits that the State of Israel itself is a colonialist state, and this tragic history is the greatest impediment to a peaceful and equitable solution to the conflict. West argues that a race-sensitive analysis, fully recognizing the contradictions of slavery and western expansion at the expense of indigenous Americans, can help us develop a progressive vision that will bring America closer to its ideals. The fact is and this may be counter intuitive but the Islamic revivalists movements and their associated scholars, Callers, intellectuals, laymen, and workers have been the foremost cultural force for transformative change that reconciles Islam with the current historical context and situation. We need a voice like his—if only it were more accessible. He begins from the premise that Israel is a legitimate state that came into existence as similar liberation and independence movements across the world. With intermittent journeys through Tocqueville, Melville, King, Emerson, Twain and Morrison, among others, he lingers in the Middle East (supporting security for Israel and freedom for Palestinians), and calls fiercely for an American Christianity that evokes the Christian ideals of love and justice, and that advocates deeper engagement with youth culture—which leads to a nine-page account of how his outreach led to a clash with Harvard president Larry Summers and his departure for Princeton. Also on the issue of the Kurds I believe West has glossed over the fact that one group, the PKK and affiliated groups run Northern Iraq and are themselves quite autocratic and authoritarian when it comes to parties who challenge their power.His other contention is that so called Islamic revivalists movements are in power in the Muslim world when nothing can be further from the truth, he states, "the Islamic revival mobilized the masses and gained state power." Aside from Iran which is quite a problematic and unique case in itself (being Shia) every Islamic revial movement from Algeria, Morocco, Lybia, Egypt, Syria, Sudan, until recently Iraq, Turkey, Bangladesh has not only felt the brunt of state repression but also state violence and subjugation. America can be a force for good if it checks it's hubris, fights imperialism, and most importantly re-invigorates those forces that oppose expansionism, free-market fundamentalism, and oppression at home. However, its obfuscating prose makes Professor West's deeply felt points about America's past, current, and future political struggles much harder to understand than if he emulated one of his idols, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. West's pinched, raspy yet somehow jazzy delivery reminds one of a Spike Lee production—if it were one long close-up of Cornell West's face and discussed only intricate policy points welded to humanistic fervor. *I had to shorten this review.The book is about the importance of Democracy, threats to Democracy, both in America and around the world interlaced with historical background and shared experiences. He goes on to state: "It is the legalistic conception of Islam that often authorizes an antidemocratic rule of Muslim jurists. No democracy can survive without these precious commitments. The great dramatic battle of the twenty-first century is the dismantling of empire and the deepening of democracy. Cornel West is an eloquent prophet with attitude." —Newsweek"West reveals himself as a thinker of dazzling erudition, whose critiques are inevitably balanced by an infectious optimism and magnanimity of spirit." —The Village Voice --This text refers to the paperback edition. No democracy can thrive without legitimate forms of accountability containing such power.Escalating authoritarianism feeds public paranoia and cuts off the democratic lifeblood of any society. West was quite critical of Islamic revivalists movements which he equates with clerical authoritarianism and fundamentalism, but what would he think about this democratic outcome in Palestine, does he believe it is a manifestation of the strong democratic possibilities of Palestinian society, or another manifestation of nihilism and if so how is he any different then George Bush and those Evangelical nihilists who parroted democracy and freedom only to destroy the democratic aspirations once a group they disliked came into power. As the mechanisms of deliberation and modes of cooperation weaken, unchecked power reigns supreme. The subtle censorship of media and narrowing of political discourse disempowers citizens and discourages novel approaches to pressing problems. Echoing his 1993 demand for improvisational "Jazz freedom fighters[]," West here invokes the blues, which "forge a mature hope that fortifies us on the slippery tightrope of Socratic questioning and prophetic witness in imperial America." Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. No vital sense of public interest and common good can be sustained without these humanistic convictions.Plutocratic economic arrangements—like elite greed runs amok—create an unhealthy hemorrhage of wealth at the very top of society. Cornel West has been Professor of Religion and Director of African American Studies at Princeton University since 1988. He goes on to state that the greatest Democratic possibilities may come out from the Palestinians and the Kurds. Recently he was appointed Professor of African American Studies and the Philosophy of Religion at Harvard University. They have been the recipients of some of the most gross violations of human rights that such a statement by West is unconceivable. American democracy, argues West, is threatened by free market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism and escalating authoritarianism. There is also hardly any rule of Muslim jurists in the political realm outside of the Iranian theocracy (which is singular in Islamic history), as the State has gone to enormous lengths to subjugate, co-opt and undermine Muslim Jurists at every turn. ...more February 11, 2006 Professor Usher talked about his book Wise Guy: The Life and Philosophy of Socrates, published by Farrar, Straus and... A sequel to 1993's Race Matters, West's latest aims to "look unflinchingly at the waning of democratic energies and practices in our present age of American empire." Such ortund language pervades the book, which expands philosophically on extant critiques but offers little practical or programmatic advice. West maintains that fighting the corrupting forces of this alliance will require the moral renewal on the scale of the U.S. civil rights movement. He is most apprehensive of the unholy alliances between the corporate and political elite, which in recent years has been integrated with Christian fundamentalism. West declares that there are three nihilisms at work in American Democracy that need to be overcome: Evangelical nihilism, paternalistic nihilism, and sentimental nihilism.These nihilisms lead to Imperialism as was the result in Iraq and Free-Market Fundamentalism, which is our Achilles heal parading *I had to shorten this review.The book is about the importance of Democracy, threats to Democracy, both in America and around the world interlaced with historical background and shared experiences. According to West this is the methodology and democratic forces that are vital to democracy matters at home and across the world.What is problematic to me is his chapter "Forging New Jewish and Islamic Democratic Identities." In this chapter he calls for Jews and Muslims to be critical (nothing wrong with that) and to take on his methodology of Socratic questioning to form democratic identities(problematic). Though he calls on both sides to be critical and terms the actions of Israelis "inhumane" his analysis falls far short of a fair and balanced critique.He puts the oppressor on par with the oppressed when the monopoly on power and violence is in the hands of Israel; and the victimized Palestinians who lash out in unjustifiable suicide bombing are labeled "barbaric." There is no doubt that when Palestinians target civilians and those not responsible for the violence they harm the resistance, contradict Islam, and act criminally but the fact that this action is not justifiable does not mean that it is not understandable as it occurs out of a deep dissatisfaction with occupation and daily state terror, something he also fails to mention when asking Israelis to be critical. An overly liberal and in the end anti-intellectual and ineffective solution/contribution to reform of Muslim societies and renewal of Islam. The fact is the uniqueness of Islam, sometimes to a fault but generally for the better, is that there is no Pope or hierarchy of established clerical authority; at least in the dominant Sunni tradition. The curtailment of liberties and the repression of rights make the hard-won rule of law suspect. This is an interesting statement especially since in quite free and fair elections after this book was written the Palestinians overwhelmingly elected Hamas into government. The ideological monitoring of schools and universities dampens the imagination and ingenuity of talented and creative young people. His expressed purpose is to articulate a strong vision of American democracy by focusing on the "right side" of the American democratic experience. It also erodes the fragile democratic trust between classes and groups. He is the author of many books, including Keeping Faith, Prophetic Fragments, and, with bell hooks, Breaking Bread – This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title. This is more a colossal fight over visions and ideas than a catastrophic struggle over profits and missiles. This version of Islam is dominant in the world today. .the present form of clerical Islam is an authoritarian effort to secure an Islamic identity and to run modern nation-states given the collapse of secular nationalism...like rabbinical Judaism or Catholic Christianity, clerical Islam is in no way the essence of Islam...therefore, the present task is to undermine the authority of the Muslim clerics on Islamic and democratic grounds."The conception of Islamic "clerical" authority being on par with rabbinical Judaism and Catholic Christianity is nothing but a crude comparison. West declares that there are three nihilisms at work in American Democracy that need to be overcome: Evangelical nihilism, paternalistic nihilism, and sentimental nihilism.These nihilisms lead to Imperialism as was the result in Iraq and Free-Market Fundamentalism, which is our Achilles heal parading as our crown jewel. In particular he advocates the works of Mahmoud Taha and his "Second Message of Islam" which according to some does away with the Medianar period of Islam and focuses exclusively on the Meccan period. The eternal modernizing force and tool at the disposal of qualified scholars is ijthad, or independent reasoning and is being used precociously, being combined with tajdid or renewal of the Faith. Our need to be self critical of the abuse of power, the nihilisms that it leads to, the destructive Empire that succumbs to Imperialisms and the proper way in which to engage our strong historical democratic tradition and forces against the dark side of American Empire. We not only ignore it at our own peril: we also must acknowledge that the very moral grounds of our prosperity are at stake. The point of undermining clerics is crass and is exactly the same thing that Osama Bin Laden and other extremists have done and leads to nothing but anarchy and superficial understanding of Islam. All rights reserved. Democracies reap social chaos when such plutocratic seeds are sowed.Aggressive militarism—whether abroad, as in armed invasion in Iraq, or at home, as in police violations—heralds force as the desirable means of resolving problems. It is careless of West to promote Taha who doesn't have a large audience in the Muslim world, though certainly all voices should be heard and fairly treated and his murder by the State of Sudan was unjust.On the Palestine issue he hardly covers the deep questions, hypocrisy and nihilisms of Israeli society; its demolition of Palestinian rights, its self proclaimed commitment to a Jewish state (a justification for genocide and violence towards Palestinians), the land grabs and violence of Israeli settlers's, Zionism, etc. Freedom of expression is the indispensable precondition for any democratic experiment.The perennial battle between empire and democracy—that reaches from Athens to America—sits at the center of human efforts to preserve decency and dignity, excellence and elegance, freedom and equality. He criticizes Republicans as evangelical nihilists driven by delusions of American domination. Democrats (including John Kerry) as paternalistic nihilists accepting a corrupt system and most news organizations as sentimental nihilists sacrificing truth for distraction. His non-recognition of this fact contradicts his principles and reeks of the same nihilisms he is fighting against. D.J.B. © AudioFile 2005, Portland, Maine --Copyright © AudioFile, Portland, Maine --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title. "Uncompromising and unconventional . This requires paidea, or the cultivation of critical and active citizenry, something in my opinion that not only non Muslims but also Muslims here and abroad can gain from. Drawing on his theological background, West compares fundamentalist Islam, which has provoked a negative response in our nation, to our own Christian fundamentalism. All rights reserved -This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title. It demotes diplomacy and degrades dialogue—two crucial pillars of any democratic regime. This audiobook certainly lacks nothing in sincerity, personal style, commitment. --This text refers to the paperback edition. The prevailing climate of opinion and culture of consumption makes it difficult to even conceive of new democratic possibilities and practices.This slow yet frightening imperial devouring of American democracy flows from a lethal combination of free market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism. This top-heavy inequality puts a premium on instant success and short-term gain by any means and at any cost. Free market fundamentalism—just as significant as religious fundamentalisms—not only posits the unregulated market as idol and fetish; it also validates and demeans nonmarket activities like critical thought, compassionate temperament, and laughter at self and society. *These three nihilistic threats connect the spiritual with the social, the personal to the political, and the economic to the existential."The way to counter these nihilisms is to combine Socratic questioning/examination with Prophetic witness/drive/vision and a Tragomic dark hope that seeks the "democratic" inspiration of Blues and Jazz. Vernon FordCopyright © American Library Association. We live at a moment in which it has become fashionable to celebrate the benefits of imperial rule and to accentuate the deficiencies of democratic governance. Racism and imperialism have been essential elements, central to our nation's development while restricting our highest ideals.

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