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A work that attempts to juxtapose politics and beauty is something of a curiosity in contemporary political theory. Yet this has not always been so. For example, ancient political philosophy often portrayed the ideal political unit as one in which the four cardinal virtues—wisdom, courage, prudence, and justice—were related harmoniously, and justice itself was understood as a beautiful concord or harmony. Plato’s association of the true, the good, and the beautiful, represents a distinctive but not extraordinary version of this outlook. The utopian political imagination, both ancient and modern, has often been captivated by visions of symmetrical design, efficiency of form, or by the organic beauty of the pastoral idyll. Modern ideologies such as nationalism, fascism, National Socialism, and communism, all promoted a distinctive aesthetic in public sculpture and architecture, and in propaganda material; this aesthetic was viewed by many not merely as an instrument of persuasion but as integral to the ideology in question.

While some academic disciplines have given attention to these phenomena, beauty and aesthetics have been marginal to contemporary political theory. There are two partial exceptions to this claim. First, Michel Foucault’s late work on “the care of the self,” which he sometimes characterized as an aesthetic project of self-fashioning, along with a reemphasis on the nature of ancient philosophy as a kind of “practical exercise,” aimed at self-shaping, and with the resurgence of interest in virtue ethics initially stimulated by Alasdair MacIntyre’s study, *After Virtue*, all prompt reflection on the ways in which it may be more fruitful to consider the symbiosis of ethics and aesthetics than to assume the existence of “morality” as a separate and

distinct domain of human experience and conduct. Second, various forms of ideology-critique have, in contrasting ways, highlighted the importance of beauty for political thought. This is most apparent in feminist critiques of the ideals of beauty to which women are expected to comply in societies pervaded by male desire. Here, conceptions of beauty are diagnosed as ideological disguises of gendered forms of power and as traps to be disarmed and discarded. On the other hand, the influential neo-Marxist social theorist, Herbert Marcuse, insisted on the emancipatory potential and relative autonomy from capitalist social relations of “great” or “authentic” art, works whose transcendent beauty and aesthetic form represent a standing critique and subversion of ordinary experience and dominant attitudes. These qualities of disruptiveness and transcendence may be preserved as long as the autonomy of beauty in art is preserved, but they are undermined or flattened when great art is popularized and turned into trivial entertainment.

Timothy J. Lukes’s *Politics and Beauty in America: The Liberal Aesthetics of P.T. Barnum, John Muir, and Harley Earl*, hews closer to the latter perspective, though, unlike Marcuse, he wishes to praise beauty for its own sake, not for its “emancipatory potential.” Lukes is eager to combat what he sees as a characteristically American tendency to harness the idea of beauty to a political project, and to see the experience of beauty as legitimate only if it can demonstrate political or social functionality. For him, feminist critiques of masculine ideals of female beauty replicate this instrumental leveling of the idea of beauty, evaluating it only from a political perspective, and consequently fail to break out from what he refers to as “liberal survival imperatives.” By contrast, Lukes insists on the autonomy of aesthetic experience and on the intrinsic value of beauty. While he claims that he does not “wish to flee the political universe” he is adamant that “beauty and politics are distinct concepts” (xi).

I am sympathetic to the idea that values are plural and distinct. However, Lukes causes unnecessary problems for himself by insisting on too complete a divorce of beauty from other values. As a result, he finds himself pulled in two different directions. On the one hand, he has a political point to make—essentially, a critique of American liberalism’s preoccupation with “survival” and functionality, and its tendency to instrumentalize or commodify all domains of human experience. This produces a “circumscribed experience of beauty” (x). This critique is fleshed out in an intriguing chapter on philosophical theories of the beautiful and the sublime in the work of Locke, Shaftesbury, and Burke (perhaps the best chapter in the book) and in interpretations of American understandings of beauty concerning women, wilderness, and machines (cars). Here, Lukes shifts from philosophy to the register of cultural critique. In all three areas of the American conception of beauty, however, he detects the same problem: a tendency to place beauty in the service of “survival,” utility, or the “enhancement of estate.”

On the other hand, because he is so insistent on the completely discrete nature of beauty and politics, and so anxious to assert the autonomy of beauty, it is difficult for Lukes to explain how a supposedly more robust or authentic conception of beauty could serve as a challenge to prevailing liberal outlooks. Indeed, he seems even to struggle to provide a tentative or working definition of his own understanding of beauty—which he must, in order to provide the necessary underpinning for his critique. There is a perceptible indeterminacy or vagueness about his two central terms— “liberalism” and “beauty,” and a resulting indirection in his main argumentative strategies.

The concept of beauty must provide the basis for Lukes’s negative judgment of “American beauty.” So how exactly does he understand beauty? In his Preface, he takes issue with recent celebrations of a “beauty renaissance” or renewed appreciation in American

intellectual discourse for the importance of beauty on the grounds that all of these announced retrievals subject beauty to some or other utilitarian project—effective pedagogy, sustaining democracy, enhancing our sense of justice, or transforming our sense of women’s status. Lukes insists that beauty must be seen as distinct from other values—especially political or economic values. He comments, “I...believe that we retain distinct words for beauty, politics, and art for a reason; and I am willing to risk banality in order to explore the possibility that they represent discrete and sometimes incompatible endeavors” (xi).

In fact, the risk that Lukes runs here is not so much banality as vacuity. In his second chapter, he uses a discussion of two fables—the myth of Cupid and Psyche, as related by Apuleius, and Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont’s version of “Beauty and the Beast” to serve respectively as accessible statements of the ancient or Platonic and the liberal conceptions of beauty. His interpretation of the story of Cupid and Psyche suggests that the attempt to realize heavenly beauty on earth in the person of Psyche is a failure, and is designed to highlight the idea that “pure” beauty may only be “discovered” and “explored,” rather than appropriated for human purposes. Beauty, according to this view (for which Lukes repeatedly states a strong preference), is distant from and resistant to attempts to describe it in human language; it is “an ineffable, overwhelming beauty, exempt from human influence” (22).

If beauty is ineffable, is there anything further we may say about it? If there is not, can this view provide any kind of determinate standard for judging liberal conceptions of beauty to be inauthentic or “circumscribed” (x, 41)? Could there perhaps be a way of at least intimating some of the qualities of beauty or of the experience of beauty, for example, Dionysian ecstatic power, Apollinian clarity, harmony or unity of form allied with a diversity of particular elements—any of the usual proposals made by aestheticians—without thereby supposing that

such intimations provide an exhaustive or definitive statement of the nature of beauty? Lukes does not seem to entertain this possibility, which is unfortunate, because this means that the word “beauty” in his text—at least when it does not concern historically and geographically specific conceptions of beauty – amounts to no more than an empty signifier. When measured against such an “ineffable” (or vacuous) standard, all conceptions of beauty that ascribe a function or purpose to it will necessarily be deemed deficient, but if the standard actually has no determinate content, such judgments possess no clear force.

I do not mean to imply that Lukes’s critique of the American conception of beauty as it pertains to women, wilderness, and machines has no value. His overall narrative and attempt to link these three aspects of American beauty are arresting and suggestive, as are some of his more specific claims. His scholarly range is impressive, though often impressionistic and tendentious. I cannot think of another political theorist who would opt to write about P.T. Barnum, John Muir, and Harley Earl in one volume. But why *does* Lukes bring these three figures under one title?

P.T. Barnum, showman, businessman, and unscrupulous perpetrator of hoaxes such as the Feejee Mermaid, nevertheless played an important (and Lukes suggests, deliberate) role in promoting a distinctive ideal of female beauty, personified by the enormously popular “Swedish Nightingale,” Jenny Lind, who toured America under Barnum’s management from 1850 to 1851. According to Lukes, Barnum promoted Lind as the embodiment of “a beauty that reflects and celebrates liberal ascendance” (90), an independent and accomplished woman, who had risen above adversity to achieve personal success as an opera singer. Lind was a woman whose beauty resided in her cultivation of talent, not in her natural attributes and not in aristocratic refinement and idleness. She served (not always successfully) as the Yankee counter to the Southern belle and as a celebration of the industrious, self-disciplined, hard-working liberal individual. In her

person, beauty was presented, neither as wild or languorous sensuality nor as a refuge from the imperative to accumulate property, but as a quality that could “imbue” the liberal “survival motif” with “exquisiteness.” In other words, Lind’s beauty sweetened the liberal commitment to accumulation, and in so doing, strengthened it, contributing to its success.

Lukes sees a similar tendency at work in the career and writings of John Muir, amateur naturalist, advocate of wilderness preservation, and founder of the Sierra Club. Muir was an ardent advocate of the beauty of wilderness—a beauty that he saw as encompassing such *prima facie* anti-utilitarian aspects of the natural environment as poison oak, dangerous mountain ranges, earthquakes, and unromantic “grimy” Native Americans. Muir was an admirer of the achievements of modern engineering and machine industry, and was not averse to the “scientific management” of wilderness, to tourism, or to the location of limited forms of industrial activity in wilderness preserves, but unlike his adversary, Gifford Pinchot, he did not see wilderness simply as a potential resource for industry or husbandry. Lukes argues that Muir’s outlook should not be seen as a “straightforward expression of a liberal imperative to dominate nature” (149), nor as the promotion of a refuge from the career of accumulation. Rather, it advocates an experience of the beauty of wilderness open only to those liberal individuals who have cultivated the knowledge, inner self-discipline, and sophisticated sensibility necessary to appreciate it. Lukes explicitly draws the analogy between Muir’s wilderness and Barnum’s promotion of female beauty: “The influence of the survival motif occupies both expressions of beauty, for one can appreciate the beauty of American wilderness and female beauty only after a thorough apprenticeship with Locke....American culture, unable to welcome a fully autonomous beauty remains satisfied with a beauty that is susceptible to adaptation” (149).

Finally, Lukes turns to the designer of the three famous mid-1950's Chevrolets, Harley Earl. An industrial designer by training, rather than an engineer, Earl reversed the subordination of design to machine, introducing non-utilitarian elements such as welded corners, horizontal chrome strips, ornamental trim, and bright colors to his extremely popular vehicles. Lukes sees these designs as a "hybrid of the exquisite and the utilitarian" (167), and claims that "like Barnum and Muir, he (i.e., Earl) forsakes utility in his designs and thereby admits disinterested diversions to the survival purpose of the underlying mechanism" (168). Under Earl's influence, automotive bodies shifted from mechanism to sculpture, embodying a useable form of beauty. Lukes is less than clear in identifying the flaw in this "hybrid" conception of automotive beauty, but it seems to reside, first, in the domestication of design for the suburban market and its reinforcement of conventional gender roles, and second, in the phenomenon of 'planned obsolescence,' which subordinated design to market- and profit-motives. He suggests that this, and its current iteration in electronic technological design, "provides consumers with a more legitimate cover for their otherwise gratuitous interest in beauty" (180). For Lukes, the problem seems less that planned obsolescence stimulates wasteful consumerism than that it squanders an opportunity to promote a disinterested appreciation for beauty and that consumers still need utilitarian excuses for their interest in beauty.

This raises once again the question of Lukes's own conception or standard of beauty. In what would a truly "disinterested" contemplation of beauty consist? He offers some tantalizing clues concerning authentic, disinterested appreciation of ineffable beauty in his final chapter. For example, he interprets Ed Hopper's late work, *Excursion into Philosophy*, as an important critique of the American attempt to idealize "delightful sexuality" and to conflate it with beauty, but sees it also as a belated admission of the error of seeking beauty in representational art (198).

It is only in “less materially grounded forms” of art that we may successfully resist the survival and subsistence concerns of liberalism—such as the Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock’s *Full Fathom Five*, which “returns us to the sea...suggesting an alternative hierarchy under which humanity and its subsistence concerns are no longer paramount” (205) or the “Free Jazz” or “harmolodics” of Ornette Coleman, which transcends the context of racialized political power and so “undertakes a daring renovation of American beauty” (214). Lukes seems to prefer any form of art that eludes everyday concerns of practicality, enjoyment, and representational accessibility to the “hybrid forms” that strive to combine utility and disinterested appreciation in an unstable blend. Never mind that even these forms of beauty seem readily susceptible to niche commercialization or commodification.

Despite the intriguing historical details, unconventional linkages of subject matter, and nuanced judgments (of which I have only been able to convey a smattering here), I freely confess to finding Lukes’s overall argument maddeningly imprecise. Because I do not wish to lose sight of the value of his concern about the instrumentalization of beauty in America, I choose not to dwell on his extremely loose and arbitrary usage of the term “liberalism,” as opposed to “capitalism,” “modernity,” or “instrumental reason,” or on the vague repetition of phrases such as “survival agenda.” Nevertheless, there are opportunities here to explore Marxist, Weberian, and Tocquevillean analyses of American political culture, which Lukes completely neglects.

I return instead to a point raised earlier. If all we can say about beauty is that it is “ineffable,” “autonomous,” and completely distinct from all other ethical and political values, then it is hard to see how beauty may be intelligibly related to politics at all. Lukes is laudably determined to protect beauty as an intrinsic and partly mysterious good from all attempts to reduce it to a moral or political purpose. However, in his concern to secure the autonomous value

of beauty, he goes too far. Perhaps the root of the problem is a tendency to conflate the intrinsic and objective good of beauty with the idea of disinterested contemplation as the core of the aesthetic appreciation of beauty, or with the notion—partly derivable from Immanuel Kant—that the only legitimate apprehension of beauty is aesthetic. Beauty may indeed be an autonomous and distinct value, not reducible to moral or political concerns. This does not, however, mean that it can be completely separated from the full range of concerns of living human beings. Lukes is right to point out that there is a powerful tendency in American culture to advocate for beauty *only* for instrumental reasons—because beauty greases the wheels of aspirations to social success, because it enhances a sense of justice, because a conception of beauty less dominated by male desire may enhance the status of women or contribute to gender liberation, etc. It does not, however, follow that a non-aesthetic, non-disinterested concern with beauty necessarily reduces it to a mere vehicle of some social or political project. One may recognize the intrinsic good of beauty, yet at the same time be interested in the non-aesthetic functions conceptions of beauty play in society. After all, Plato himself (identified by Lukes as the author of the most profound conception of autonomous beauty) recommends in the *Republic* that the ordinary, unphilosophical Guardians should be educated to acquire a sense of beauty because this will provide them with an intuitive sense of justice and injustice.

If that is the case, there are two implications for any attempt to relate beauty and politics. First, it is perfectly legitimate *for a political or social theorist* to be interested in the ideological functions of conceptions of beauty or in the culturally and politically disruptive and emancipatory potential of beauty—as Marcuse and others have been. This need not involve a reduction of the value of beauty to fuel for a political project, or worse, to propaganda. Second, while Lukes's concern that dominant American conceptions of beauty tend to accept a sense of

beauty only on condition that it can play a ‘positive’ role in the world of commerce, material accumulation and status-seeking is compelling, it is never enough to criticize conceptions of beauty simply because they instantiate a “hybrid” sense of beauty’s autonomy and its practical functionality. More—much more—needs to be said about the particular powerful interests served by a given conception of beauty and about the vision of human emancipation blocked and obscured by it. Lukes ends his book, therefore, at just the point at which a serious and critical attempt to relate beauty and politics needs to begin.