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A critical encounter with Fred Dallmayr: Introduction

Kenneth Colburn Jr.

In the fall of 1989 I had the unique privilege and honor to serve as the organizer and chair of a book review panel on Fred Dallmayr's *Critical Encounters* at the annual meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences held at Duquesne University. My selection of both this author and his book as the basis for a review panel was not made lightly nor without several worthy competitors in mind. Yet it appeared then as it does now to me that Fred Dallmayr is without doubt one of the leading theoretical phenomenologists of our time in the social sciences, as suggested by the long and impressive record of publication he has compiled over the past decade or so. Having settled on the author and book, and receiving his commitment to attend the session, my next task was nearly as difficult: I had to find reviewers with the necessary knowledge and sensitivity to do justice to the diverse authors and complex theoretical issues treated by Fred in his book. I was fortunate, as I believe their written reviews amply demonstrate, in being able to enlist the able and competent contributions of Peter Kivisto and Dieter Misgeld.

At the session Peter Kivisto and Dieter Misgeld each offered insightful and critical commentary on Fred Dallmayr's work after which Fred had the opportunity to respond. As everyone who was present at the session agrees, Fred's response to "his critics" was extraordinary not only for the usual generosity and intellectual depth with which he responded to the latter's commentary but also for the *tour de force* of self-reflection and formulation of the goals, methods, and achievements of his entire scholarly work to date. As Fred sees it, and I would concur, *Critical Encounters* marks a significant transition in his intellectual development in that he is for the first time attempting to self-consciously discover and speak his own voice and not merely engage in the exegesis of others' texts.

To begin with Peter Kivisto's review, he characterizes, correctly in my view, Fred's critical treatment of the various authors he deals with in terms of Gadamer's concept of "good will" in which a primary concern in the hermeneutical formulation of an author/text is to exhibit "exegetical generosity." Giving the author the benefit of the doubt in the reading of a text enables the author/text to be the best or strongest that he/she/it is capable of being, an achievement that promotes self-reflective dialogue between author/text and reader. Dallmayr, like Gadamer, practices exegetical generosity as a means of ensuring the greatest opportunity for self-development through meaningful and not irrelevant encounters between self and other.

Peter rightly emphasizes that while Dallmayr addresses authors/texts in the areas of phenomenology, hermeneutics, pragmatism, deconstruction, critical theory, and postmodernism, he is chiefly concerned with utilizing the latter as resources for developing a "practical ontology" or an "ontological praxis." Although Peter does not quite put it in these terms, it is clear that Fred's interest in developing such an ontology has to do with his journey to discover and speak his own voice.

Dieter Misgeld in his review identifies the authentic community or polis as a major theme of Dallmayr's work and Dieter displays much sensitivity to the importance of ontology for Fred's project. Ontology for Dallmayr, Dieter suggests, refers to "a mode of reflection" that makes it possible to distinguish the essential (being) from the non-essential (essent) and which can, therefore, make us "face the absence of a true public space, the absence of the relevant forms of community." As Dieter emphasizes, authentic community is not realized in the modern political state and its bureaucratic functions and structure. Authentic community is instead synonymous with meaning generated and capable of sustaining common discourse. For this reason, Dallmayr places a priority on poetic experience and expression; as Dieter suggests, "community is created, not made."

Thus far Kivisto and Misgeld are friendly and supportive in their reading of Dallmayr. Yet each raises in a somewhat different way essentially the same criticism of *Critical Encounters*, namely, that Dallmayr's essays are more oriented toward philosophical abstractions than political or practical matters. Peter, for example, notes that Fred's essays are skewed more toward philosophy than politics and that "nowhere does he engage in a sustained discussion" of his "political vision." Dieter likewise focuses

on this apparent shortcoming in Fred's work noting that he "finds it odd that Fred Dallmayr never links the philosophies and philosophers which he considers with actual political developments in contemporary societies." Thus both Peter and Dieter concur in their view of Fred's work as significantly compromised by his failure to link theory with practice through a demonstration of the relevance of such theorizing for understanding contemporary issues.

In what follows the reader will encounter Fred Dallmayr's own clarification and justification of his scholarly project in response to the critical reactions of Kivisto and Misgeld. The reader will become acquainted with Dallmayr's vision of phenomenology as "an attentiveness to the phenomena of experience, an effort to 'save the experiences' in the face of technical constructs and abstract explanations, and ultimately an openness to whatever appears or discloses itself in phenomena." Yet how does Dallmayr respond to the criticism that he fails to pursue the connection between theory (ontology) and practice (political matters)?

Toward the end of his paper Dallmayr in fact takes up this criticism by distinguishing between ontic and ontological levels of analysis, that is, "between politics seen as concrete policy-making and politics viewed as the generation and maintenance of 'polity' or a public space." Fred cogently argues that his theorizing was directed toward the latter rather than the former level of political analysis, and this selection he grounds in a rejection of any simple or straightforward correspondence between the ontic and the ontological levels of political analysis. As a token of this difference he suggests that "theorists or intellectuals ... have no privileged position in policy-making over other citizens," a view quite at odds of course with the prevailing (liberal-pragmatist) claims of many political and social scientists. From this perspective Dallmayr's failure to address near-at-hand political matters could be seen as a feature of his ontological commitment to the enduring rather than the transient dimension of political life and thus as a principled kind of reserve characteristic of theorizing about essential matters.

The idea of reserve as a feature of authentic theorizing is in fundamental opposition to the presumption of transparency in the more technical, utilitarian pursuits characteristic of liberalism. Theoretical reserve must resist the impulse to provide technique and a calculus because the latter offer the false hope of escaping from the hermeneutical circle of discourse and dialogue with a subsequent loss of the opportunity to achieve and re-achieve community. The reader should, therefore, not be alarmed or surprised by discovering that Fred Dallmayr, in finding and expressing his own voice, does so with the reserve necessary for one who would nurture and provide for an authentic communal life.

Biography

Fred R. Dallmayr received the Dr. of Law degree, 1955, from the University of Munich; the M.A. in political science from Southern Illinois University, 1956; and the Ph.D. in political science from Duke University, 1960. He has taught at Purdue University, 1963-71, and also from 1973-78 when he served as Sackey J. Dee Professor and Head of the Department of Political Science; the University of Georgia, 1971-73; and, since 1978, as Professor of Government in the Department of Government and International Studies at the University of Notre Dame. He has also been Visiting Professor at Duke University, the University of Hamburg, and the New School for Social Research, and a Fellow at Nuffield College, Oxford University.

His numerous publications (since 1955 he has published 7 books, 5 edited books, 24 chapters in books, 70 articles and 28 book reviews) reflect his extensive interests in political theory and political philosophy. A selected bibliography of his major writings in the last decade is provided below.

Selected bibliography of recent works by Fred R. Dallmayr

Books

Beyond dogma and despair: Toward a critical phenomenology of politics.
University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.

Twilight of subjectivity: Contributions to a post-individualist theory of politics. University of Massachusetts Press, 1981.

Language and politics: Why does language matter to political philosophy? University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

Polis and praxis: Exercises in contemporary political theory. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984.

Critical encounters: Between philosophy and politics. University of Notre Dame Press, 1987.

Margins of political discourse. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.

Book chapters

Critical theory and public policy. In Ernest R. House (Ed.), *Evaluation studies, review annual*. Vol. 7, 740-752. Beverley Hills: Sage Publications, 1982.

Kommunikation und Gemeinschaft. In W. Kuhlmann and D. Boehler (Eds.), *Kommunikation und Reflexion: Festschrift für Karl Otto ApeZ*, 191-220. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp. 1982.

The theory of structuration: A critique. In Anthony Giddens, *Profiles and critiques in social theory*, 18-27. Macmillan Press, 1982.

"Introduction," to Michael Theunissen. *The other: Studies in the social ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber*, ix-xxv. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984.

Comments on Giddens. In Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica (Eds.), *Hermeneutics: Questions and prospects*, 231-238. University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.

Phenomenology and Marxism in historical perspective. In Waldenfels, Broekman and Pazanin (Eds.), *Phenomenology and Marxism*, 3-30. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.

Critical theory and public policy (expanded version). In William N. Dunn, *Policy analysis: Perspectives, concepts and methods*, 41-67. JAI Press, 1986.

Life-world and communicative action. In Bhikhu Parekh and Thomas Pantham (Eds.), *Political discourse: Explorations in Indian and Western political thought*, 152-178. Beverley Hills: Sage Publications, 1987.

Political inquiry: Beyond empiricism and hermeneutics. In Terence Ball (Ed.), *Idioms of inquiry*, 169-185. Albany: SUNY Press, 1987.

Heidegger, Holderlin and politics. In Joseph Buttigieg (Ed.), *Criticism without boundaries*, 111-128. University of Notre Dame Press, 1987.

Praxis and reflection. In Alan Blum, Michael Brown, Fred Dallmayr, Maurice Roche, and Kurt Wolff, *Self-reflection in the Human sciences*, 1-15. Edmonton, Alberta: University of Edmonton Press, 1987.

Life-world: Variations on a theme. In Stephen K. White (Ed.), *Lifeworld and politics: Between Modernity and Postmodernity; Essays in honour of Fred Dallmayr*, 25-65. University of Notre Dame Press, 1989.