

# *Empires of Belief: Why We Need More Scepticism And Doubt In The Twenty-First Century*

by Stuart Sim, Edinburgh University Press, 2006, 176 pp.

**Jules Townshend**

*Also under review: Simon Thompson, The Political Theory of Recognition: A Critical Introduction, Polity Press, 2006, pp.256.*

Both these books deal with contemporary themes, one with the rise of a variety of fundamentalisms in the modern world, the other with issues stemming from the growth of identity politics – the politics of recognition. Both are well-written and have illuminating things to say. Sim's book is very much a *cri de coeur* in the face of the gathering darkness of many forms of fundamentalism that threaten to undermine the Enlightenment project, and is a rallying call for those influenced by post-structuralism to embrace Derrida's 'New Enlightenment.' The book is strong in identifying different forms of fundamentalism, and Sim quite rightly points out that the 'Enlightened' West in producing its home-grown fundamentalisms, such as market fundamentalism or Creationism, has little to feel superior about vis-à-vis Eastern religious fundamentalism. Sim briefly explores the philosophical roots of scepticism, from the ancients through the Enlightenment to the post-moderns, including an interesting discussion of scepticism in Islamic and classical Indian philosophy. He then surveys fundamentalism in many of its modern guises, as well as identifying the good and bad uses of scepticism. Thus, he deals with the sceptical ploys of scientists over the human causes of global warming, creationists sceptical of Darwinism and Eurosceptics – each either serving vested interests or concealing their own fundamentalism. He also wants to argue that scepticism has its limits in the form of 'super-scepticism' – it can veer into the relativism and potential nihilism of the post-moderns. Hence he favours a 'Pyrrhonist scepticism' that at least admits to the possibility of knowledge, but has a questioning attitude. Following Chantal Mouffe he champions an 'agonistic politics,' where 'enemies' are treated as legitimate adversaries, and calls for a scepticism that keeps politics on its 'toes,' that disrupts oppressive consensuses without destroying the fabric of political life. And he favours Lyotard's injunction to pursue 'little narratives,' or 'Rainbow coalitions,' thereby avoiding the supposed totalitarian implications of 'grand

## TOWNSHEND | Fundamentalism and Identity

narratives.’ He wants an ‘engaged scepticism,’ or ‘sceptical anti-authoritarianism within all cultures,’ which promotes less belief and more doubt, ‘acting on behalf of all humanity’ (p. 4).

At one level it is difficult to disagree with Sim’s sentiments if one is in favour of the Enlightenment and the abolition of superstition and oppressive or self-interested dogmatism, but it is difficult to know more precisely what a sceptical politics would look like, apart from having a questioning attitude. If we see the heart of politics as consisting of the battling conflicts of interests, then it entails more than questioning ideas, and involves taking political action. And political action, especially of an Enlightenment sort, needs to be based on some ‘rational’ explanation of the world. These concerns might lead us to a further question – how to explain the emergence of these various fundamentalisms. Sim unfortunately makes little attempt at this, but, given his preference for ‘little narratives’ and his opposition to Marxist system-building, he is unlikely to put the narrative of capitalism centre-stage. Of course, to do so in any simple way would be to commit a fundamentalist error, but to assume that capitalist-driven imperialism and technology, the commodification of everyday life, globalisation and divisions of labour are of little significance in explaining these new ‘empires of belief’ can also become a form of dogmatism. Thus, one hopes that Sim could allow for the possibility that his own preference for Lyotardian ‘little narratives’ is open to challenge on cognitive grounds, and that thinking in terms of ‘systems’ has no necessary totalitarian connotation.

In contrast to Sim’s book, Thompson’s is not a commentary on the dangers of fundamentalism in the world. It is a work of rigorous political philosophy that painstakingly dissects the thought of three Hegel and/or Critical Theory-influenced thinkers associated with the politics of recognition, namely Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser. This is a well presented book. The reader is offered plenty of sign-posts indicating where the argument has gone and is going (almost ‘sat-nav’ style!). The chapters are neatly divided up into different forms of recognition, namely as ‘love,’ ‘respect’ and ‘esteem,’ followed by three further chapters containing discussions on the relation between recognition and redistribution, recognition and democracy, and on struggles for recognition.

As the subtitle suggests this is a ‘critical introduction.’ As such it clearly and succinctly outlines the central arguments of these writers, but indicates where they fall short. Yet this is done on the spirit of constructive criticism. So Thompson on many occasions shows how their respective arguments can be strengthened, especially

with the help of each other's, in a kind of dialectical synthesis. Thus, we are not presented with a critique derived from Thompson's own theory of recognition. As he says, presenting his own theory is for another day (p. 187). At this level the book works extremely well. Thus, in the second chapter Thompson offers a solid defence of Taylor and Honneth against Fraser's questioning of whether inter-subjective recognition has any place in a political theory of recognition (all political theories explicitly or implicitly rely on some theory of the subject). The third chapter convincingly argues that (following Honneth) a clear distinction ought to be made between respect and esteem, and that (following Fraser) the idea of entrenched group rights ought to be resisted owing to the reification of identities and the potential of power imbalances within groups and of conflict with other groups.

Why Thompson puts so much emphasis on the respect/esteem distinction becomes clear in the fourth chapter. It allows him to argue that a respect for individual rights is different from the esteeming of cultures, and that practically it is possible to pursue both goals simultaneously, although protection of fundamental – universal – individual rights has the ultimate priority. He also insists against Taylor that there is a need to link issues of recognition with material contexts. In the fifth chapter he successfully demonstrates against Honneth that struggles for redistribution cannot be reduced to struggles for recognition, and against Fraser that any account of the social order has to include the political (state) as well as cultural and economic dimensions. He also questions Fraser's attempt to ground her theory of recognition on the principle of equal moral worth (far too ambiguous). There follows a lucid discussion of the relation between democracy and recognition which shows the real difficulties in reconciling the two in the sense that individual recognition is a precondition for democracy as well as an outcome of democracy. In the final chapter Thompson shows how another circle fails to get squared in Honneth's discussion of struggles for recognition. Honneth argues on the one hand that emotions constitute 'true' knowledge of social conditions, and on the other suggests that they can be mediated by institutions and ideas. He cannot have it both ways.

This book is likely to become the standard introduction to this topic. Yet there still remains the question touched on in various places throughout the book about the extent to which 'recognition,' inspired by the rise of experientially based new social movements, can provide an overarching normative basis for political advocacy in the modern world. As Thompson himself suggests, using Tully's arguments, struggles for recognition are likely to go on without end even in the most democratic and egalitarian of societies, but that does not really tell us much as to whether such

## TOWNSHEND | Fundamentalism and Identity

struggles ought to be supported, and on what basis. In the case of struggles for individual rights of many sorts the capacity for rational autonomy could be seen as a strong form of justification, but for various kinds of group rights, as Thompson suggests, difficulties set in, with the potential of generating inter-and intra-group conflict. Thus there is the question of the limits to which the recognition discourse can be used in the political democratic process. The language of recognition especially in its group form (substantive and ethical as opposed to procedural and universal) can be exclusionary and so can as easily be the language of the oppressor as the oppressed. Another difficulty with the politics of recognition is who ought to be recognised, as post-structuralists have been keen to indicate, pointing to the experience of the feminist movement. Thus, gender underwent deconstruction, because originally the movement privileged the voices of white, straight, middle class women. The language of recognition needs to be treated with utmost care if it is not going to create the exclusions and oppressions that it seeks to overcome. We hope that when Thompson produces his own theory of recognition the limitations of this sort of discourse will become even clearer.

---

Jules Townshend is Professor of Political Theory at Manchester Metropolitan University. His latest book is *Key Thinkers: From Critical Theory to Post Marxism* (with Simon Tormey), Sage, 2006.