Stout’s Democracy without Secularism: But is it a Tradition?

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This article critiques Jeffrey Stout’s suggestion in Democracy and Tradition that the practice of critical democratic questioning itself forms part of a historically unique secular tradition. While the practice of democratic questioning makes a valuable contribution to the project of fostering an “enlarged mentality” among the adherents of any particular tradition, Stout’s contention that this practice itself points to the existence of a substantive tradition, one that stands apart from and is not reliant upon the moral sources of the traditions it engages, remains problematic.

1. Freedom, Constraint by Norms, and Faith

“Freedom,” Jeffrey Stout tells us in Democracy and Tradition, “is a kind of constraint by norms.” In saying this, he is nodding his head toward those theologians and thinkers like Stanley Hauerwas, who emphasize the essential role that tradition, in particular the Christian religious tradition, plays in maintaining the commitments, institutions, and practices through which its members are able to acquire excellent skills, virtuous habits, and good characters. It is in the space created by such traditional constraints, Stout says, that people become free to do most things that are worthwhile doing. “These normative constraints,” he adds, “make possible specific kinds of expressive freedom, different roles and aspirations, and therefore different kinds of people.”

Stout also agrees in principle with Hauerwas that a society should be judged according to the kind of people it produces. For Stout, a society can be deemed good if the normative constraints it fosters and promotes (or discourages and opposes) free the development of virtuous character. Thus, the measure of any society consists in the virtuosity enabled by the tradition or traditions that find room to flourish within its borders. I hasten to add that Stout’s particular affirmation of tradition involves conceiving of these in a dialectical fashion. According to this conception, the normative constraints articulated within traditions emerge historically and evolve over time through...
the critical and dialogical negotiations of their members. Such a conception of
tradition emphasizes the back and forth movement between novel performance
and critical reflection, a movement through which a tradition’s norms emerge
and change shape over time. Because he understands these norms to be
creatures of social practice in this way, he thereby considers the paramount
decision before members of democratic societies to be the one concerning
“which practices and institutional arrangements we ought to foster.” In giving
his answer to this question, he locates what he takes to be (rightly or wrongly)
a significant area of disagreement between himself and Hauerwas.

One of the practices that Stout considers eminently worthwhile, and
which he thinks Hauerwas does not, is the practice of democratic questioning
itself, which he thinks democratic societies have used to good effect when
adjudicating between and amongst the various traditions located within them.
According to Stout, Hauerwas does not value democratic questioning as a
virtuous social practice, but rather understands it “as one of the acids of
individualism eating away at tradition.” Although he does not share this
negative assessment of democratic questioning, Stout does sympathize with the
desire that informs it – namely, the desire to defend tradition from a secularist,
liberal ideology that understands tradition as a purely repressive force that
needlessly constrains human progress and individual freedom. So, in promot-
ing democratic questioning as a valuable social practice, Stout refuses to do so
according to the terms of a secularist ideology with which he has little or no
sympathy. He even provides persuasive reasons to resist couching his recom-
mandations within the Rawlsian confines of a “free-standing” conception of
public reason. Instead, he chooses to describe democratic questioning as a
practice that itself requires the cultivation of virtues and the construction and
telling of narratives – that is, a tradition. “Commitment to democracy,” he
says, “does not entail the rejection of tradition. It requires jointly taking
responsibility for the criticism and renewal of tradition and for the justice of
our social and political arrangements.”

What makes Stout’s strategy in *Democracy and Tradition* so intriguing
is its willingness to travel quite a long way with such anti-liberal defenders of
tradition as Hauerwas, while at the same time mounting a far-reaching critique
of what he understands to be the deleterious effect the latter’s work has had
upon the willingness of religious folk to engage in the practice of democratic
questioning. Because he values the contribution that traditions, and even speci-

cally religious traditions, make to democratic society, Stout joins Hauerwas
and others in denouncing rigorous secularism as an enervating force in
democratic society. It is this worry for the health of a robust democracy that
also informs his criticisms of such liberal theorists as John Rawls and Richard
Rorty, who in different ways have sought to restrain the expression of religious
commitment in public forums. So, in spite of his grave concerns about the
sectarianism he reads in the work of religiously motivated theorists like
Hauerwas and Alisdair MacIntyre, he nonetheless joins them in arguing against