

The Political Novel: Re-Imagining the Twentieth Century. By Stuart A. Scheingold. London: Continuum Books, 2010. 272p. \$90.00 cloth, \$27.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592711004476

— Simon Stow, *The College of William and Mary*

In the final paragraph of his book, Stuart Scheingold reiterates his central claim that “one key to understanding the complexities introduced by the circumstances of the twenty-first century would be an inquiry into novels” (p. 224). He nevertheless notes “the shortcomings of [his] research—shortcomings which are always part and parcel of honest and intellectual exchange. This is especially the case . . . in a venture that reaches across the contested intellectual terrain that tends to put literary, historical, and political modes of inquiry at odds with one another” (p. 225). It is, perhaps, unfortunate then that despite his awareness of the problems of using the literary to think about the political, Scheingold fails to engage them in a meaningful way. As a result, *The Political Novel* remains something of a missed opportunity rather than a convincing account of the ways in which the novel might—as he believes it can—help us to reconceptualize the past in order that we might think and act more productively in the future.

Scheingold situates his book as a response to Irving Howe’s seminal *Politics and the Novel* (1957). On Scheingold’s reading, Howe sees the political novel as celebrating those who act heroically on behalf of ideals that are forever out of reach. “In the final analysis,” he writes, “Howe puts his faith in politics and honors novelists who believe that in the long run political action will somehow be successful” (p. 11). Scheingold, on the other hand, believes that the novels most reflective of the twentieth century are those that he labels “novels of political estrangement,” texts which “engage not with political processes and institutions but instead with those who are subjected to, but have little or no say in the decisions made by authoritative agencies on their behalf—and too often at their expense” (p. 1). By understanding estrangement as the fundamental political experience of the twentieth century, Scheingold suggests, we will be better placed to act differently in the twenty-first. He offers readings of several novels that he believes illustrate the types of political estrangement with which he is concerned.

Obviously there is something of a confirmation bias here. Drawing heavily on the work of Tony Judt, Scheingold asserts that political estrangement is the most pressing problem of modernity, and then offers readings of novels that are said to depict such political estrangement. Thus, not only are novels that do not support this thesis discounted from his analysis, but so are possible alternative readings of the novels that he does discuss. The problem of confirmation bias does not, of course, mean that he is necessarily wrong in his diagnosis of modernity’s malaise, nor that novels of political estrangement are not the

most important political novels of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it does suggest that the author needs to work harder to establish the veracity of his insights, not least because the manner in which we read novels undoubtedly shapes what we take from them. His failure to do so is a major weakness of the book.

Scheingold’s claims about the malaise of modernity and the role of the literary imagination in allowing us to see it would, perhaps, be more convincing if his approach to the texts were less reductive. Unfortunately, however, he simply offers a basic summary of a novel’s plot line, and then briefly identifies the ways in which it supports his broader claims. Thus, the very richness that the literary imagination is supposed to bring to our understanding of politics is reduced, like the novels themselves, to a simple take-home message. This is suggested by the frequency of the phrases “When all is said and done” (pp. 34, 72, 93, 163, 202) and “in the end” (pp. 115, 128, 211) or variations thereof (pp. 82, 120, 210) in his discussion of the lessons offered by a particular text. Indeed, his approach is so deflationary of the experience of what it means to read a novel that on several occasions, the insights that a given text or group of texts is said to offer about modernity are offered in the form of bullet points (pp. 36, 50–51, 96–97, 112, 188–89).

It may be, however, that Scheingold’s problematic approach to textual readings arises, in part, from the sheer number of texts that he has chosen to discuss. Beginning with Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* and ending with Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*, Scheingold provides readings of 27 novels by 25 different authors in a book whose main body of text is only 225 pages long. As such, there is insufficient space for any single reading to develop beyond the simple plot summary that he offers. Had the author chosen to focus on a fraction of the texts he discusses, then it might have been possible for him to develop his central thesis more convincingly, perhaps explaining more fully why he had chosen one novel over another, or prioritized a particular reading. He does explain that the novels he discusses “are of widely recognized literary merit—the literary imagination at its best” (p. 24). This is, however, simply asserted rather than demonstrated. Indeed, as Scheingold’s chronological approach to literature nears its end, he seems to rely rather too heavily upon Michiko Kakutani, literary critic for the *New York Times*, as the arbiter of what is of value in contemporary literature. Certainly, one might take exception to the suggestion that the didacticism of Bernard Schlink’s *The Reader* or Zadie Smith’s overpraised *White Teeth* constitute the literary imagination at its best; then again, one might not, but there is simply no space within Scheingold’s approach for such discussions to take place.

In his conclusion, Scheingold is right to note the difficulties involved in using literature to talk about politics. The shortcomings of his book have, however, little to do

with the intellectual territoriality that he identifies as a stumbling block to such analysis, and more to do with the overly ambitious nature of his own enterprise. Rather than seeking to establish the veracity of his claims through the figurative weight of the small library of texts under discussion, the author would have been better-off presenting the theoretical foundations of his approach in more detail before turning to richer, more nuanced—and more theoretically informed—readings of a few select novels. For while it could plausibly be argued that novels might allow us to reconceive of the past in a manner that is productive for the future, one would not be justified in drawing such a conclusion from the arguments presented in this book.

The Luck of the Draw: The Role of Lotteries in Decision Making. By Peter Stone. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 208p. \$49.95.
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— Adrian Vermeule, *Harvard University*

Lotteries are fascinating, both to those who buy tickets to enter them and to the economists, political theorists, and philosophers who talk about them. Peter Stone's ambitious book attempts to generalize and unify earlier treatments by Jon Elster, Neil Duxbury, Oliver Dowlen, and others, offering a single master account of lotteries that cuts across the many and highly heterogeneous political and social contexts in which they have been used. The result is a careful and clear discussion. In the end, however, Stone's master principles are excessively abstract; the concrete variety of lotteries and their institutional uses turn out to be more interesting than the philosophical generalities that unite them.

Stone's generalized account of lotteries rests on what he calls the "lottery principle," which holds that "[l]otteries make sense when and to the extent that it is important that reasons be kept out of decision-making" (p. 16). This is only a slight step beyond earlier work; Dowlen, for example, sees "arationality" as a key feature of lotteries (*The Political Potential of Sortition*, 2008). But Stone pursues his theme relentlessly, and clarifies the abstract conditions under which lotteries do and do not promote justice or social utility.

Two types of cases receive sustained attention. The first are allocative settings in which reasons run out and lotteries serve a *tiebreaking function*. If, for example, there are multiple equally deserving claimants for a single indivisible good, lotteries seem a natural device for allocating the good without any (further) reference to reasons, for there are none to be had. Stone goes on to argue that justice demands the use of lotteries in such cases. According to his "just lottery" rule, "[u]nder conditions of indeterminacy, if an agent must allocate a scarce homogeneous lumpy good amongst a group of parties with homogeneous claims, then that agent must do so using a fair lottery" (p. 53).

In a second class of cases, the problem is not that reasons run out but that there are both good and bad reasons in the picture; here, lotteries minimize the influence of bad reasons and thus serve a *precautionary function*. Stone argues that the best rationale for allocating political offices by lot, as in classical Athens, is that when the risk of allocation on the basis of bad reasons—corruption, partisanship, and the like—exceeds the likelihood of allocation on the basis of good reasons, it may be preferable to use a random mechanism that allocates on the basis of no reasons at all. Here, as Stone notes, there is an important trade-off between the benefits and costs of excluding bad reasons at the price of excluding good ones as well; in some environments, the trade-off will be worth it, but no a priori conclusions are possible. Still, Stone's treatment does clearly identify the relevant considerations.

All this is plausible and generally well argued. Even so, however, Stone's account is occasionally questionable or incomplete on its own terms. The questionable part is his critique of the standard economic account of allocative lotteries, stemming from Lewis Kornhauser and Larry Sager ("Just Lotteries," *Social Science Information* 27 [1988]: 483–516). On this account, where not all deserving claimants can receive a lumpy good, lotteries equalize distributions by providing all parties with equal ex ante chances of obtaining the good. Stone criticizes this on the ground, among others, that the chance of obtaining a good cannot itself be a good, observing that "[o]ne cannot, after all, eat chances" (p. 62). Yet chances of obtaining a good are routinely traded on markets, where permitted by law and norms, and are thus a good in both the ordinary-language sense and the economic sense. It may be that one cannot eat chances, but one can often trade them for money with which to buy food. Where alienability of chances is prohibited, this will not be so, but then the problem is not that the chance of a good is not itself a good; rather, the chance is just an illegal good, and shadow markets or black markets may arise.

The incomplete part is that Stone does not clearly identify an important third class of cases: not cases in which reasons run out (the tiebreaking function of lotteries), or in which the threat of bad reasons is so great that it is better to decide without reasons (the precautionary function), but cases in which there is intractable disagreement about what even counts as a good or bad reason in the first place. In such cases, parties who each advocate different allocative criteria—need, merit, or whatnot—may converge on lotteries as a unanimous second choice. It is an open question whether this sort of account might not better explain cases like classical Athens than does Stone's precautionary account.

These are the sorts of questions that no ambitious book can avoid, however. The larger problem is that Stone's relentlessly abstract treatment drains all the juice out of his subject. Perhaps this is a matter of taste or academic