Welcome to the third Polity Podcast. I’m Sarah Cote Hampson, Polity’s Managing Editor, and I’m very pleased to introduce to you Professor Stephen H. Marshall whose article, “Taking Liberty Behind God’s Back: Mastery as the Essential Problem of Slavery,” leads our April issue, Volume 44, Issue 2. Professor Marshall is a political theorist who teaches in the department of the African and African Diaspora Studies and American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. He’s the author of The City on the Hill from Below, Temple University Press, 2011.

Interviewing Professor Marshall today is Professor Dean Hammer who is the John W. Wetzel Professor of Classics and Professor of Government at Franklin and Marshall College. And he also serves as a member of Polity’s board. Thank you both very much for being here.

Stephen H. Marshall: Well, it’s my pleasure.

Dean Hammer: Really enjoyed reading the article both times in this case.


Dean Hammer: And it’s exciting to see an article develop.

Stephen H. Marshall: Well, I appreciate, sir. You were one of the readers, one of the original readers of the article?

Dean Hammer: Yes.

Stephen H. Marshall: Wow! Thank you so much for all of your help and your support and ultimately, your decision to publish the article.

Dean Hammer: You’re welcome. I work on some of the same stuff that you do, as it turns out of Hannah Arendt. I did some early American stuff at one point in my life. And I am currently working on a chapter on Augustine, and in fact, just put down some Augustine to talk to you today.

Stephen H. Marshall: Wow, what are you reading?

Dean Hammer: Well, right now, I’m re-reading The City of God. I try to walk through a series of works that he’s done on the Trinity, and on Words, some interesting stuff there. My question for you, and maybe this will help answer it for myself is, why Augustine? What attracts you to him?

Stephen H. Marshall: I come to Augustine for two principal reasons, I think. Firstly, I was attracted to Saint Augustine because I was trying to find a way into the problem of political evil. And in my dissertation, I wrote about Saint Augustine and Hannah Arendt on the Problem of Evil. And Saint Augustine provided, perhaps, the richest philosophical language to make sense of the Problems of Evil. And I think also, had, as much as anyone perhaps other than Arendt, a
greater awareness of how the Problem of Evil is one of the central and intractable problems of political life.

After making that first investment, Saint Augustine, in the dissertation, I’ve always wrestled with how to bring this engagement to bear in my current thinking about the problem of slavery for American politics. And so, Saint Augustine, of course, is very insightful about the problem of slavery, as well, as I try to make clear in this essay.

Dean Hammer: There’s actually two questions that come out of that, but I think are related. To what extent does Arendt and Augustine guide us or guide you in our thinking about what form evil takes today and how we confront that evil?

Stephen H. Marshall: I think Saint Augustine is crucially important because he calls our attention to ways in which evil is, of course, grounded in the imperfections of humanity, but also shows how this individual problem is reproduced in institutional context. And so, I think he’s an important resource for trying to link the crisis of the soul to the crisis of the polis or polity of political community.

Arendt’s important because she brings this problem up to date. She, in some ways, authorizes a concern for the problem of political evil as a kind of late modern contemporary political question. On the other hand, Arendt orients our focus towards a certain constellation of political evil. In particular, I’m talking about her profound, rich, penetrating analysis of totalitarian evil. And my worry is that Arendt’s brilliance is in some ways, divided contemporary political theorists thinking about the indigenous sources of radical evil outside of this totalitarian political formation, and in particular, with respect to both the US and the Black Diaspora consisting of the Caribbean, and Brazil, and the US on the way in which slavery has functioned in some ways as a radical evil whose distinctiveness, and indeed its extremity, is obscured and concealed by starting from Arendt’s pre-occupation with totalitarianism and the Holocaust.

Dean Hammer: How do you think the conceptions of evil and in turn, the conception of slavery that comes out of that... How do they contribute to our own reckoning with the slave past and to where we go in the future in our democracy?

Stephen H. Marshall: I approach this in two ways. Firstly, I think that political theorists tend to treat the problem of slavery as a settled problem, right? So, most persons don’t turn to Saint Augustine to think about the problem of slavery, in part, because most persons aren’t thinking about the problem of slavery as an ongoing problem that needs to be explored by political theory.

Arendt, in some ways, contributes to the concealment of the problem of slavery because of her writings about slavery. It’s not simply her profound writings about evil, but it’s, in fact, a way in which she constructs slavery as a kind of non-political problem, one which she explains on revolution. It is obscure in America. It’s resistant to critique and theorization. It’s outside of
theorizing, right? In other writings about race and slavery, she says that slaves were members of American society. They had a price, and it was because they had a price, that they had a value. And, of course, anyone who’s engaged with more attentive writings about slavery know that these kinds of characterizations are hopelessly imprecise. So, there’s a way in which her very reflections about slavery are obscured.

Dean Hammer: And, in fact, you talk about that a little bit in your article when talking about how contemporary discussions of slavery, including by our first African American president contribute to part of that confusion. It takes it off the political agenda to some extent.

Stephen H. Marshall: Now, that’s exactly right. President Obama, for entirely understandable reasons, attempted to resuscitate this memory of slavery and put it into the service of a narrative of racial progress. There’s a way that he flattens out the experience of enslavement, but also obscures this problem with mastery, which I attempt to describe in the article, absolutely. His move here resembles, as I suggest, the move of other writers like Michele Bachmann and Governor McDonnell who have very different projects but nonetheless, again, attempt to deploy the memory of slavery for their own political purposes.

Dean Hammer: That it was an aberration, but I think if I’m understanding what you’re saying, the argument, over one hand, is that it’s an aberration, and the argument that Augustine and Arendt bring out is that it actually is part of a human condition that admits and allows this sort of things to go on.

Stephen H. Marshall: That’s right. I think that all three of temporary politicians that we’ve discussed, appropriate slavery as a break from the larger quest for justice in the American context. We’d seen Augustine suggest... He answers that the lust for mastery and the politics of mastery is an intractable problem of political life. And he provides a language for us to try to make sense of this quest and this politics as a danger that besets political life, and that we as members of a democracy ought to be sensitive to.

Dean Hammer: You had mentioned that, and you returned to it, so it gives me a good transition. You had talked about Augustine as reflecting on the imperfections of human life, that we’re fallen beings, which I think is probably some of his most powerful stuff.

Stephen H. Marshall: That’s right.

Dean Hammer: But then you suggested that he, in turn, might provide us with an understanding of a polity that helps us wrestle with these imperfections. And I’m curious about what you see as the nature of that polity. There’s a lot of different interpretations of how Augustine understands politics and what he urges as a polity. Actually, that’s partly what I’m wrestling with right now. So, I’m curious about what you see as him offering as a political way or as a
Stephen H. Marshall: That’s right. Firstly, I think that Saint Augustine is important because he alerts us to the quest for mastery as the principal pathology of political life. I think that’s crucially important. That’s a crucially important political insight. I don’t endorse an Augustinian politics of acquiescence to political authority because it’s political authority. I think that that’s deeply problematic for a variety of reasons. But I like the skepticism towards the perfectionist impulse that’s so rife within modern political projects, and is particularly rife within the American context founded, as it is or captive as it is, to this kind of exceptionalist narrative about itself as this exemplary politics or this exemplary polity whose ultimate historical purpose is to provide some kind of redemptive service to mankind. I think this Augustinian sobriety about human imperfection in the quest for mastery is an important corrective to that impulse.

Dean Hammer: Interesting. I think I agree with you on that. Although, I was just reading... For all of his seeming complicity with slavery, he was celebrating the resistance of the Romans to a particular moment of enslavement in *The City of God*. So, he’s got exactly a different approach to these things.

Stephen H. Marshall: That’s right. That’s right.

Dean Hammer: More generally, what motivates you or psyches you as a scholar?

Stephen H. Marshall: I love reading books. I’m passionately committed to democratic politics. I love, as a scholar, the ability to pursue my intellectual curiosity and put that into the service of political action in democratic political action. At present, I’m still wrestling with this problem of mastery. And I envision pursuing a larger book project about the problem of mastery. In some ways, the US Constitution perhaps constitutes mastery as a political project, and that we continue to wrestle with this politics that’s bequeathed by the constitution. And so, for me, this is informed in part by trying to pursue this intellectual question about why and how slavery is abolished, but the afterlife of slavery persists in so many various ways. But it’s also about attempting to contribute to what I think is this larger democratic political project of making democratic citizenship more widely available, more robust, more vigorous, things of that nature.

Dean Hammer: I noticed in your book manuscript you’ve evoked Winthrop’s, *The City on the Hill* which I have done a book on Puritans, and *A City on the Hill from Below*. I was just going to ask you what... I also teach a politic on American critical thought course which actually focuses on the period between Civil War and World War I because it’s probably the most explosive time in American history. In this politics below the hill, who are your political heroes in that political fight or that political struggle?
Stephen H. Marshall: Oh, great question. Well, I am, of course, deeply, deeply impressed by David Walker. The radicalism, the courage of this son of a slave in the 1830s engaging with Thomas Jefferson on the basis of his deep investment in this ancient republican literature is for me really, really impressive. His realism about the gravity of the enmity between the races is a kind of candor and clear-sightedness that I think is a model. Now, his political conclusions are troublesome, but they are hard-won conclusions. And I appreciate the courage to allow himself to arrive at the exclusions, and then to take responsibility for them publicly.

But at bottom, I’m Baldwinian. Baldwin is my hero, in part, because I think he is just an amazingly creative thinker, but also courageous in this other way, which is to really grapple with this Walker realism and attempt to think through the possibilities for transformation given this intractable enmity. I also appreciate his honesty in talking about the ways in which his own soul is implicated in these racial conflicts. Baldwin is in some ways...is a Socrates who talks autobiographically. And he’s a artist who cares so deeply about his fellow citizens that he’s willing to enter into public life in order to re-invigorate democracy. I really, really admire James Baldwin.

Dean Hammer: Another name I’ll throw out there, because it’s one that I teach frequently, and for exactly the reason you’re talking about, is Du Bois, something you said reminded me of this, who so understood the problem that, of course, it drives you mad at some point because you realized the intractability and this image of progress. This progress isn’t actually occurring, that things are going backwards or things are going really nowhere. And that’s the admiration for someone who in the midst of that and with the recognition of that can devote their life to politics, can actually enter into that frame and try to do something about it is, I think, amazing.

Stephen H. Marshall: That’s right. I think Du Bois is, of course, the great intellectual scholar. And you’re absolutely right. The willingness to give his entire life to the study of American political problems and Black problems, the ability to change over time to reflect his deepening awareness of how intractable these problems are is really quite amazing. The thing about Du Bois that I found really interesting that I try to get at in my book is that he is in some ways a figure who... He brings a kind of erudition that enables him to try to position himself as an educator of the cultural and political elites of his time. This is a really gutsy move, and I think, a move that’s underappreciated in Du Boisian scholarship. I admire that about him. I think it has its limitations. The politics that he outlines in The Souls of Black Folk is a tour de force. It’s an amazing intricate political theory. There’s no question about it, but one, which at the end of the day, I think, turns on a certain kind of naivety, to be honest.

Dean Hammer: Interesting, in what way?

Stephen H. Marshall: I think that Du Bois is principally concerned to speak to those he takes to be patricians. The gentle reader of The Souls of Black Folk is this literate New
England audience. And what he’s attempting to do is to conjure this image of a noble legacy that his readers can earn by taking out this struggle with the abolitionist. And the naivety is that in 1903, these patricians are oligarchs for the most part or persons aspiring to be chieftains of the gilded age, right? So, they don’t have the same kind of respect for tradition, a same kind of capacity to be moved by this sense of fidelity to tradition that Du Bois presupposes in *The Souls of Black Folk*. I think that’s the great naivety of the text. Du Bois is certainly realistic about the extent and gravity of Black problems although he gets it wrong in certain crucial areas. But he, I think, misreads or misjudges the ideal reader, if you will.

Dean Hammer: And misses the mass of readers, right? Look at how many Booker T. Washington High School and Grade Schools there are.

Stephen H. Marshall: That’s exactly right.

Dean Hammer: And very few Du Bois High Schools. Let me end with this question that comes up by way of Du Bois’ naivety because in many ways, that is the naivety shared by intellectuals, generally, is we believe in the force of ideas or, at least, have to believe in most things. And the question is simply this, given that there are several units of your work with American democracy, and American history, and American culture, how do you avoid simply making Du Bois’ mistakes? That is to say, how do you make sure that the ideas that you're talking about are linked to have impact on...have a realism of power to the world that you're in?

Stephen H. Marshall: That’s a great question. And I don't know if I have a good answer to it. I’m always a little guilty that my activism isn't as salient as my intellectual scholarly activity. I participate in various political mobilizations, if you will. But the heart of my professional life is at the office and with my students. I like to think that I have an impact on my students and that these folks will, in some ways, help to contribute to this larger political project.

But I guess at the end of the day, I don’t think that our scholarly work must necessarily be a political intervention. And I think that there’s... It’s possible that what we’re supposed to do as scholars is to do scholarship. And that as citizens, we’re supposed to do another set of things. One of the things that citizens ought to do is to engage in conversations with fellow citizens, many of whom happen to be scholars who can bring these scholarly insights to bear.

And one of the things we can do as scholars is, in our political undertakings, allow ourselves to be open to the political insights of our fellow citizens and not assume that our scholarly work is authoritative.

Du Bois and Baldwin are great examples here. These are exemplary figures. And indeed, it’s not just Du Bois and Baldwin, we could talk about Fannie Lou Hamer, we could talk about Ella Baker. These were persons who, in addition to very, very committed public intellectual lives, lives devoted to wrestling with ideas, simply made the kind of sacrifices that enabled them to be
engaged in a deeply organic way with the political classes of their time. All of them were great activists. They set a very, very high bar. I don't know that I can meet that. But I know that I personally have the fortitude, and the courage, and all that to do the kind of thing they do. But what they suggest is that one needs to be great in order to be great.

[Laughter]

Dean Hammer: And that is, in fact, what makes them heroic.

Stephen H. Marshall: That’s exactly right. That’s right.

[laughter]

Dean Hammer: Well, thank you very much, Stephen. This was absolutely fascinating talking to you. And best of luck on your projects, on your continued work, and on the insight that you’re bringing to Augustine, to Arendt, to evil, and to our slave past.

Stephen H. Marshall: Thank you so much. It’s been a pleasure.