

Barton Swaim on Political Books – *The Wall Street Journal*, November 24, 2017
By Barton Swaim

Is democracy truly the intrinsic good most Americans believe it to be? Is it even, as Churchill put it, “the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried”? Not really, according to a number of critics in Europe and America. Jason Brennan, in “Against Democracy” (2016), makes the case straightforwardly. Sure, he admits, “the best places to live right now are liberal democracies, not dictatorships, one-party governments, oligarchies, or real monarchies.” But that doesn’t mean democracies are better. “Democratic governments tend to perform better than the alternatives we *have tried*. But perhaps some of the systems we haven’t tried are even better.” What systems? Most skeptics propose abandoning universal suffrage in favor of some form of meritocracy or technocracy—rule by the experts.

English philosopher A.C. Grayling, like these critics of democracy, is displeased at what he regards as the poor choices of his fellow citizens: His book “**Democracy and Its Crisis**” (Oneworld, 225 pages, \$22.99) is prompted largely by Britain’s Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump. He rejects the democracy-skeptics’ arguments, though, and makes both a theoretical and practical stand for the Churchillian view. Mr. Grayling’s principal aim is to convince those who believe in democracy that although the democracies of Britain and America are ailing in fundamental ways, remedies are within reach and worth the sacrifice.

Mr. Grayling incisively surveys attempts by Western thinkers, from Plato and Aristotle to Madison and Tocqueville, to resolve what he calls the “dilemma of democracy”: the tension between the belief that power belongs ultimately to the people, and the desire for stable and humane government. “The people” can act irrationally and inhumanely, these thinkers realized, but they envisioned systems of government in which majority rule is bound by constitutions. Mr. Grayling covered some of this ground in “Toward the Light of Liberty” (2007),

though the present book gives greater attention to the Levellers, Christian radicals in 17th-century England who advocated universal male suffrage.

Mr. Grayling's account of democracy's present-day travails is less rigorously argued. His chief complaint about American politics, unsurprisingly for a man of the left, is that money buys elections. But Mr. Trump spent considerably less on the 2016 election than Hillary Clinton, and the vilified billionaires Charles and David Koch have not had electoral success. On Brexit, Mr. Grayling complains that the Leave campaign manipulated the public into doing what the country's representatives never would have done. But wouldn't pro-Brexiteers counter that the 2016 plebiscite was necessary precisely because the elected representatives were too invested in the nondemocratic European Union to listen to their constituents?

It's useful to bear in mind the distinction between classical liberalism and modern liberalism: A "liberal democracy" is liberal in the classical sense—its elected officials are bound by a constitution and its government is accountable to the public. Modern liberalism, by contrast, elevates individual autonomy and the expansion of the welfare state to the highest aims of politics. Modern liberals, moreover, place great faith in transnational organizations that have very little democratic accountability at all. One sometimes gets the feeling that modern liberals who defend democracy do so not primarily because it reflects the will of the people and fosters stable government but because they believe it fosters modern liberalism.

Often it does, but often it doesn't, and American liberals' greatest triumphs in recent decades—legal abortion, same-sex marriage—were the results of court decisions, not legislation. Indeed, the tendency among many Western liberal elites to confuse modern liberalism with democracy itself may have soured ordinary people on the institutions and traditions of true liberal democracy.

Josiah Ober is a liberal—he is a classics professor at Stanford—but he believes democracy is both intrinsically desirable and possible without modern liberalism. “My claim,” he writes in **“Demopolis: Democracy Before Liberalism in Theory and Practice” (Cambridge, 204 pages, \$24.99)**, “is that a secure and prosperous constitutional framework can be stably established without recourse to the ethical assumptions of contemporary liberal theory.”

“Demopolis” is a tightly reasoned work of scholarship, and thus not an easy read, but Mr. Ober is an excellent writer and his argument is worth the effort. He believes today’s liberals, following the political philosopher John Rawls, conflate liberalism and democracy in ways that make it difficult to assess one without the other. He suggests we consider the capacity of “basic democracy”—democracy in the absence of modern liberalism’s assumptions about personal autonomy and the welfare state—to produce a well-functioning government that resists tyranny and affords citizens basic individual rights.

The distinction between liberalism and democracy is nicely expressed in Mr. Ober’s concept of “civic dignity.” In order to function, basic democracy requires citizens to be engaged in the effort of fashioning a shared existence; but citizens can’t be engaged in this way when they are humiliated or condescended to by the governing elite. “Living with dignity means that each of us must be free to make consequential choices in various inherently risk-laden domains,” he writes. Voters, in other words, must be free to make mistakes.

I’ll put it more directly than Mr. Ober: Modern liberalism infantilizes people who hold nonliberal opinions by treating them either as moral oafs who don’t know the difference between right and wrong or as simpletons who can’t govern themselves. It treats whole classes of citizens as (to borrow a term) deplorables. Perhaps political scientists should stop worrying about the future of democracy—a form of government with an ancient pedigree—and start worrying about the future of liberalism.