

## DEMOCRATIC VISTAS

CAROLINE WINTERER

Department of History, Stanford University  
E-mail: [cwinterer@stanford.edu](mailto:cwinterer@stanford.edu)

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After a generation of grand stories about the rise of modern republican thought (the so-called “republican-synthesis” school epitomized by the works of Gordon Wood and J. G. A. Pocock), James Kloppenberg’s new book, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought*, offers a history of democratic thought: what Kloppenberg calls “the idea of self-government.” In the course of nearly a thousand pages of text and notes, Kloppenberg traces democracy’s emergence “as a widely shared, albeit still controversial, model of government” over the last four centuries in the North Atlantic world (1). The book is deeply learned and intellectually capacious, covering thinkers from the ancient Greeks, through the sixteenth-century wars of religion, through the American and French Revolutions, ending abruptly at the Civil War. Few intellectual historians writing today could have managed a book of such sweep. The number of authors, texts, and themes discussed is vast—so much so that at times it seems that the book could double as a history of thought in the West.

But whether it succeeds as a history of what the subtitle calls “the struggle for self-rule in European and American thought” is less clear. More encyclopedic than analytic, Kloppenberg’s book treats what he calls the “thought” of “thinkers who championed democracy” (x). The thought of thinkers is of course the *métier* of the intellectual historian, but here the rough edges of thinking itself—the historically particular intellectual communities in which an idea arose, the circuitous means by which ideas were transmitted and received, the bracing conceptual ruptures, the constraints and possibilities of a chosen genre, the bitter personal rivalries—have been sanded down to clear a path for the *longue durée*. And because the book is organized around political events rather than historically specific intellectual problems, the struggle promised in the subtitle also recedes from view. We work our way through the great books surrounding a particular event, losing the thrill of the new: the sense that sometimes, quite suddenly, someone imagines their world in strange and breathtaking new ways, redefining what it is possible to say and do. One of these redefinitions, and the one I will focus on in this review, was modern

democracy's new temporal horizons, the way it required a rewriting of the past and a reimagining of the future in certain ways that Kloppenberg largely ignores.

Elaborately organized, the book traces eight themes over approximately four hundred years, though Kloppenberg does not say whether the themes are his own or those derived from his historical actors. There are three "contested principles" (popular sovereignty, autonomy, and equality), three "underlying premises" (deliberation, pluralism, and an ethic of reciprocity), and two "underappreciated aspects" (democracy's religious origins and its ethical dimensions) (6). In addition to these eight categories, the body of the book periodically lists other binaries. These include four "tensions" in the thought of eighteenth-century European philosophers (between diversity and uniformity, democracy and despotism, empiricism and the yearning for general laws, and the attractiveness of democracy and fears about its workability), and five "complex interactions" in the thought of eighteenth-century Americans (between concreteness and abstraction, religion and impiety, boldness and caution, cosmopolitanism and localism, shrewd calculation and unwavering principles) (204, 254).

Like a magnet over iron filings, Kloppenberg lifts the same eight themes, or a subset of the eight themes, from his texts across hundreds of years. Not only does the narrative tend to sag under the weight of all these principles, premises, tensions, interactions, and aspects; more problematically, Kloppenberg's thinkers also seem to be constantly returning to the same problems and questions. We yearn for him to point to clear conceptual breaks, when a person or intellectual community reset the terms of the debate and reimagined the field of imaginative possibility.

Inevitably, the eight principles/premises/aspects work better for some subjects than for others. One advantage of the theme of the "ethic of reciprocity," for example, is that Kloppenberg has permission to reintroduce religion into the story of American political thought after its relative neglect at the hands of the republican-synthesis school. By the "ethic of reciprocity" Kloppenberg means "the rationale for treating all persons with respect and weighing well their aspirations and their ways of looking at the world." To my ears, the injunction to treat "all persons with respect" sounded jarringly modern. But Kloppenberg claims that this principle appeared in early Christianity and extended "the category of those deserving consideration beyond the small body of citizens in ancient Greece and Rome or God's chosen people" (10). Given his interest in religious and ethical themes, Kloppenberg appropriately carries among the Scottish Common Sense philosophers, who posited a moral sense as part of human nature. He reminds us that Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was a manifesto to benevolence rather than a brief for unfettered free-market capitalism. He restores John Locke to the story of American political history, appropriately emphasizing the widely read and cited *Essay Concerning Human*

*Understanding* over the *Second Treatise*. These are welcome correctives to the relative neglect of religion in histories of American political thought.

Useful in some ways, the “ethic of reciprocity” makes for an awkward fit in other parts of Kloppenberg’s story. For example, it does not adequately capture the major dilemmas presented by slavery, which Kloppenberg defines as “the antithesis of reciprocity” (642). Slavery was many things in the antebellum era—an economic system, a legal system, a political system. Simply calling it the antithesis of reciprocity seems so minimalist as to be misleading. What is more, Kloppenberg then ignores the alternative vision of democracy that was in fact articulated in terms of “reciprocity” by the pro-slavery apologists of the antebellum South. Goaded by the moral drumbeat of the abolitionists, the pro-slavery apologists countered that slavery undergirded a harmonious, hierarchical society of mutual reciprocity between slaveholding whites and enslaved blacks. George Fitzhugh’s *Sociology for the South* claimed that it was “the essence of democracy to consult the good of the whole.” In Fitzhugh’s vision, that whole consisted of land owned by a few elite slaveholding families, who would create a stable society and care for their slaves.<sup>1</sup> This too is a vision of a democratic society, but one that rests on an “ethic of reciprocity” far different from what Kloppenberg seems to mean.

Buttressing Kloppenberg’s eight features of democracy is a robust narrative line that is captured in the book’s title, “toward democracy.” Where the republican-synthesis school emphasized the endless cyclical repetition of history through a largely secular trajectory, Kloppenberg is at pains to emphasize a linear narrative in which religious disputes play a starring role. Thus while Pocock opened *The Machiavellian Moment* in the city-states of the Renaissance, Kloppenberg gives them fewer than five pages, beginning instead with the deadly wars of religion that consumed Europe in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Following in the footsteps of David Hall’s recent book *A Reforming People*, he reinserts early New England into American political history after decades of neglect by the republican-synthesis school, which preferred to leap directly to the ideologies and conspiracy theories of the Revolutionary era.<sup>2</sup> He sees “the emergence of democracy” in the Puritan settlements of early New England, a sunrise that is then “deferred” (the title of the next chapter) by dark absolutist wranglings back in the old country, then allowed to rise once and for all in the age of democratic revolutions of the late eighteenth century (81).

<sup>1</sup> George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South: or, The Failure of Free Society* (Richmond, VA, 1854), 192.

<sup>2</sup> David D. Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (New York, 2011).

Perhaps recognizing the dangers of this straight trajectory—its potential for appearing teleological, or for concealing when democracy is the major subject of a given text or just one topic among many—Kloppenbergh introduces a countervailing narrative device: the “tragic irony of democracy,” a phrase he repeats a number of times throughout the book and that features as the title of his final chapter. The tragic irony of democracy is this: “the recurrent creation of social and political arrangements that, although often initially appearing to mirror popular desires, ended up either freeing previously repressed impulses that undermined democracy or generating other pressures that produced new and unanticipated forms of dependency and hierarchy” (13).

Described in this way, democracy’s tragic irony seems to be a version of the generic historical problem of the unintended consequence: democracy’s cheerleaders hoped for the best and often created the worst. What is more, the narrative device of the tragic irony seems to be imposed from the outside by Kloppenbergh, to spur us to “change the way we think about democracy” by recognizing that it is always “an ethical ideal” and not merely a “set of institutions” (4). Yet Kloppenbergh’s historical actors, at least as he presents them to us, do not seem to see themselves as part of a tragic arc. Whereas the cycles of republican history were thought by historical actors themselves to have existed and to have defined their horizon of political possibility and action, the democratic theorizers Kloppenbergh presents do not seem to have believed the story of democracy to be a “tragic irony.”

In fact, democracy until the nineteenth century was not really thought to have a “story” at all, let alone a tragic one. For the last two thousand years, democracy had usually featured as a category in various Polybian typologies of human government that included monarchy and aristocracy. The transformation of static typologies into flowing narrative is the invention of the very era—roughly 1760–1860—that is at the heart of Kloppenbergh’s book. Yet Kloppenbergh assumes that there is a preexisting, even timeless, “story” of democracy rather than revealing its invention to be one of the exciting innovations of the revolutionary era. “All histories of democracy must begin by considering developments in the ancient Near East, the warring city-states of classical Greece, and the beginnings of Christianity during the mighty but brittle republic of Rome,” he writes before plunging into twenty pages of Greco-Roman history (26). Yet it was precisely in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that the first histories of democracy appeared. With this new historical genre came a new self-consciousness about sailing along the crest of a long wave of rising democracy. Republics had always been about cyclical rise and fall, but democracy as reimagined by nineteenth-century Europeans and Americans broke free of that infinite loop. The new “story” of democracy was progressive and evolutionary, rising once and for all from the gloom of the past in a way that republics never could.

To find this story, Kloppenberg would have had to stray beyond the canonical political texts and figures that populate his book, into genres where people were more reflective about the unexpected new temporal possibilities opened by the idea of democracy. A major architect of our modern conviction that democracy has a “story,” for example, was the radical English historian George Grote (1794–1871). Grote’s *History of Greece* (in twelve volumes, 1846–56) announced that democracy had emerged among the fifth-century BCE Athenians; it culminated in the modern, liberal nation-state of Britain. Grote thought that Athenian democratic structures created constitutions that allowed for free speech and action, consensual government, individual liberty, free thought, and security of property—basically Grote’s wish list for modern Britain.<sup>3</sup> Grote’s admiring American acolytes imported his ideas into American colleges and adapted them to the needs of their rough-hewn new democracy: they hoped that becoming like the Greeks would make modern American democracy more beautiful, more glorious, more cultured. In short, nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans *invented* the idea of the glorious, democratic Greeks to ground their new notions of what a democracy was in a noble past. We owe the very concept of “Western civilization” to these Victorians, who yearned for a clear linear trajectory “toward democracy”: from democratic Athens through the less democratic Dark Ages and back into the sunshine of the increasingly democratic present.

Thus Kloppenberg’s three-part narrative—beginning in ancient Greece and moving through absolutist Europe safely into revolutionary France and America—recapitulates rather than interrogates the “Western-civilization” narrative of democracy that some of the first modern theorists of democracy invented slightly over a century ago. The result is that one of the astonishing inventions of modern democratic thought—a new, emancipatory, progressive historical narrative—is left out of his story.

The elephant in the room in any history of modern democracy is republicanism, the dominant strain for thinking about popular sovereignty from the Renaissance until the nineteenth century. Kloppenberg states that his book was twenty years in the making, which suggests that it began to gestate in his mind in the twilight of the republican-synthesis years of the mid-1990s. By then, the limitations of the republican synthesis had been thoroughly diagnosed. Learned epitaphs to its demise were inscribed in the scholarly tombstones of the state-of-the-field essay. Republicanism, it seemed, had calcified into a rigid historiographical system. It was claustrophobic and hermetically sealed against massive domains of the human experience. Yet Kloppenberg has nothing to say about how his story supplements or replaces the interpretation of American

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<sup>3</sup> George Grote, *History of Greece*, vol. 4 (Boston, 1851), 176–8.

political thought that dominated the profession from the 1960s through the 1990s. His single sustained historiographical intervention (although there are small jabs here and there throughout the book) is his dissatisfaction with how social scientists have written the history of democracy.

In fact, republics play no clear role in Kloppenberg's narrative until chapter 7, on the American Revolution, when they are suddenly summoned into the limelight. Before that, they lurk on the edges of the narrative, present but not really accounted for. "Republicanism" gets no entry in the index, and "republican government" refers back to seven pages in the seven-hundred-plus pages of text. Throughout the book, however (especially after Part I), it is clear that ancient and modern republics rather than democracies were the relevant political unit for many of Kloppenberg's thinkers. In chapter 7, Kloppenberg finally discloses what seems to be a crucial piece of information, which is that democracy and republicanism were not sharply differentiated until roughly the nineteenth century. "During the decisive years of the war against Britain," he writes, "Americans increasingly used the words 'democracy,' 'republic,' and 'commonwealth' as synonyms to describe the nonmonarchical, nonaristocratic government they wanted. Initially the word 'republic' was more common than 'democracy,' but systematic differentiation between the meanings of the two is a product of later debates" (315). The reader is sent to the endnotes, which explain that only twenty-nine newspapers in the 1790–1820 period had the word "democratic" in the title, while 342 had variations on the name "republican" (763 n. 3).

But this is too little too late. Why pretend for six chapters that democracy is something that is relatively easily defined and separated from republicanism, only to reveal later that in fact they are nebulous and contested terms, not fully differentiated by their users? We are left wondering: are republicanism and democracy two essentially separate stories? When and why did they overlap? And why did one ideal of government eventually triumph over the other?

The hero of Kloppenberg's story is the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville, whose *Democracy in America* dominates the last part of the book. This choice seems to reflect the historical narrative that Tocqueville himself had learned from the Americans he visited in the 1830s. Tocqueville learned from Boston's Brahmins that democracy in America emerged in the Puritan towns of New England, for this was the story that this first major generation of New England historians had begun to tell themselves. We also learn that it was Tocqueville who was concerned with what he called "reciprocal obligation" (626). Here for the first time the "ethic of reciprocity" emerges as a genuine actor's category in Kloppenberg's narrative. For Tocqueville, reciprocal obligation glued together an atomized American society that worshipped equality above all else. He saw it everywhere in the voluntary associations springing up across the land, coining the term "habit of the heart" to capture its effect on the mind and the soul (626). That an ethic of reciprocity

might be a modern invention rather than democracy's ancient companion is the kind of surprise that Kloppenberg might have explored more.

A tragedy looks backward to what might have been and weeps for the world we have lost. This is the gloomy vista of Kloppenberg's *Toward Democracy*. But what was so inspiring about democracy in the nineteenth century was that it promised a golden tomorrow for all. It unleashed radical new possibilities not just for political self-rule, but for individual self-fulfillment. This, after all, was the second meaning of "self-government" and "self-rule," two terms coined in the eighteenth century that Kloppenberg never fully probes. "Self" could refer to a whole people, but it could also mean the individual self. Was it truly possible or even desirable to govern the unruly, mysterious, messy, erotic, emotional self in an age of unprecedented social mobility?

Kloppenbergs has little to say about the great troubadour of modern American democracy, Walt Whitman. Yet Whitman captured an essential truth about modern democracy and the ungovernable individual selves it unleashed, a truth that fundamentally contradicts Kloppenberg's tragic narrative. "The only large and satisfactory justification of it resides in the future," Whitman wrote of democracy in *Democratic Vistas*.<sup>4</sup> Modern democracy might be unruly, elusive, and maddening. But you can't beat the view.

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<sup>4</sup> Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (Iowa City, 2010; first published 1871), 37.