

important, we need to pay heed to the difficulties presented by the intertwining of practical and theoretical legacy.

—Peter Ives

*University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada*



Eric W. Cheng: *Hanging Together: Role-Based Constitutional Fellowship and the Challenge of Difference and Disagreement*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. vii, 182.)

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“We must all hang together,” Benjamin Franklin jibed after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, “or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.” Franklin’s sentiments capture the essence of Eric Cheng’s *Hanging Together*, which muses over how to perpetuate liberal democracies in a modern world rife with what the author calls difference and disagreement. “Difference” here represents descriptive diversity (age, sex, race, etc.); “disagreement” means ideological competition (partisanship, religious belief, and so on). Liberal democratic theory promises to hold diverse, competing peoples together, but the threat of division and strife constantly looms over efforts at democratic unity. Cheng proposes a solution to this problem—the problem of difference and disagreement—called *role-based constitutional fellowship*. The goal of this fellowship is to create and sustain a “culture of trust” wherein citizens *trust* that their fellow citizens are committed to perpetuating liberal democratic political institutions, despite their disagreements (94).

Motivated by the rise of far-right political movements the world over, *Hanging Together* argues that we need to rethink how liberal democrats perpetuate their political systems. While theoretically not restricted to America, Cheng nonetheless focuses most of his analysis on the situation in the United States, post-January 6th, 2021 Capitol insurrection. Cheng’s intention is to create a framework for “how citizens who have differences and disagreements ought to relate to one another in a liberal democracy” to sustain their systems and remedy injustices (1). By “liberal democracy” (the correctness of which Cheng assumes a priori), Cheng means a political regime that takes seriously the rule of law, individual liberties, freedom of the press, fair elections, an independent judiciary, and “the legitimacy of political disagreement” (1).

Cheng’s framework first involves understanding the different roles citizens play in society before figuring out how to create a culture of trust between them. There are two main spheres in modern liberal democracies, one

political and one general. To establish a broad culture of trust, trust must exist within the political sphere, among citizens, and then between politicians and the general citizenry. Citizens must recognize that “trust assumes different complexions in different contexts and [that]. . . different solutions are required to overcome different barriers to trust” (86). Cheng thus prescribes a “division of labour” within each sphere to overcome barriers (95).

Fixing the political sphere requires balancing the division of labor between pragmatists (those willing to compromise) and purists (those less willing to compromise). Pragmatists “can develop a sense of reciprocity by performing compromises” and purists can “refuse to compromise” to keep “pragmatists honest” (95). Cheng’s goal is to outline patterns of behavior necessary to encourage politicians to view their political opponents as *adversaries*, not *enemies*. Practically, Cheng argues, politicians could be nudged in this direction with a few key policy changes. Cheng concludes that Westminster political systems “are better than rival electoral systems at channeling competition in manners that bolster citizens’ trust in the *system*,” since these systems clarify the allocation of blame (162). In addition, Cheng would prevent the “permanent campaign” from inundating political life by reforming campaign finance laws to ensure politicians do not need to constantly ask for money, setting campaign spending limits, lengthening executive and legislative terms, and raising viability thresholds to “disempower smaller parties” and thereby enable majority governing coalitions (165–66).

The difficulty in establishing a culture of trust among the general citizenry lies in finding a balance between “oppressors,” allies, and the “oppressed” (131–37). Cheng’s aim here is to identify ways to increase verbal contact between these groups, to encourage “transparent discourse” over contentious topics of injustice and social hierarchy (131). Cheng suggests that workplace diversity workshops (ones that do not simply preach “diversity is good” but also acknowledge that “diversity is hard”) and minipublics (where citizens from different social groups sequester together to practice democratic deliberation) are two artificial ways to increase civic discourse. Cheng also highlights radical educational reforms, such as having children form classroom councils to make real decisions democratically—to teach them habits of democratic citizenship (167–68). Ultimately, Cheng contends that reformers should look to the less voluntary workplace, not voluntary social institutions, for the solution to problems of difference and disagreement in America; since employment is one of the least voluntary activities Americans routinely engage in, it offers the greatest opportunity to compel citizens to engage with people different from themselves.

*Hanging Together* touts role-based constitutional fellowship as a “negative ideal” (13)—Cheng claims that fellowship represents an “ideal” because it describes how citizens ought to behave, but is “negative” in that it does not constitute perfection—an odd contradiction in terms (9). A notable problem for role-based constitutional fellowship (perhaps flowing from this

contradiction) is that any framework purporting to help rectify injustices lacks substance without a discussion of justice. *Hanging Together* avoids any such discussion, hedging instead that “this vision is not the best of all conceivable worlds” and that fellowship merely outlines “a path through which undue social hierarchies can be redressed” (179).

Yet exactly how the author intends fellowship, without presenting a definition of justice, to redress undue social hierarchies (without a clear understanding of what constitutes an *undue* hierarchy either), is difficult to grasp. Perhaps Cheng intends for groups perceiving oppression to define injustice and undue hierarchy on a rolling basis, thus setting the agenda for their allies “listening well” (129). Yet, if the definition of injustice, and therefore justice, can so change, how could even the most active listener keep up?

Cheng’s many policy proposals suggest ways people might “harness the benefits of difference and disagreement and avoid unduly squashing difference and disagreement, yet also sidestep the potential perils of difference and disagreement” in a liberal democracy (1). The potential effect of these policies is to reduce barriers between diverse peoples with serious disagreements—a noble goal. Cheng presumes, however, that reducing barriers is enough, that most political disagreements *can* be worked through, can be talked through. In effect, Cheng suggests that there are no disagreements too intractable to overcome—that the differences in debates over, say, abortion could be settled if only advocates could come together and trust one another to preserve liberal democracy.

That is, however, what Cheng suggests could happen if citizens partake in role-based constitutional fellowship. Critically, Cheng fails to account for what many, from Tocqueville to Lincoln to Deloria Jr. to Deneen, have wrestled with: liberalism’s lack of motivational substance. How can common citizens find meaning in a system predicated on the idea that all *meaning* is publicly equal? Social institutions are important in democracies for that very reason—that many citizens tend to want to believe that their private vision of the good life is *true*, not simply *true for them*. I struggle to believe that the “negative ideal” of Cheng’s role-based constitutional fellowship could tolerate or accommodate serious truth claims in real political debates.

Ultimately, Cheng treads in *Hanging Together* the same road statesmen like Abraham Lincoln walked in his 1838 *Address to the Young Men’s Lyceum*. In attempting to figure out how to better perpetuate our political institutions, to better unite liberal democrats whose nations seem to be buckling under the weight of combative antiliberalism, Cheng’s effort is a useful and welcome one.

—Aaron Kushner 

Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA

