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**Patrick Deneen: Democratic Faith**

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## Dynamics of Democratic Faith

For better or worse, democracy cannot be disentangled from an aspiration toward human perfectibility.

—Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life*

DEMOCRACY IS REGNANT in practice and triumphant in theory. While many thinkers object to suppositions that we have reached philosophically the “end of history,” nevertheless in Western political thought there is no formidable or even noticeably significant challenge to the near-universal embrace of democracy as the sole legitimate form of government.<sup>1</sup> Particulars differ radically—sometimes it appears that various camps fight to assume the label “democratic” in order to assert their unimpeachable legitimacy and dismiss the claims of philosophical opponents, just as the term “antidemocratic” constitutes opprobrium of the highest order—yet, at base, an underlying embrace of certain democratic tenets centered around a belief in universal human suffrage, political equality, economic and personal liberty, and inherent human dignity constitute shared features of various schools of democratic thought. In political theory—a “field” invented some twenty-five hundred years ago in order to discern the relative virtues and deficiencies of different regime types, and often identifying democracy as inferior to monarchy and aristocracy—it is no longer necessary, by and large, for its contemporary practitioners to demonstrate the grounds for democracy’s superiority.

Yet, at the risk of contrariness, if not outright overstatement, democratic theory is in a state of quiet crisis, reflecting (if inadequately) the more serious crisis of democracy itself. The quiescent assumption that democracy’s superiority can and ought to be taken as a matter of unchallenged belief rests on a set of largely unexamined presuppositions that point to a quiet desperation underlying much of contemporary democratic theory—a desperation, indeed, that has always been present in democratic theory from its earliest articulations in antiquity. That desperation has been more evident in ages with high degrees of democratic suspicion, and has taken the form of forcefully articulated statements of democratic faith. In the absence of such widespread opposition in the contemporary era, such strong statements of democratic faith have become less evident within mainstream analyses of democracy, but even their pale counterparts evince no less anxiety—albeit less self-awareness of that anxiety—than their more explicit earlier counterparts. This desperation takes the form of an inherent fear that “faith” is not

sufficient—that belief in democracy will not be repaid in reality—and thus that either democracy must give way to the reality of human shortcomings or human shortcomings must be overcome to realize democracy. While claiming to take “men as they are,” democratic theory from its inception, even to its dominant contemporary expressions, exhibits anything but satisfaction for the civic capacities of ordinary humans, and seeks, sometimes to a major extent, to alter that condition for democratic ends.

In the first line of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, Rousseau declares his intention to “take men as they are and the laws as they might be.”<sup>2</sup> A less utopian yet more idealistic formulation perhaps cannot be found in the history of political thought. Men, Rousseau suggests, are sufficiently capable as they are to create good laws—laws that could serve as the basis of an excellent regime, but which yet elude them. Such law might be realized if the inherent decency of humans could itself be either recovered or actualized for the first time. “Man is born free, but is everywhere in chains”: our freedom is inherent in our deepest origins but has been shackled by institutions and practices that deceive or divert men from their true condition. Rousseau formulates the modest yet radical premise of democracy: democracy is based upon a belief in human decency, even potential for individual and collective goodness, and needs only to achieve the realization of this inherent decency to bring about democracy in its most fully manifested, even ideal form.<sup>3</sup>

Democracy, in this succinct formulation, seems the most appropriate, even most natural regime for human beings. While reviled in past ages as according too great faith in human goodness—trusting otherwise selfish and self-involved humans to extend as much respect and consideration to the views, interests, and property of others as those that underlie one’s own motivations—previous philosophers ranging from antiquity to the middle ages and even into modernity have held democracy to be an idealistic but finally unworkable form of utopian fantasy.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary devotion to democratic forms reflects a worldwide embrace of the belief that ordinary humans are capable of, at the very least, minimal decencies and, at best, deep devotion both to those dreams and interests they hold dearest and to those same dreams and interests held by their fellow citizens. Democracy assumes that extraordinary virtue becomes ordinary, that ordinary humans are capable of extraordinary virtue. As stated by George Santayana,

If a noble and civilized democracy is to subsist, the common citizen must be something of a saint and something of a hero. We see, therefore, how justly flattering and profound, and at the same time how ominous, was Montequieu’s saying that the principle of democracy is virtue.<sup>5</sup>

It is easy, given modern assumptions, to view those ancient, medieval, and even modern thinkers who regarded democracy with suspicion, misgivings, and even outright hostility as overly dour and even pessimistic. We resist any rejection of democracy as informed by an ideology or even faith that has since been superseded. We can perhaps fruitfully mine other parts of such

philosophies for interesting and provocative observations, but at the point in which all regimes—including democracy—are considered, weighed, and almost inevitably found wanting, we balk and point to anachronistic, recidivist, and even reactionary assumptions.

Yet, do we overly flatter ourselves, as Santayana suggests, in quickly brushing off those misgivings and even outright expressions of “antidemocracy”? Perhaps we think not, because, more often than not in contemporary philosophy and theory, we believe that we theorize implicitly and oftentimes explicitly under Rousseau’s dictum, “taking men as they are.” We are not utopian—indeed, we do not even wish to dwell on considerations of “virtue”—because we do not seek to alter human beings to “become” democratic creatures, to “make” men worthy of democracy. Our ambitions are altogether modest: we seek to advance democracy at home and in the world to provide all humans with the requisite freedom from oppression and arbitrary rule, and freedom to become what their capacities allow, and not to make humans other than they already are. We seek, as Rousseau suggests, to align “men as they are” with “laws as they might be.”

Yet, if this simple dictum of Rousseau, if only implicitly, underlies apparently modest democratic endorsement that most largely share—if, further, it renders us unwilling, perhaps even incapable of considering, much less accepting, the “antidemocratic” proclivities of most of the philosophers in the history of political thought—then how are we to understand Rousseau’s argument, several brief chapters after his opening sentence, that citizens in a just society with democratic underpinnings need to undergo a fundamental transformation? Because of the limitations of human beings to see past their own interests, to take into account the good of the whole, which they cannot easily perceive much less achieve a willingness to embrace even were it perceptible—indeed, arguably because human beings are so riven by difference as to be incapable of becoming a “whole”—Rousseau invokes a *lex ex machina*, the “Legislator,” who takes human beings as they are and undertakes to “change their nature, so to speak.” A regime in which the good of the whole is considered and embraced, in which laws are conceived and promulgated in light of that whole—in which individual preferences cease, in some way, to become foremost in people’s minds, thereby rendering automatic a “view of the whole”—one can expect that all subsequent public considerations will be undertaken in a similar spirit and vein. Such an idealized regime would be capable of molding generations of such citizens, able to rely on its own “social spirit” to continuously cultivate this devotion to the whole. But Rousseau realizes that in order for such a regime to come into existence the “effect must become the cause,” that such civic excellence must first come into existence without the benefit of an existing regime to form those excellences. Hence the recourse to the Legislator: “For a nascent people to be capable of appreciating sound maxims of politics and of following the fundamental rules of reason of State, the effect would have to become the cause, the social spirit which is to be the work of the institution would

have to preside over the institution itself, and men would have to be prior to laws what they ought to become by means of them.”<sup>6</sup>

If there is a distance between the “reality” of men as they are and the laws as they might be—between those manifest limitations of human beings and the ideal of a democracy in which universal justice might be achieved—then we must either attribute this fact to one of two main causes: either men “as they are” do not currently exhibit the kinds of imagination, sympathy, or rationality that needs to inform the willingness to cede some individual desires and satisfactions for the good of the whole; or, democracy is too good for the people, and people cannot be changed to become worthy of the ideal. In a democratic age the latter option—once the prevailing view of most political philosophers for most of human history—is unthinkable. Thus, with the recognition that there is some distance between “men as they are” and democracy as it might be, an attempt to bring the two together leads to an implicit dissatisfaction with “men as they are,” and perhaps even an inclination to seek their transformation to “democratic men as they might be.”<sup>7</sup> If “men as they are” *do* in fact possess the requisite features that could lead to a realization of democracy, then something *external* to them is preventing its manifestation. This assumption underlay the revolutionary ideologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which the assumption that a combination of institutions and various ideologies that gave rise to “false consciousness” prevented human beings from realizing the utopian universal regime in which all alienation was overcome. However, if in our more modest age we are less inclined to such revolutionary inclinations—more inclined to claim to be content with “men as they are”—even modern democrats remain uncomfortably aware that men are not quite what we might wish them to be, and that they are not yet wholly commensurate with “democracy as it might be.” If humans are capable of becoming ideal democratic citizens—ones that are simultaneously fully realized autonomous individuals yet also willingly seek to understand and embrace more general human concerns—then we must attribute this gap to insufficient realization of what humans *are* or *could be*. Embedded in this seemingly modest claim to contentment with basic human motivations is a subtle but undeniable transformational impetus. If less obvious and even objectionable than the tack adopted by Rousseau, this tendency to make humans into what they *really* are—or what they really might be—may indeed require some kind of intervention by those who have adequately realized such grounds, if only in theory and not yet in fact.

In order not to abandon a belief in democracy, nor to embolden those who would find democratic discontent as a sign of democracy’s peril, assertions of “democratic faith” insist upon the possibility of *democratic transformation*. In particular, by advancing a conception of human beings as both infinitely malleable and ameliorable, along with an accompanying belief in the compatibility or malleability of nature and the universe to such perfectionist inclinations, the impulse to “perfectibility” becomes an integral compo-

ment of democratic faith. Alexis de Tocqueville observed this belief in widespread human “perfectibility” as an evident and overwhelming feature of modern democracy during his visit to America in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Even if a final vision of fully “realized” democratic humanity cannot be advanced—indeed, such accounts typically resist a full statement of democratic apotheosis in favor of depictions of infinite change (change that invariably takes the form of “improvement” and progress) but, according to Richard Rorty, “carries us beyond argument, because [it is] beyond presently used language”—“democratic perfectionism” serves as the implicit, and often explicit, object of democratic faith.<sup>9</sup> Because of this belief in amelioration without limit, of mutability without *telos*, of progress without boundary, and of faith without grounding, one finds especially strong expressions of “democratic faith” in “antifoundational” and pragmatic theories. Democratic theory is particularly inclined toward conceptions of human growth and improvement that reject “foundations,” appeals to “nature,” or invocations of necessary limits and cautions. Democratic faith tends to reject tragedy.

For this reason, antifoundational believers in democracy are concomitantly hostile to forms of philosophy and “faith”—particularly ancient philosophy and traditional religious faith—that seek to chasten such human visions of perfectibility with warnings against hubris, invocations of human nature and human teleology, and reminders of inescapable human shortcomings. “Traditional” teachings—especially religious and in particular the Judeo-Christian belief of fundamental human depravity—do not appear to accord with “democratic faith.” Indeed, according to the “democratic faithful”—whose faith is premised to a lesser or greater extent upon the prospects of transforming individuals into citizens fitting for democracy—then “traditional” views of ineradicable human imperfection are, on their face, *anti-democratic*. Ironically such opposing positions are rejected as being motivated by so much faith—now *bad* faith—even while its critics invoke “democratic faith” as a superior form of belief. In this choice between two faiths, it is simply a matter of having the “will to believe” in democratic faith.

If the distance between “men as they are” and “democracy as it might be” suggests the necessity of changing humans or viewing them as malleable and subject to alterations of the social conditions in which they are embedded, then any assumptions of human depravity or even strong statements of human limitation must be rejected a priori. If this is the case, one would expect to see among such “democratic faithful” thinkers an aggressive rejection of religious belief that asserts the existence of certain unalterable human conditions, including those of sinfulness, pride, self-aggrandizement, a propensity to irrationality, and a fundamental condition of alienation. At the same time, however, the “faith claims” of transformative democratic theory can often go unnoticed—submerged beneath aggressive and dismissive attacks upon traditional religious faith, and thus taking on the semblance of a school of “skeptical” theory—thereby leaving democratic “faith” assumptions unacknowledged and unexamined. Arguably, accompanying the as-

cedancy of democracy in the present age is an increasing inability to recognize, much less examine, presuppositions that undergird democratic faith precisely *because* it is rarely recognized as a form of faith, even one with theological underpinnings that draw from Gnostic, Pelagian, Montanist, and antinomian traditions, all forms of millenarian belief that humans can bring about their own salvation in some form. Satisfied with its apparent skeptical secularism, “democratic faith” neglects its theological assumptions about human anthropology, even as it excoriates the faith claims of “religious” believers.

Yet, the most robust theories justifying democracy almost inevitably contain a shadow theology. Perhaps more than any other regime, democracy requires a reconciliation of the apparently irreconcilable—in its most ancient formulation, “the one” and the “many”; in contemporary parlance, the individual and the community; and even in some recent articulations, the individual and the global. Arguably much contemporary (if not simply *all*) political theory is devoted to an exploration of how to preserve a robust form of individual flourishing while inculcating the necessary disposition of toleration, respect, even care for the whole. Alienation remains a primary source of dissatisfaction, as it has since the dawn of human consciousness. The attempt to overcome this seeming dichotomy built into the human psyche—the praiseworthy and equally damnable love for one’s own and sometimes evident but often insufficient care for the good of the whole—can be understood to undergird many theological accounts and equally underlies many secular variants that stress the possibility of a kind of “democratic transcendence” and an overcoming of human alienation.<sup>10</sup> Again, Tocqueville’s observations at the dawn of modern mass democracy are instructive, inasmuch as he saw that democracy had a tendency to lead simultaneously to a belief in individualism, on the one hand, and “pantheism,” on the other. Democracy bridles against differentiation and borders, and hence tends to break down any hierarchies and rejects attempts to preserve or create boundaries or exclusion: one is left with one *and* many but not with “some.” Democracy, so conceived, sees its main challenge as the reconciliation of the individual with a greater diversity but ultimately, almost unavoidably, appeals to the possibility of cosmopolitan transcendence of all arbitrary limitations. Individualism and pantheism are two sides of the same modern democratic coin.

If traditional theological accounts of this transcendence of the divide between the “one” and the “many” invoke divine assistance or even suggest its possibility only in an eventual “City of God,” secular variants on this theology require some means or method of “transformation”—and, indeed, the language of “transformation” is almost unavoidable in much of contemporary democratic theory. Because the ideal of “transformation” contains at least faint echoes of enforced or hierarchic attempts to alter human nature, much of contemporary democratic theory rests content with calls for “self-transformation,” impersonal mechanisms such as “constitutional transfor-

mation,” or by means of an education that will make us adequately and simultaneously individualistic and liberal.<sup>11</sup> Many approaches have been urged and pursued in closing this gap between the perceived disappointing reality of democracy as it is and democratic citizens as they might be. While this book does not claim to offer an exhaustive analysis of the various endeavors to fashion a democratic citizenry, two “methods” in particular will be analyzed in further depth: first, the call for various kinds of “civil religion” as a means of reconciling democratic individualism and social solidarity (which include various articulations of specifically democratic education aimed toward the realization of the “kingdom of God on earth,” such as that advanced by John Dewey); and, second, the embrace of science as a form of inquiry, and as a project with a promising set of outcomes, that aim to overcome limiting features of humankind that have thus far thwarted the realization of an idealized democracy. Both these undertakings are born of a set of theological presuppositions about the relationship of God and man, of human potential and the possibility of earthly redemption, and thus more deeply align “democratic faith” with theological faith in ways that its adherents rarely acknowledge or even realize. It remains a suggestive question whether the decline of contemporary “faith” in the *means* of transformation, without a concomitant decline in “democratic faith” itself, represents a lessening or an exaggeration of faith in democracy. I discuss such efforts at “democratic transformation” in chapter 2.

Does democracy necessarily, whether implicitly or explicitly, give rise to a “perfectionist” impulse? Is democracy tenable without such a belief, or does powerful empirical evidence of citizen shortcomings in the form of political apathy, poor political knowledge, prejudice, parochialism, and the absence of real progress made toward human “transformation” suggest that “democratic faith” is misplaced and misconceived? If democracy rests upon the “evidence of things unseen,” are these material factors likely to be the eventual source of disillusionment, disappointment, and despair? If a dynamic within democratic theory tends toward dissatisfaction with the gap between “men as they are” and democracy as it might be, and means of closing the gap tend toward a belief in infinite human amelioration, then democratic theory, which appears to contemporary eyes to be the only political theory intended for human beings as they are, may be ironically a political theory most inclined to arrive at dissatisfaction with ordinary humans. The “quiet” crisis of contemporary democratic theory is reflected in the very vocal dissatisfaction with democratic politics generally in the populace, and is imperfectly articulated among most democratic theorists as dissatisfaction with unrealized democratic capacities of those self-same people. Civic discontent is manifested as antipolitical democratic populism; academic dissatisfaction, by contrast, is frequently expressed as thinly veiled contempt for such populist dissatisfactions. Academia believes itself to be responding to civic discontent, when, in fact, taking the genealogy of its own “democratic faith”

into consideration, it could be argued that intellectual elites actually *contribute* to democratic dissatisfaction. There is a blithe assumption that elite recommendations for democratic “transformation” represent a solution to present discontents rather than further contributing to civic disillusionment as a result of setting the bar for legitimate democratic politics beyond what any politics will bear. Very few contemporary democratic theorists actually can be said to believe in humans “as they are” but, rather, prefer to envisage democracy as it might be—if people can only be transformed into beings good enough for democracy.

“Democratic faith” may thus in fact contribute to democratic disillusionment and cynicism.<sup>12</sup> “Democratic faith” and “democratic cynicism” arguably coexist in a mutually reinforcing cycle: democratic faith’s exaggerated and unrealizable vision of democracy leads to disillusionment; a response that dismisses “faith” is the result, leading to a cynical democratic theory premised upon the inescapability of interest and manipulation; in turn, idealists resort to more fervent calls for democratic faith and ever greater resulting expressions of disillusionment, even despair.<sup>13</sup> In the end, calls for a moderate and decent democracy are abandoned in this struggle between soft-hearted (headed?) true belief and hard-headed (hearted?) cynicism. Indeed, the increasing inability of “normative” democratic theorists and “realist” empirical analysts of democracy to speak with each other suggests a worrisome divide: democratic theorists today prefer the company of members of philosophy departments, whereas political scientists find more in common with faculty in economics departments. Connections to the world of politics, politicians, and citizens are in jeopardy, thus suggesting a problem that is more than merely “academic” in nature.

Against the growing (and related) tendencies toward democratic “faith” and democratic “cynicism,” I would like to recommend instead a form of “democratic realism.” The challenge for democratic theory and, more important, for democracy is to escape the dynamic that reinforces, on the one hand, the cynical complacency of pluralist and interest-group (and, increasingly, rational-choice-based) conceptions of political conflict and, on the other, unrealistic conceptions of democracy premised upon a fundamental transformation of political conditions, citizens, or both.<sup>14</sup> One means of stepping outside this reinforcing vicious circle, it has been suggested, is by finding a “mean” between these two extremes. Resorting to a distinction articulated recently by the ethicist William F. May, such a mean might be achieved by identifying democracy in the dynamic tension between two impulses, one that is “accepting” of people in all their imperfection, and the other “transforming” in an effort to challenge people to improve and go beyond what is strictly given.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, much contemporary democratic theory falls into one camp or the other, leading in the former case to complacency and a politics of low expectations and, in the other, to heightened expectations, disappointment, eventually even despair and democratic disgust. In terms that have been suggested by Margaret Canovan, “pragmatic”

democracy needs a “redemptive” face, and utopian “redemptive” democracy needs a strong dose of “pragmatism.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet, I would like to suggest that this idea of a democratic “mean,” while attractive, does not do sufficient justice to the Aristotelian conception of “mean” from which it is implicitly drawn and, in particular, does not recognize that a “mean” must always be achieved prudentially with full recognition of the likely temptations that will draw such a conception of democracy inevitably back toward one dominant extreme.<sup>17</sup> I would rather recommend an alternative “dynamic,” one that begins with a stronger initial assertion of what May describes as an “accepting” attitude, since, in particular, “acceptance” (here, in his discussion, of a parent for a child) is antecedent to, and necessarily informs and moderates, the efforts at “transformation.” Consider the opposite assertion of priority, which places “transformation” before “acceptance.” This priority reflects “democratic faith’s” vision of the future transformation of inadequate people into fully fledged democratic participants, people who are worthy of democracy. “Acceptance” comes after “transformation.” Unsurprisingly proponents of “democratic faith” frequently evince dissatisfaction and at times even contempt toward the yet untransformed masses. A strong dose of “elitism” courses through the thought of such democratic faithful as Emerson, Mill, and even at times Whitman. It is too short a distance from the “democratic” superiority of these thinkers to the antidemocratic “transformative” philosophy of Nietzsche (a fact Nietzsche implicitly acknowledged through his deep admiration of Emerson). Alternatively “democratic realism” begins from a disposition of “acceptance,” one that begins with a firm sense of human limitations and imperfection, even imperfectability, and, by means of “acceptance,” results in a chastened “transformative” impulse that stops well short of endorsing the perfectionist “transformative” enterprise of “democratic faith.” Rather, beginning from an attitude of acceptance, the possibility of democratic *caritas* arises, one that is resistant to a smug superiority or condescension, one that is *accepting*, and, through being accepting, seeks a more gentle “transformation” through humility and forgiveness. Our acceptance in the first instance “transforms” our expectations and prompts our admiration of (rather than disgust for) imperfect striving; encourages efforts to assist inevitably broken communication; and promotes compassion for suffering that we share alike to different degrees and in different forms, albeit all with a final view toward human mortality and finitude.

“Democratic realism” begins with—and does not abandon—a strong premise of human imperfection (a belief akin to, perhaps indistinguishable from, original sin, in theological terms), thereby rejecting the temptation for any form of democratic perfectionism or political utopianism more generally.<sup>18</sup> At the same time democracy can resist complacency through the very resources offered by that strong initial recognition of human imperfection: rather than recommending resignation to complacent or cynical versions of

what John Rawls called “modus vivendi” democratic politics, the recognition of individual imperfection, fallibility, and insufficiency affords powerful grounds for an endorsement of democracy that calls upon chastened qualities of “heroism” and “saintliness” of ordinary citizens, even an imperative for democratic *caritas* based upon a starting acknowledgment of human need. As none of us is capable of self-sufficiency, all politics are premised upon a mutual endeavor to secure for the common what each would be incapable of achieving alone; democracy, by extension, represents the common effort to transcend “mere life” and, rather, to provide the possibility of “the good life”—one impossible for each alone—for all citizens.<sup>19</sup> “Democratic realism” results in a strong articulation of political and more profound human equality *not* premised upon our eventual or ultimate perfectibility, on the one hand, nor upon the theoretical realization of our individual capacities within a meritocratic order, on the other (so-called equality of opportunity) but rather an equality born of our shared *dependency* and mutual *insufficiency*, and therefore a concomitant recognition of our shared obligations to, and concern for, one another.<sup>20</sup> Democracy is ultimately justified because of our shared weakness and imperfection in view of our shared equal condition of need and insufficiency and not because of the promise of ultimate autonomy or perfectibility. Indeed, contemporary endorsements of democracy premised upon belief in progress, human agency, control of nature, thorough autonomy, and self-transcendence actually *imperial* democracy to the extent that these visions delude individuals into believing in fantasies of total freedom from necessity, nature, and one another, rather than keeping in view our shared equal condition of need and insufficiency. Libertarianism or tyranny, not democracy, lies at the end of that road.

Undoubtedly some will simply see my own alternative of “democratic realism” as a form of “democratic faith” by another name. Defined appropriately—that is, not premised upon a belief in human or societal transformation but, in the first instance, firmly insistent that democracy is best justified by means of an embrace of a belief in human imperfection and insufficiency—it is a duly modified label I am willing to accept. It places me in the very good company of G. K. Chesterton, who wrote in *Orthodoxy*:

This is the first principle of democracy: that the essential things in men are the things they hold in common, not the things they hold separately. And the second principle is merely this: that the political instinct or desire is one of these things which they hold in common. . . . [It is] a thing analogous to writing one’s own love-letters or blowing one’s own nose. These things we want a man to do for himself, even if he does them badly. . . . In short, the democratic faith is this: that the most terribly important things must be left to ordinary men themselves—the mating of the sexes, the rearing of the young, the laws of the state. This is democracy; and in this I have always believed.<sup>21</sup>

Democracy premised not on “perfectibility” but rather on inescapable *imperfection* is one that retains a commitment to amelioration premised first

on an “accepting” disposition that motivates out of democratic *caritas*. “Acceptance” is not despairing; *hope without optimism* distinguishes its view toward the future. While much of contemporary democratic theory rightly rejects the complacency born of a pessimistic impulse, it can be argued that democracy premised upon “transformation” and perfectibility betrays the fundamental justification for democracy, which is better understood not as the realization of ultimate human *potential* for a kind of earthly divinity but rather as that which begins from, and never has far from sight, an acknowledgment of human *shortcomings*. An initial recognition, even embrace, of human imperfection, and concomitant rejection of the vision of thoroughgoing transformation, opens up the possibility of an amelioration of democratic politics and democratic culture—a prospect that would fall so short of “transformation” that any improvement might be, if not disillusioning and unsatisfying, outright indiscernible to the democratic utopian but would serve as a source of ongoing hope to the “democratic realist.”

One source of that realism often derives from religious faith, a self-critical form of belief which can exercise a chastening force on democratic ambitions. In contrast to the “democratic faithful,” whose belief in human malleability frequently leads them to reject traditional religious belief as undemocratic, “democratic realism” finds, in the religious stress upon human fallibility, insufficiency, and humility, an extraordinary chastening and democratic resource. While many contemporary academics and leading intellectuals view religious believers as a threat to democratic politics, it can be argued that religious belief—properly understood—can contribute to the strengthening of our commitments to “ordinary” democracy. Without calling for religious belief by those who do not share such faith, secularists might be persuaded to see the invaluable democratic resources afforded by religious believers. Far from posing a threat to democracy, religious belief so conceived can be seen as the first line of defense against the threat to democracy that “democratic faith” can engender. Those of religious faith can serve as a witness by reinforcing our sense of imperfection and chastening utopian forms of “democratic faith,” by fostering a shared belief in common neediness that rejects the sense of self-satisfied desert or self-loathing failure in increasingly meritocratic societies, and commending to the populace as a whole an exemplary kind of “democratic *caritas*.”<sup>22</sup> Contemporary critics of religious belief in many cases rightly perceive an absence of these democratic resources among many of the most strident, and hence most visible, of today’s religious adherents. Mutual hostility between the “faithful” and “nonbelievers” has hardened each camp and undermined the charitable impulses that might be called upon to bridge the divide, and even encourage each side to overlook the many that both sides share in common concerns for social justice.<sup>23</sup> Above all, each camp is becoming increasingly incapable of articulating the danger to democracy posed by the loss of corrective religious resources, that faith which might serve to chasten forms of “democratic faith” lacking any such restraining internal resources. This danger I take to be the fault of all

concerned, secular and religious-minded alike, who, locked in a series of discrete battles often in the realm of symbolic politics, fiddle while Rome burns and increasingly imperil democracy. In the third part of the book I call for a reconsideration of some powerful articulations of democracy's "friendly critics" (Plato, Tocqueville, and the Americans Reinhold Niebuhr, Christopher Lasch, and Abraham Lincoln) who caution against the democratic impulse toward self-flattery.

Among a number of these critics "democratic faith" is countered by "religious faith," and suggests finally that democratic theory may be best understood in light of theological assumptions rather than as a debate among wholly secular philosophers or between "believers" and "secularists." One of the aims of pointing to the existence of "democratic faith" is to highlight how democratic theory is often, perhaps always, a battle between different systems of belief. In the pages that follow I attempt to trace some of the "dynamics" of this faith in democracy, its concomitant temptations toward Promethean perfectionism, its attendant tendency toward fostering democratic despair, and, finally, a possible source of reconceiving a "democratic realism" that takes men as they are without inclining toward a belief in democratic perfectionism, on the one hand, or succumbing to self-satisfied complacency toward imperfection, on the other.

This is not a book that calls for "democratic quiescence"; rather, my aim is to offer a sobering assessment of how difficult "belief" in democracy in fact becomes when shorn of easy recourse to "democratic faith." Democracy is not an undertaking for the faint of heart: it calls for limitless reservoirs of hope against the retreat into easy optimism or the temptation to a kind of democratic cynicism or despair. "Critics" of democracy—ranging from Plato to Tocqueville to Niebuhr and Lasch—are often mistaken as being hostile toward democracy proper, because they seek to warn against democracy's most dangerous internal tendencies, especially expressions of versions of "democratic faith" that ironically yet ultimately threaten to imperil the prospect of democracy itself. Such voices are better understood as "friendly critics" of democracy, offering a set of diagnoses that represent a form of "democratic realism." It may be that the best protection against eventual democratic disillusionment is not to stoke the flames of "democratic faith" but instead to temper their white hot flames—flames that burn too quickly, leaving only fading embers—with cold water. The cure for ailments of democracy may not be more democracy but rather chastened self-reflection over the nature of the faith in that very "cure" that likely only worsens the ailment.