

INTRODUCTION

The United States is abuzz with talk of a new democracy. For the first time for many decades, political campaigners have captured the nation's imagination by ardently condemning its prevailing order. They have denounced professional politicians for their hypocrisy, excessive partisanship, and cut-throat adversarialism; they have derided special interest groups for their corrupting influences; and they have demanded that citizens be provided more direct access to key decision-making processes. The same campaigners have also devised a host of new institutional arrangements to assist in this transformation. They have designed consultative committees and citizens' juries to encourage citizen participation in policymaking; they have devised websites to facilitate dynamic political conversation across cyberspace; and they have sought to restore municipal squares and urban parks to the safe havens for public political discussion that they once were said to be.¹ Even presidential politics appears to have been swept up in the hurly-burly of these new democratic demands. In January 2007, as Barack Obama announced his candidacy, he insisted that what the United States needed was not a new set of policy programs but a wholly "new kind of politics." It is time for American democracy to be renewed, Obama implored, time to ensure that its politics become "less bitter and partisan," less "gummed up by money and influence," and more targeted on finding commonly acceptable solutions to the immeasurable problems that confront the United States today.²

¹For examples and overviews, see Benjamin Barber, *A Passion for Democracy: American Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Archon Fung, *Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, eds., *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (London: Verso, 2003); John Gastil and Peter Levine, eds., *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005); Arthur Lupia and John Matsusaka, "Direct Democracy: New Approaches to Old Questions," *Annual Review of Political Science* 7 (2004): 463–82; and Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²See the editorial "Obama Jumps Into Presidential Fray," *Washington Post*, January 17, 2007, A1. See, too, Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown, 2006).

Many political philosophers, both inside and outside the United States, have been similarly swept along by this call for a “new kind of politics.” One widely cited group of theorists—the deliberative democrats—even has a serious claim to have provided the intellectual inspiration for this movement for democratic renewal. Since the early 1990s, Bruce Ackerman, James Bohman, Joshua Cohen, John Dryzek, James Fishkin, Archon Fung, Amy Gutmann, Cass Sunstein, and Dennis Thompson, amongst others, have emphasized the need for wide-scale reform in American democratic life. They have insisted, in particular, that politicians and citizens should amend their political conduct and learn to approach politics in a spirit that is more inclusive and less antagonistic than at present, more focused on common advantage and less on sectional interest.³ It is no surprise, therefore, that these thinkers see great opportunities in the current trend toward reform, emphasizing in particular the possibilities that it provides for rejecting the excessive partisanship of the politics of the 1980s and 1990s and of engendering a deeper and wider commitment to deliberative civic virtue amongst the American public as a whole.

The ideals and practices of deliberative democracy have not been welcomed by everyone, however. In recent years a second group of equally well-regarded, if rather more intellectually disparate political theorists—including William Connolly, John Dunn, William Galston, Raymond Geuss, Chantal Mouffe, David Runciman, Ian Shapiro, Michael Walzer, and Sheldon Wolin—has rejected both the philosophical principles and the political proposals that underpin this search for “a new kind of politics.”⁴

³ For introductions, see Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin, *Deliberation Day* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997); John Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), and Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); James Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); Stephen Macedo, ed., *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jane Mansbridge, ed., *Beyond Self-Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Cass Sunstein, *The Partial Constitution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994). For commentary and background influences, see Simone Chambers, “Deliberative Democratic Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 6 (2003): 307–26; Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon, 1979); and John Thompson and David Held, eds., *Habermas: Critical Debates* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1982).

⁴ For diverse introductions, see John Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* (London: HarperCollins, 2000); Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993); Mark Philp, *Political Conduct* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Ian Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); David Runciman, *Political Hypocrisy: The Mask of Power, From Hobbes to Orwell and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton

Known here as “democratic realists,” these thinkers are divided in many ways but they nonetheless share an insistence that the theory of deliberative democracy is naively optimistic as to the possibilities of democratic politics in a country like the United States. “[P]olitical philosophy must be realist,” Raymond Geuss has summarized, meaning that it should “be concerned in the first instance not with how people ought ideally to act”—as deliberative democrats tend to be—“but rather with the way the social, economic, political etc., institutions actually operate at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances.”⁵ When democratic politics is approached this way, the realists insist, it becomes clear that its processes must always be at least partially shaped by the manipulative strategies, devious practices, and exclusionary tactics that deliberative democrats and their fellow travellers strive to replace. Realists contend that it is only unhelpful queasiness, delusional hypocrisy, or even idle utopianism that prevents aspirational reformers from appreciating this and recognizing that the search for a “new kind of politics” will invariably lead to disappointment. More worrying still, the political consequences of such blindness could well be disastrous. When efforts at reform fail, the realists recall, they often provoke political discontents and social dislocations that far exceed those that preceded them.⁶

The intense controversy between these two groups has captivated academic attention in the last few years and it has done so in a way that very few other debates have been able to match. Yet despite this excitement, there is little new about arguments concerning a “new kind of politics” in American political thought. Controversies about both the desirability and possibility of democratic reform have been a constant in the history of America. From the very earliest years of the republic, federalists and anti-federalists, liberals and republicans, Whigs and Democrats have disputed the meaning and implications of “democracy.”⁷ The twentieth century was even more fecund in this regard. Throughout that turbulent age, reform

University Press, 2008); Michael Walzer, *Politics and Passion: Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); and Sheldon Wolin, *Democracy Inc.: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁵ Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 9.

⁶ See the discussions in William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁷ See Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); Bernard Baylin, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic, 2000); and John G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Political Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

movements—including the Progressives of the 1910s, the trade unionists of the interwar years, the civil rights campaigners of the 1950s and 1960s, and the New Left of the early 1970s—demanded democratic political transformations on an unprecedented scale. There were agitations for specific reforms—direct election of U. S. senators, the expansion of the suffrage, and the restriction of the Supreme Court’s right of judicial review of legislation—and there were demands for vast structural changes, including the democratization of industrial decision making, the abolition of the party system, and the dismantling of federalism. There were also deep and wide-ranging philosophical investigations of the nature of the democratic ideal as the movements sought to advance their programs to an often deeply skeptical American audience.

To many scholars, these movements are best understood simply as precursors to today’s deliberative democrats. They are certainly seen as such by deliberative democrats themselves, who are frequently keen to celebrate their historical lineage by drawing affinities with one or other of these earlier movements, and especially with the movement for African American civil rights.⁸ This is, however, a serious mistake. For even though there are some similarities between deliberative democracy and twentieth-century movements for democratic reform, there are also crucial differences. Most importantly, whilst the final *goals* of these movements often did include achieving a democratic order where deliberation and the pursuit of common agreement would shape our political lives, the practical political *methods* by which they sought to secure that order were strikingly different from those recommended by deliberative democrats today. Indeed, when it came to the question of how the campaign for democratic change should be conducted, these movements were far closer to today’s democratic realists than they were to the deliberative democrats. Change would not come easily in the United States, they all argued, and the cause of democratic reform therefore required an insistent and not a deliberative politics. Reformers would need to employ a wide range of forms of political action—including many that might be rejected today as manipulative or even coercive—if they were to have a hope of securing their “new kind of politics” in the future.

This book recovers, re-evaluates and rehabilitates the arguments that these movements made in defense of this view. It contends that these movements collectively constituted an American radical democratic tradition in

⁸ See, among others, Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond*, 51–52; Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, 50; and John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 247–50. For effective commentary on this trend, see John Medearis, “Social Movements and Deliberative Democratic Theory,” *British Journal of Political Science* 35 (2004): 53–75.

the twentieth century: a tradition that was bound together by the central conviction that a new democracy in the United States could be built but only if American citizens cast aside many of the traditional behavioral constraints that restricted their political conduct and become willing relentlessly to campaign, protest, and to struggle for democratic reform. Reason, persuasion, and deliberation alone could not create a new democracy, all of the movements of the radical democratic tradition insisted. It would have to be forged through “buoyant, crusading, and militant” political action.⁹

Democratic Theory Today

The debate about democratic reform today is conducted largely in ignorance of the arguments of this American radical tradition.¹⁰ The individual movements themselves are, of course, recalled both by historians and political scientists, but remarkably little has been written about the democratic ideals that they shared or about why they sought to secure democratic change in the way that they did. This absence is greatly to the detriment of our current debate. The radical democratic tradition contributed extensively to the development of American political institutions in the twentieth century and it also presented theoretical and practical arguments of impressive subtlety and potentially of great importance. It is, therefore, those arguments that this book seeks to restore. Before that work can begin, however, we need to be clear about the precise contours of the current debates so that we will be able both to identify their core concerns and striking silences.

The current argument over a “new kind of politics” began in American political theory in the early 1990s as a critique both of prevailing democratic practice in the United States and of liberal political philosophy’s response to that practice. The last two decades of the twentieth century were a bleak period for American liberalism, shaped as they were by conservative dominance of both formal politics and national culture.¹¹ It was unsurprising, therefore, that many liberal and left political theorists had little time for American democracy. Such democratic life, they charged, had been

⁹ John Dewey, “Democracy is Radical,” *Common Sense* 6 (1937): 11.

¹⁰ There are, of course, exceptions to this trend. The arguments of Bonnie Honig and James Tully, for example, bear a striking resemblance to aspects of the radical democratic tradition. See Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), and James Tully, “Political Philosophy as a Critical Activity,” *Political Theory* 30 (2002): 533–55.

¹¹ See Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton 1998), 307–13, and Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

corrupted by unjust influences, especially by the power of money and special interests, and perverted by the unsavory political behavior of key actors, especially by established parties and pressure groups who always seemed more keen to satisfy themselves than to serve the common good. As a result, many liberal political philosophers turned their backs on democratic politics altogether in the 1970s and 1980s and sought solutions to the political ills they identified through the courts instead. If neither elected politicians nor the citizenry themselves could be entrusted with liberal concerns, the argument went, then the judiciary, and especially a reform-minded American Supreme Court, might at least be relied on to protect and enforce the extensive system of individual rights that liberals held so dear.¹²

It was this move that deeply worried the theorists who would become known as the “deliberative democrats.” Even if democratic life is currently unsatisfactory in crucial respects, thinkers like Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson insisted, citizens of a nation like the United States cannot simply be expected to sit back and wait for their interests to be served by unelected judges. Rather, it is vital that such citizens be involved in the process of governing themselves. However unreliable such citizens currently appear, they must be given the opportunity to structure their own laws and to shape their own collective life-chances. Such democratic ideals have been fundamental to progressive politics since the founding of the republic, the deliberative democrats explained, and are simply too important to give up on, despite the ills that beset actually existing democratic practice.

It was for this reason, then, that deliberative democrats began to insist that Americans must aspire to a nobler, purer, and more socially just form of democracy. Reformers in the United States should thus seek to create forms of democratic life where real discussion could occur between citizens, so that they could be alerted to the inadequacies of the prevailing social and political order and could begin to transcend their different interests and identify shared goals once again. It was not judicial action that the crisis of American liberalism demanded, the deliberative democrats explained, but a full-blown democratic renewal.

This argument found an appreciative audience and deliberative democratic ideals quickly became commonplace in liberal philosophical circles. As the years have passed, the demands of deliberative democrats have

¹² For paradigmatic statements of this view, see Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, esp. 173–211, and Stephen Holmes, *Passions and Constraint: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), esp. 42–68. For early and perceptive criticism, see Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: American in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), and Jeremy Waldron, *Law and Disagreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

become even more ambitious. Within the last decade, many have begun to contend that the very legitimacy of core American political institutions depends on the existence of such deliberation. This argument depends on two claims. First, citizens can only legitimately be required to obey the law if that law can be justified to them in terms that they could reasonably be expected to accept. And, second, the only way of testing whether they could, in fact, be able to do so is for the law to emerge from a deliberative setting where every citizen aims reasonably to persuade others of the necessity or desirability of their preferred political outcomes. If laws emerge in any other setting then they may well just represent the dominating will of one group over another, and that, in turn, would render them illegitimate.¹³

Despite the undeniable attractions of this underlying ideal, deliberative democratic political philosophy has also become the subject of sustained criticism. Most notably, the group of otherwise quite dissimilar political theorists known here as democratic realists have dismissed the whole notion as an empty pipe-dream. To these thinkers, deliberative democrats simply fail to appreciate three fundamental facts about democratic politics.¹⁴ First, they neglect to acknowledge that real and deep differences will always divide citizens from each other in societies such as the United States, rendering the search for any form of reasonable agreement essentially hopeless. Second, they overlook the fact that self-interest is one of—if not the most important—determinant of the political conduct of both citizens and professional politicians and it is extremely unlikely that it could ever be replaced. And, third, they refuse to accept that power imbalances are endemic to the practice of politics both because governing authority is always ultimately dependent on coercion and because we live in deeply unequal societies where some will always be able to call on greater resources and talents in their political interactions with others.¹⁵ For these thinkers, the implication of these three facts is straightforward: democratic politics

¹³ The connection between deliberation and legitimacy was first discussed in Barnard Manin, "On Legitimacy and Political Deliberation," *Political Theory* 15 (1987): 338–68 and Thomas Nagel, "Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 16 (1987): 215–40. It reached its apogee in John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," in his *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 131–80. For excellent commentary, see Gerald F. Gaus, *Contemporary Theories of Liberalism* (London: Sage, 2003), 119–47, and Eric MacGilvary, *Reconstructing Public Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ On the similarities and disagreements between these thinkers, see William Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," available online at http://www.law.yale.edu/documents/pdf/Intellectual_Life/ltw_galston.doc.

¹⁵ See Aryeh Botwinick and William E. Connolly, *Democracy and Vision: Sheldon Wolin and the Vicissitudes of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Joseph M. Schwartz, *The Permanence of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); James Tully, "The Agonic Freedom of Citizens," *Economy and Society* 28 (1999): 161–82.

can never be about the pursuit of a reasonable agreement between a diverse citizenry, as deliberative democrats appear to propose. It is instead a continuous struggle for political power, usually involving the identification of “friends” and “enemies”—as Carl Schmitt once put it—where the battle for control over the coercive apparatus of the state always takes precedence over the achievement of highly moralized objectives, however hard moralists and politicians might work to persuade us to the contrary.¹⁶

These realists further charge that the deliberative democrats’ naivete in the face of these facts is more than just misleading. It also has the potential to be exceptionally dangerous. Political efforts grounded in a position that ignores these concerns are likely to have perverse consequences. All three facts matter here. First, the deep diversity of the citizenry entails that political attempts to identify a common good are not only foolhardy but also have the potential to collapse into homogenizing, normalizing, and repressive efforts to enforce an artificial unity. Second, the inevitability of self-interest in political conduct further ensures that reform proposals based on the possibility of its eradication open the way to even worse forms of corruption and manipulation as normal political practices are forced underground. Third, and similarly, the unavailability of inequalities of power in politics necessitates that the “high-flown language” of deliberative legitimacy will become merely a “mask for power relations,” again allowing these inequalities to exert even greater influence hidden from the public gaze.¹⁷ If there is to be any sort of democratic reform, any “new politics,” the realists insist that it must be grounded on a thoroughgoing assessment of the necessary limitations on democratic politics. But it is probably better just to admit to the necessary constraints of democratic politics and to craft an alternative response to the problems of our political order instead.¹⁸

The deliberative democrats’ response to these critics has been strident. They argue that the so-called democratic realists are really just democratic pessimists. Realists go morally awry because they arrive at their normative recommendations from a picture of the way the world of democratic politics is today rather than by attempting to identify how a democratic system ought to be. The most their approach can ever hope to offer is a relatively minor improvement on the status quo. A truly better political order, on the other hand, can only be built if theorists start by trying to identify the desired

¹⁶ See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 [1932]).

¹⁷ Runciman, *Political Hypocrisy*, 206.

¹⁸ See Mark Lilla, *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals in Politics* (London: Granta, 2001), and David Runciman, *The Politics of Good Intentions: History, Fear and Hypocrisy in the New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

end-state—by offering an “ideal theory”—and then think carefully on how such a goal could be realized even in the very “non-ideal” conditions of the present. As John Rawls, a relatively late convert to deliberative democracy, explained: deliberative democracy should be understood as what he called a “realistic utopia.”¹⁹ He contended that it is always essential in political theory first to describe the long-term goal as fully as possible and only then to think about how “this long-term goal might be achieved, or worked toward usually in gradual steps.”²⁰ If deliberative democracy seems overly optimistic it is simply because its advocates have rightly begun their work by spending most of their time in outlining, examining, and fine-tuning their democratic ideals rather than by being bogged down in descriptions of the non-ideal present. Their task has been to describe democratic life as it ought to be rather than as it is currently conducted.²¹

Crucial though this response is, it nonetheless admits that the deliberative democrats’ job cannot finish with ideal theory alone, or at least it cannot if they wish their ideals to become anything other than philosophical abstractions.²² If deliberative democrats wish to insist that their ideals could effectively be realized at some point in the political future of the United States, then they must also offer some account of how the transition from the non-ideal to the ideal might occur. They must provide an account, that is, of what the gradual steps Rawls talks about will be and explain how they can identify the ones to take. But this crucial task has been tackled extraordinarily rarely by deliberative democrats. Some of them have despaired of responding to it at all. Charles Larmore once meekly suggested that “what should be said about the less-than-ideal case is not entirely obvious.”²³ Most others, though, write as if the transformation is to be achieved through a sort of behavioral mimicking, where citizens are encouraged to act “as if” they lived in an ideal democracy, even though the conditions for such a democracy properly to function have yet to be attained. The assumption behind this recommendation is presumably that the example of good citizen behavior—with its emphasis on reason-giving, mutual respect, and a concentration on the common good—will prove infectious, such that citizens and professional politicians will eventually develop bonds of trust and

¹⁹ See Rawls, *Law of Peoples*, 124–26.

²⁰ Rawls, *Law of Peoples*, 89.

²¹ For discussion, see Charles Mills, “Ideal Theory as Ideology,” *Hypatia* 20 (2005): 165–84, and Adam Swift and Stuart White, “Political Theory, Social Science, and Real Politics,” in David Leopold and Marc Stears, eds., *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 49–60.

²² They might not harbor such ambitions, of course. On which, see David Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 258–76.

²³ Charles Larmore, “Political Liberalism,” *Political Theory* 18 (1990): 352.

political solidarity that will allow them collectively to transcend sectionalism and adversarialism and encourage them to craft a new deliberative democracy for them all to enjoy together.²⁴

Only one leading deliberative democrat, Archon Fung, has provided a consistent critique of this position. Fung accepts that it might well be self-defeating for deliberative democrats simply to approximate ideal behaviors in non-ideal settings in the hope that they will somehow “catch on.” If deliberative democrats “limit themselves to communicative methods even under highly adverse conditions such as extreme inequality, pervasive disregard for deliberative norms, and systematic domination,” he explains, then they would be very likely to lose all of the political contests in which they engaged. He suggests that “no sensible political ethic can require unilateral disarmament.”²⁵ On the other hand, Fung does not break entirely from the deliberative democrats’ proclivity to insist on the importance of “mimicking” deliberative behaviors in the non-ideal present. According to his account, deliberative democrats must avoid reinforcing the least desirable elements of political life. A campaign for deliberative democracy that employed negative advertising, for example, might perpetuate the least desirable elements of partisanship; a campaign that involved actively misleading, intimidating, coercing, or bribing citizens would seem even more unlikely to help in securing a more deliberative future.

In response to this difficulty, Fung proposes that citizens today should commit themselves to a “provisional set” of ethical principles as they decide upon their political conduct, principles that he calls “fidelity,” “charity,” “exhaustion,” and “proportionality.” None of these principles are fully ideal in themselves, he contends, but if citizens could limit themselves to behaving in accordance with them in the non-ideal present then they would have a better chance of crafting an ideal deliberative democracy for the future. These are citizen behaviors, then, that are said to approximate the deliberative ideal, to encapsulate its moral core, whilst at the same time making it possible to create a more ideal deliberative democratic order in the future.

There is much that is persuasive in Fung’s account, and I return to it in more detail in the conclusion. It suffers, however, as a result of what Bonnie Honig has called the “paradox of politics”: the problem that the creation of an ideal democracy must at least partially be dependent on the existence

²⁴ See Gutmann and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?*, esp. 1–3. For extensive discussion, see Marc Stears, “Liberalism and the Politics of Compulsion,” *British Journal of Political Science* 37 (2007): 549–52.

²⁵ Archon Fung, “Deliberation Before the Revolution,” *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 399.

of a number of “ideal democratizers” in the much less than ideal present.²⁶ It is entirely unclear on Fung’s account where his principled citizens—his “ideal democratizers”—are going to come from. Fung is silent indeed both on the question of how citizens are to be persuaded to sign-up for the deliberative ideal itself and how they are to be persuaded to conduct their actual political lives according to his four principles. How can citizens faced with corruption, glaring inequalities, hierarchies, and power differentials in the existing political order be expected to moderate their political behavior in the search for a better future? Who are these individuals who can be expected to labor under a political self-denying ordinance when even the most thoughtful of deliberative democrats cannot tell them exactly how or when their ideal is likely to reach fruition?

The pervasive difficulty of these questions is clearly demonstrated if we simply ask how many citizens in the United States today could genuinely be considered to be supportive of the deliberative democratic ideal and how many are likely to be persuaded to conduct their political lives according to Fung’s principles in the present. If the answer to these questions is “not very many,” then it is extraordinarily difficult to see how the process of deliberative reform is expected to get started. As Bonnie Honig explains, “the paradox of politics catches us in a chicken-and-egg circle that presses us to begin the work of democratic politics in *medias res*.”²⁷ Fung believes that the building of a better deliberative democratic future requires citizens who are able to behave today in ways that, if not ideally deliberative, are nevertheless infused with deliberative values. He even argues that this is the “distinctive moral challenge” of our times.²⁸ Yet he does not say how or why he expects people to be able to rise to it. The vital question, therefore, is where are these steely, committed, deliberative citizens to come from? And that is the challenge that no deliberative democrat has yet been able to meet.

Reflecting on all of these themes, three crucial questions emerge from the contemporary debate on democratic reform. Those questions start first with the issue of what an ideal democracy would look like. They then move, second, to concerns about the extent to which prevailing systems fail to match that ideal. They conclude, third, with the challenge of how citizens should behave in the here-and-now if they wish to transform that imperfect present into the better future. In recent political theory, remarkably few scholars have taken on all three of these questions directly. Deliberative democrats have offered very detailed answers to the first—that concerned

²⁶ See Bonnie Honig, “Between Deliberation and Decision: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory,” *American Political Science Review* 101 (2007): 1–17.

²⁷ Honig, “Between Deliberation and Decision,” 2–3.

²⁸ Fung, “Deliberation Before the Revolution,” 416.

with the nature of the ideal democratic order—but have provided little by way of insight with regard to the second. Democratic realists have, on the other hand, provided similarly sustained examinations of the second—involving the identification of serious imperfections in the political present—but they too often paint a depressingly pessimistic picture of what might be achieved in response to the first. The third question—that of how we might persuade citizens to embrace the ideal and of how those who are committed to it should behave in the absence of a large number of fellow citizens who share their aspirations—remains effectively unanswered by either side.

The Radical Democratic Tradition

It is precisely in this way that the movements of the twentieth-century American radical democratic tradition differed from both deliberative democracy and democratic realism. Rather than either advancing an ideal of deliberation or building a theory on a pessimistic reading of existing democratic possibilities, the twentieth-century movements that constituted this tradition shared and shaped an approach that combined elements of the arguments of their more recent rivals. Like the latter-day realists, they recognized that the inadequacies of American democracy ensured that political change could not be forged through a politics of reason, consensus, and inclusion alone, but would also require “buoyant, crusading, and militant” forms of political action, including forms that might be rightfully described as adversarial, manipulative, and even coercive.²⁹ Like the deliberative democrats, however, they also looked forward to a time when such actions were no longer necessary, a time when democratic politics would become more open, less exclusive, more egalitarian, and perhaps even more deliberative than the politics that had existed since the founding. The promise of democracy, they argued, was unfulfilled in various ways, corrupted by ill-motivated citizens or leaders, and unsettled by the prevailing radically unequal distribution of social and political power.

The constitutive task of the radical democratic tradition was to bring these two claims together. They did so by insisting, first, that it was possible to rectify those ills and thus to secure a “new kind” of democracy but, second, that any such effort would require a full range of political strategies encompassing electoral and non-electoral politics, reasoned and passionate appeals, and noncoercive and coercive forms of protest alike. Most of all, these movements insisted that it was crucial to distinguish between the

²⁹ Dewey, “Democracy is Radical,” 11.

sorts of democratic political actions that were required in the present and those that would be appropriate in some improved future democracy. It was necessary to craft a politics that would enable a better regime to be created but it was also vital not to act as if such a future had already come.

None of the movements that composed the radical democratic tradition believed that the end of democratic reform justified the use of any means of political action, though. They did not suggest that citizens should take to the streets whatever the consequences nor did they argue that it was always acceptable to impose one's view of the future order on unwilling fellow citizens whatever the cause of their objections. Rather, they strongly believed that the choice of political means had to reflect crucial democratic ideals. They thus generally resisted calls to insurrection or revolution—if not always some more minimal use of violent force—partly on immediate moral grounds and partly because they believed that such methods of regime change would generate animosity between social groups for decades to come, preventing the creation of a peaceful, open, and inclusive democratic order in the realizable future.

Despite such caution, the theorists of the twentieth-century radical democratic tradition continually insisted that it was nevertheless wrong to circumscribe too tightly the actions that might be required in the present. The selection of political means had instead to be both goal-oriented and context-sensitive. Such orientation and sensitivity further required that citizens—or at least citizen-activists—possess an astute sense of political judgment. Citizens would need to be able to assess both the efficacy of contrasting types of political action in varying contexts and to evaluate the ethical appropriateness of that action in each given instance. Assessments of democratic political action in this tradition always thus existed at the intersection of principle and action, of ideal and strategy, and citizens needed to understand the connections and disconnections between these ways of thinking. Radical democrats, then, demanded that citizens develop a kind of practical wisdom that would enable citizens to make these strategic yet principled decisions on a regular basis. They would need to know when to compromise and when to hold out, when to argue and when to concur. They would need also, of course, to be able to muster the courage required by the often desperate struggle to build a better democratic future and, equally importantly, to exhibit the patience necessary to hold back from such struggle when the occasion demanded.

The answers to these precise judgments, and political theorists' evaluations of citizens' abilities to make the right call, dramatically shifted across the twentieth century. All was not stable within the radical democratic tradition. It knew its moments of optimism and of pessimism, of clarity and

opacity. At their best, however, the movements of the tradition developed a startlingly clear sense of what was required, explaining that democracy demanded that citizens develop special kinds of political virtue, kinds suited both to the immediate political contexts within which they lived and campaigned and to the demands of the cross-temporal transformation to which they were committed.

It is not surprising that this body of work has been overlooked or misunderstood in recent years, as this approach to political action sits ill with both the deliberative and the realist approaches, at least as they are usually understood. Most deliberative democrats are unwilling to accept the use of distinctly nondeliberative political action in the hope that such action will bring about an improved future.³⁰ Many realists, on the other hand, are deeply wary about promises relating to the future in general. They worry that such promises either mask attempts to enforce some homogenizing ideal—an ideal that might serve the interests of some but will also exclude concern for others—or promote a misguided optimism about the possibilities of politics that might lead citizens and politicians in dangerous directions. Realists thus often prefer to commit themselves to a politics that can maintain political ambiguity, uncertainty, or contestation rather than one that ties itself to a single determinate goal. They are also often worried about the temporal orientation of radical theorizing, suggesting that its focus on bringing about a better future betrays a worryingly unilinear understanding of change across time: one that neglects the possibility that the judgments about the desirability of elements of the past, present, and future partly depend on the varying perspectives of the viewer.³¹

This book seeks to demonstrate that both of these concerns are misguided, at least in their most exaggerated forms. The remainder of this introduction explains how.

Plan of the Book

This book investigates the contentions of the radical democratic tradition as it was forged across the twentieth century, revisiting the arguments of its proponents and the practices of its exponents, and outlining how its essential recommendations can be reclaimed today. It is a journey that takes in all

³⁰ See David Miller, *Citizenship and National Identity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), 159. For a more subtle assessment, see Andrew Sabl, “Looking Forward to Justice: Rawlsian Civil Disobedience and its Non-Rawlsian Lessons,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 9 (2001): 307–30.

³¹ See Connolly, *Pluralism*, esp. 97–130.

of the major contributors to the tradition's evolution and that takes seriously both their weaknesses and their strengths. It is structured in two parts.

The first part covers the period from the beginning of the century to the end of the Second World War. It begins with the Progressive reformers of the first fifteen years of the century. These reformers initiated the twentieth-century radical democratic tradition. They did so by placing a conception of the common good firmly at the center of their democratic ideals whilst also arguing forcefully that multiple sorts of political action, including action that might have appeared sectional or even coercive to others, was needed to realize such a good in the imperfect democracy of the United States. Chapter 2 demonstrates what happened to this idea during the interwar years, and especially during the years of the Great Depression. Concentrating on the ferocious critique of prewar Progressivism provided by Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Lippmann, and on attempts to salvage Progressive theory from that critique, the chapter illustrates that the Depression Era provided a particularly pessimistic moment in the development of the American radical democratic tradition, a moment when a "realist" assessment of prevailing political circumstances almost entirely overwhelmed prospects for a better democratic future. Chapter 3, though, demonstrates the ways in which the more optimistic parts of the radical democratic tradition were nonetheless reasserted in the later interwar years. Featuring a new evaluation of the contribution of John Dewey, this chapter suggests that the ideal of a more inclusive and harmonious democratic future re-emerged late in the Depression Era but was newly combined with support for a far more vigorous and adversarial account of the efforts that would be required to secure immediate political change. At the heart of these moves, the chapter shows, was the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), whose buoyant and crusading efforts on behalf of the democratic rights of industrial labor would remain highly contentious within American democratic thinking for the remainder of the century.

The CIO's vision struggled for traction in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the second part of the book turns to dramatic changes brought about in the postwar period. It begins, in chapter 4, in the immediate aftermath of the war, when radicals were presented with an even more serious challenge than they had been in the years after the First World War. Once-strident campaigners grew tired and skeptical during the war and many came to believe that the primary role of activists was to conserve the good in the present order, rather than try to build anew. The result was a period characterized by overwhelming caution and by the sense that even if change in American politics was sought, it could only ever be expected to be achieved incrementally. Chapter 5, though, demonstrates that this

moment of caution gave way as the traumas of war faded from memory and that by the mid-1950s both optimism and political drama had returned to radical democratic thought, courtesy of the civil rights movement. The chapter examines the democratic theory and practice of that movement in the 1950s, concentrating especially of the Congress of Racial Equality, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and demonstrating how these groups reinvigorated the radical democratic tradition by responding to the critiques of the post-war pessimists in a new and distinctive way. Chapter 6 moves that story on still further, tracing the ways in which the student activists of the 1960s, especially those associated with Students for a Democratic Society, borrowed from the democratic theory of the civil rights movement and transformed it from an account of democracy as racial justice into one of the struggle for democracy as lifestyle experimentation. The conclusion draws the lessons from each of these moments together, and outlines ways in which the tradition of radical democracy is able to respond to the demands of the present.

This intellectual journey is one that takes in both philosophical and practical elements; that is, the book surveys both the ideas and the practices of the movements that shaped the radical democratic tradition. Indeed, it has to cover both. The gap we so often notice today between those who think about democracy's demands and those who follow those demands on the streets or in the corridors of power is a relatively recent phenomenon; writers about democratic action in the twentieth-century United States were generally also practitioners of a certain type of democratic action. It follows that there are indeed great texts to be examined here, including Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life*, John Dewey's *The Public and its Problems*, Walter Lippmann's *The Phantom Public*, Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, C. Wright Mills's *The Power Elite*, and even John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*. But there are also pamphlets and speeches, newspaper articles and editorials in journals of opinion, and the newsletters of activist organizations.

In addition to the various kinds of texts, there are also manifold practices discussed in this account. One of the immediately notable things about the radical democratic activism of the twentieth-century United States is the apparent continuity in political strategy, in what scholars of social movements have called "repertoires of contention."³² The trade unionists of the 1930s thus invented the sit-down strike, a method that gave way to the sit-

³² See Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

ins at lunch counters in the southern states that initiated the civil rights movement, which in their turn inspired the university campus “occupations” of the late 1960s and 1970s. Songs of protest, too, passed from generation to generation; spirituals sung by slaves were picked up by the trade unionists of the 1930s, later adapted to the cause of civil rights, and finally found a new life once more in the folk music revival of the 1960s.³³ Even at the beginning of the twenty-first century, rock musician Bruce Springsteen could be found mobilizing against the Republican Party with the very same songs.³⁴

This continuity is partly the consequence of shared personnel and joint organizational allegiance. Research into the twentieth century’s trade union, civil rights, and student protest movements often throws up the same names; people like Abraham J. Muste, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Bayard Rustin moved from one movement to another, and brought new generations of colleagues with them. Such research also reveals how the organizations these activists led were institutionally interconnected: demonstrating, for instance, how the Progressive Intercollegiate Socialist Society gave way to the Depression Era’s League for Industrial Democracy, which itself spawned the Students for a Democratic Society of the 1960s.

The similarities in political action between the generations are also the result of shared political ideals and shared political arguments. These shared ideals were partly the result of these movements’ continual invocation of concepts derived from earlier American political traditions. All of these radical democrats thus drew heavily from both the republican and liberal traditions that had given shape to much American political argument since the founding.³⁵ As shall be seen, they tried constantly to reformulate core elements of those traditions in accordance with their own aspirations. They argued that the concrete structures of American governance required radical renewal if the nation was to be able to deliver upon the promise of its underlying values. But the causes of continuity extended far beyond the use of a shared national conceptual inheritance. These twentieth century movements also offered remarkably similar answers to the more precise—and more radical—question: what should American citizens actually *do* if they

³³ See Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

³⁴ Bruce Springsteen, *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions* (New York: Sony Records, 2006).

³⁵ For an introduction to efforts to reformulate the broader traditions of American political theorizing in a more radical direction, see Foner, *Story of American Freedom*; Gary Gerstle, “The Protean Character of American Liberalism,” *American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 1043–73; Carol Horton, *Race and the Making of American Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Marc Stears, “The Liberal Tradition and the Politics of Exclusion,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (2007): 85–101.

want to overcome undemocratic injustices and exclusions and attempt to construct a better political order for the future?

In tracing those arguments, this study examines the tradition's offerings in rarefied political theory, in popular political argument, and in actual political practice. Not everything, or everyone, can be here, however. Three exceptions are of particular note. First, this study focuses exclusively on a tradition of democratic and American political thought. Movements that rejected democracy or proposed a directly revolutionary means of getting there are thus excluded from examination, and groups who self-consciously turned their back on American political traditions also only infrequently appear in the following pages. There is, therefore, little of the American Communist or anarchist traditions here. Second, it will also be noted that relatively little is said here about the inner workings of the Republican or Democratic parties. This is for the simple reason that most of the theorists and activists of the radical democratic tradition worked outside of either party, moving into closer or looser alliance with them as conditions allowed. Frequently, indeed, they were highly critical of party politics in general, seeing it as a block on democratic progress rather than as a means for securing democratic change. Finally, the thinkers and movements discussed in this book were also interested mostly in the politics of class and the politics of race; they sought to create a new democracy for the American worker and to overcome the exclusion that often faced Americans who belonged to minority racial and ethnic groups. Therefore, the analysis rarely addresses the "identity politics" of cultural allegiance that emerged in the United States after the 1970s. Movements in this regard could be included too, and their contributions to the theory of radical democracy added to the account, of course, and I hope such work will follow.

Despite these exceptions, the book's ambitions remain expansive. It aims to recuperate a tradition of thinking about democracy and democratic reform that stretched across the twentieth century but has been neglected by political theory today and to ask whether it still has anything to say to us. It will argue that in the last few decades American democratic political theory has been trapped between a deliberative democratic ideal that can often seem naively optimistic and a democratic realist one that can just as frequently appear excessively pessimistic. And it aims to show that it has not always been thus. Most of all, I hope that this study of the radical democratic tradition will show those who go in search of a "new kind of politics" in the twenty-first century that they might still find twentieth-century predecessors who can help to show the way.