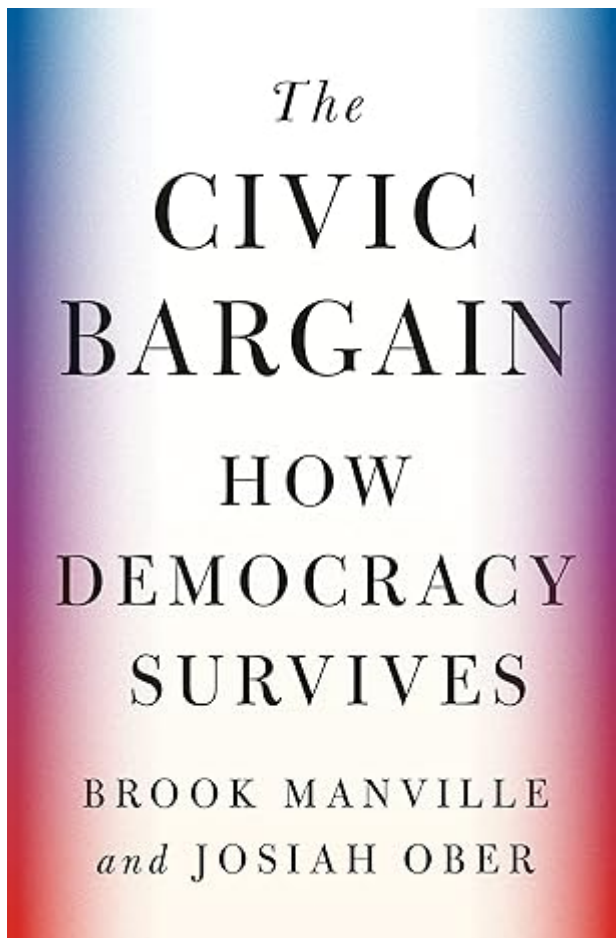


Making Democracies?



by Theodore Dalrymple

“We have made Italy,” said the Piedmontese statesman, Massimo d’Azeglio. **“Now we must make Italians.”**

But are citizens made as, say, China ornaments are made? Or do they develop spontaneously, organically, without conscious direction or design? This is an important question: for if you can lead a man to freedom, you can’t necessarily make him free. He may be wearing what Blake called “the mind-forg’d manacles.”

In Brook Manville and Josiah Ober’s [*The Civic Bargain*](#), the authors try to establish the conditions in which political democracy first emerges and then survives. They do so by examining four historical cases: ancient Athens, Rome, Britain, and America. They claim to have distilled seven

necessary conditions—in fact, the seven necessary conditions—from these examples; they do not test their conclusions by considering the history of such countries as Switzerland, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands.

They define democracy as that political arrangement in which there is no overall boss other than the populace itself, which is supposedly self-governing. This seems rather schematic and captures little of anyone's daily experience. We still have no overall boss but are certainly bossed about by political bosses or their servitors far more than we used to be. In part, but only in part, this is because of the enormous increase in the size and administrative complexity of our societies. Everywhere there is the feeling that the political class has escaped the sovereignty of the people and is now a law unto itself, serving its own interests. This is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to change the direction of the ship of state, whoever is nominally in charge.

The seven necessary conditions for the establishment and survival of democracy, according to the authors, are 1) that there should be no political boss, 2) that there should be at least adequate security and welfare within the polity, 3) that the citizenship of the polity should be defined as against non-citizens, 4) that there should be institutions in which any of the citizens can and do participate, 5) that citizens should be willing to make compromises with each other in good faith, 6) that the people within the polity should have a basic level of mutual amity, and 7) that there should be a means of educating citizen participation in the affairs of the polity.

One of the authors worked for McKinsey, the consultancy company, and unfortunately, much of the book—even the recounting of dramatic political events—reads like the report of management consultants. It is not a great pleasure to read passages such as the following:

A major innovation of Henry's work [Henry II, King of England, 1216–72] was the combination of central discipline with local accountability and initiative, reflecting well-negotiated partnerships across the hybrid platform.

Henry II in this description might as well have been the chief executive of a pharmaceutical company seeking to maximise profits as a mediaeval king. Prose like this would make Armageddon sound like a management failure.

Only the chapter on the early history of the United States comes alive and escapes the dead hand of bureaucratic abstraction written in managerialese. Indeed, the chapter would be an excellent primer on that early history; here, actions and the ideas that inspired them are well articulated.

The authors stress that the establishment of democratic polities necessarily involves compromise and occurs only when groups with different interests realise that half of something is better than all of nothing. The resulting compromise gives no one all of what he wants and is therefore imperfect from the point of view of complete justice. The imperfection or internal contradiction of the compromise means that it is unstable, and can even lead to war, as happened with the United States when the initial constitution failed to settle, or fudged, the question of slavery in a society dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. But had the framers of the constitution not compromised over that issue, or fudged it, there would have been no United States. The agreement was the best they could do in the circumstances, but when new states were added to the union, the cracks could no longer be papered over. With characteristic acerbity and penetration, Doctor Johnson, a profoundly anti-racist thinker, put his finger on the American founding dilemma when he asked, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?"

For there to be a democracy, there must be a demos, that is to say, a population with an underlying sense of community of interest that transcends faction or personal opinion.

That question, which for so long has haunted America, ought now to have been answered, and in a sense, it has been, in favour of genuine equality before the law: but faction, the bugbear of Madison, has deliberately kept it open, as surgeons used to keep wounds open by putting a piece of lint in them, causing what they thought was a laudable infection. Old grievances may be kept alive to the benefit of the leaders of the faction, whose power and influence depend on nothing having changed when in fact everything has changed.

In fact, there is a breakdown in the United States and other Western democracies in some of the preconditions for democracy that the authors distilled from their examination of their four chosen examples. For there to be a democracy, there must be a *demos*, that is to say, a population with an underlying sense of community of interest that transcends faction or personal opinion; but this sense of community of interest is being fast eroded, as sexual, religious, political and cultural identities become stronger than the national one.

These identities are accompanied or even created by uncompromising ideologies that will accept only the fullest meeting of their demands. Compromise is impossible for and with them; in many cases, the ideologies take the place of religious doctrine and observance. This is happening at a time when the democracies are facing determined external challenges, which we cannot be certain that they will be able to meet.

Normally, of course, an awareness of the enmity of others is a force for cohesion; but in a population fixated on its own, generally quite trivial discontents, with little sense of proportion or even awareness for the need of one, we cannot be

sure that we shall not repeat the absurdities of Byzantium, where arcane theological disputes continued even as the city was besieged and about to fall.

The authors do not believe that the downfall or collapse of democracy is inevitable, but their proposed partial solution, namely an enhanced civic education, seems to me both too long-term and too weak to answer the need (not that I am against it, or have anything better to offer). Nor do they recognise a profound problem with their solution in present circumstances: where the termite-like undermining of the *demos* has gone too far, there is likely to be ideological conflict even over what civic education should contain or consist of. In the case of the United States, does its history, for pedagogical purposes, begin in 1776 or in 1619? The authors have a sophisticated understanding of history and know that, in reality, it starts on neither date, history being a seamless robe; but for the heuristic purposes of civic education, it has to start somewhere. The choice of when and where to start is now itself bitterly contentious. To teach people that they are the legatees of nothing but infamy may be worse than teaching them nothing at all.

What is true of history is true of the political theory of democracy. What are equality and equity? They are often treated as if they were the same. Is equality under the law sufficient, or is inequality of outcome in itself evidence of injustice? The latter view is intellectually absurd, but such has been the efficiency of what I must call, notwithstanding its status as a cliché, the long march through the institutions, that it is probably now predominant—*especially* (and very alarmingly) among the educated classes.

The authors assume that universal suffrage is an unequivocal good, and perhaps it is better than any possible alternative. But surely it also encourages politicians to promise the population, or (worse still) favoured portions of the

population, access to unearned benefits at the expense of others? Given human nature, it is hardly surprising if those in receipt of such benefits—commercial as well as others—vote for more of them. Thus, the fundamental maxim of democracies becomes *Après nous, le déluge*. Only a population with great civic virtue could resist this tendency under conditions of universal suffrage.

The book also propounds an unexamined piety that “when the citizen body is expanded [by an influx of non-citizens], the capacity of the community is increased” because “more human capital is available, in the form of more information, knowledge, and experience,” and “as a result, more innovative and effective solutions can be discovered and implemented.” This is not a good description of Rome post-AD 410.

There are also one or two minor irritations in the book. The authors use (or editors demand) the pusillanimous *BCE* for *BC*. One does not have to be a believing Christian to employ *BC* and *AD*: indeed, their employment by non-believers is precisely the kind of cultural compromise and acceptance of a tradition and culture that is necessary for the maintenance of a democracy.

Another is the capitalisation of the word *black* when referring to human beings, as against white. It is possible to interpret this usage as being profoundly, if unintentionally, racist. From what kind of inferiority or weakness must people suffer that they might be assisted in practice by this lexicographical quirk? Is it not condescending, demeaning, and humiliating? *The Civic Bargain* is by turns dull, interesting, and thought-provoking. The chapter specifically devoted to the United States would make an excellent pamphlet for American civic education. But its unexamined pieties limit its explanatory power.

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