

James T. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-195-05461-3. 912 pp. \$34.95.

James Kloppenberg's *Toward Democracy* is a book about the development of democracy in the modern era; it deals with ancient democracy only perfunctorily (and somewhat clumsily) in a single preliminary chapter. Nevertheless, scholars of ancient democracy may find it illuminating. Not only does Kloppenberg provide a thorough and highly readable survey of democratic thought in America, England, and France since around 1600, but his characterization of modern democracy's intellectual evolution implies important continuities between the conceptions of democracy prevalent in antiquity and those that produced the great democratic revolutions of more recent times.

Kloppenberg's fundamental argument, presented in the book's introduction, is that the values usually associated with democracy—such as popular sovereignty, liberty, and equality—ultimately depend on an underlying commitment to an “ethic of reciprocity.” For Kloppenberg, reciprocity means that members of a community extend to one another the greatest possible respect and value the well-being of others on a level with their own. As a result, they can deliberate together concerning the collective good and are prepared, when necessary, to sacrifice their personal interests for the sake of their polity's health. Kloppenberg traces the origin of the ethic of reciprocity to the Judeo-Christian ideal of loving one's neighbor, and he presents modern democracy as originally a product of the dissenting Protestantism of the seventeenth century, particularly as it existed among the devoutly religious communities of British North America. In England and France, where the ethic of reciprocity was less firmly grounded, progress toward democracy proved more difficult. Even in the United States, the blossom of democracy began to fade as soon as the generation of the American Revolution had passed away and dedication to the ethic of reciprocity began to be lost. Democracy's modern history, Kloppenberg suggests, is darkened by a “tragic irony”: its implementation stimulates appetites and discontents that end up undermining the very moral commitments which permit it to exist. *Toward Democracy* is meant to remind readers that democracy's dependence on reciprocity was once widely understood and clearly articulated, especially by those whom we still revere as modern democracy's greatest champions—men such as the Levellers, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and the Founding Fathers of the United States.

The book is divided into three parts. The first of these, devoted to the 1600s, shows how the desire for democracy in England and her American colonies emerged from Puritan religious sentiments, which formed the basis for the political views even of such thinkers as Sidney and Locke. In North America, and especially in New England, such sentiments met with little resistance and democracy quickly established itself as a way of life. In England itself, however, an entrenched nobility

and an established church combined to defeat democratic aspirations. Kloppenberg presents the English Civil War as a missed opportunity for democracy and regards the Glorious Revolution as nothing but an aristocratic coup whose success forestalled any extension of the franchise in Britain for more than a century thereafter. The fruition of democracy would have to come first in the New World.

The second part of *Toward Democracy* explores the Enlightenment's impact on democratic discourse and examines the political debates that preceded and accompanied the American Revolution and the drafting of the U.S. Constitution. Generally speaking, Kloppenberg sees the *philosophes* as having contributed little of value to the democratic project. It was rather the Scottish Enlightenment, and in particular the moral sense philosophy of men like Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith, that gave real support to democratic aspirations, providing a new basis for the ethic of reciprocity in a less religious age. Kloppenberg highlights the importance of such thinkers' influence in eighteenth-century colonial America: their ideas, taught in the colleges and preached from pulpits, circulated widely and captured the imaginations of large numbers of Americans, including such leading lights among the Founders as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

Kloppenberg's account of the American founding is quietly polemical. He seeks to show that the government established by the Founders was intended to be genuinely democratic, and was designed not to constrain the popular will but to realize it. Kloppenberg insists on the Founders' intellectual debt to Rousseau, whom he presents as practically the only continental thinker apart from Montesquieu to have had a significant impact on the birth of democracy in America. He attacks the widespread notion that the Founders rejected "democracy" in favor of a "republic," demonstrating that the two words had long been used synonymously and contending that the apparent distinction between them in the Federalist Papers was largely a matter of rhetorical strategy. He argues that Madison envisioned the Constitution less as a mechanism for cancelling out rival interests than as a means of allowing the common good to be achieved through earnest deliberation. Perhaps most notably, he stresses the degree to which some of the Founders saw social and economic equality as a desirable goal, and he occasionally implies that they were less committed to an absolutist conception of property rights than we tend to suppose. Kloppenberg fights all these battles without the noisy fanfare of academic controversy—his critiques of the secondary literature are consigned to an online supplement to his already extensive endnotes—but his revision of so many widely accepted beliefs still makes for exhilarating reading.

The third part of Kloppenberg's book deals with the French Revolution and with American, French, and English history down to the 1870s. He assigns some blame for the initial failure of France's democratic experiment to the *philosophes*, who had exalted an elitist conception of reason above the ethic of reciprocity. A more fundamental obstacle, however, was the absence of a sense of fellow-feeling that could unite Frenchmen of all classes, regions, and religious convictions. The

communal ideal, which had grown up organically in America, found only parochial expression in France. Desperate in the face of foreign enemies, the Revolution tried to enforce a non-existent *fraternité*, with horrific results. On the other side of the Atlantic, in the nineteenth century, the United States was forced to struggle with its own internal divisions, particularly with respect to the issue of slavery, even as a new individualist ethos, whose origins Kloppenberg does not fully explore, began to erode the ethic of reciprocity in the expanding nation. The central figures of this portion of *Toward Democracy* are Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, and Abraham Lincoln. All three foresaw that without the ethic of reciprocity democracy would perish or come to exist only in name, and one of them strove to preserve that ethic amid the carnage of a civil war. The book ends on a rather gloomy note, with America abandoning Reconstruction and the ideal of racial equality, leaving democracy's potential still unfulfilled.

On the whole, Kloppenberg makes a persuasive case that the best of modern democratic thought has been grounded not in mere individualism or the desire to balance conflicting interests, still less in the crude idea of majority rule. Instead, democracy's advocates generally understood that its essence is a sense of community and solidarity with one's fellow-citizens. Such a claim should be especially interesting to students of Classical democracy, since in the ancient world too, democracy was inseparable from allegiance to the *polis*, on whose well-being the welfare of each of its members ultimately depended. To accept Kloppenberg's arguments is thus to reject the idea of a profound gulf that separates early modern conceptions of democracy from their ancient predecessors. If such a gulf seems to exist, then perhaps we misunderstand what the modern advocates of democracy wanted it to be. It may be that even some modern thinkers and statesmen who explicitly rejected the model of ancient Athens—as documented, for example, in Jennifer Tolbert Roberts's excellent *Athens on Trial*—nevertheless recreated certain aspects of its ideology in ways that they themselves did not appreciate.

Not all aspects of Kloppenberg's argument are equally convincing. He sometimes seems willing to read his ethic of reciprocity into texts where it is present only in embryo. He also perhaps downplays the extent to which modern democratic movements have been driven by a desire for personal freedom. In his introduction, Kloppenberg rejects "the impoverished conceptions of freedom that dominate contemporary scholarly and political debate" and opts instead to speak of a democratic ideal of "autonomy," which implies not only a rejection of domination by others but also an active rule over oneself (pp. 7–8). On the book's last page, he writes that "fulfilling the promise of democracy depends on individuals' internalizing limits on the freedom democracy gives them" (p. 710). Kloppenberg is no doubt correct, and his limited enthusiasm for mere negative liberty is another respect in which his vision of democracy approximates that of antiquity, but it is difficult to believe that modern democratic thinkers, many of whom embraced the doctrine of natural rights, did not take a generally more sanguine view of individualism than

Kloppenbergs wishes to admit. Throughout this book, Kloppenberg is making two arguments, one about what democracy means, and one about what its leading exponents have said it means. While he never goes so far as to assume that the two things are exactly the same, he perhaps does not fully acknowledge the extent to which intellectual tensions within the modern democratic tradition may have contributed to the “tragic irony of democracy” that he laments.

It is impossible, in a brief review, to do justice to the many facets of this impressive book, which challenges its reader to think hard about what democracy means and how it can be achieved. Kloppenberg’s provocative theses, together with his lucid prose and mastery of narrative, make *Toward Democracy* worthwhile for anyone interested in pondering democracy’s complexities. For ancient historians, it may also offer insight into the vocabulary and preconceptions, originating in modern political thought, that we inevitably bring to the investigation of a much earlier era.

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