

Demopolis

What did democracy mean before liberalism? What are the consequences for our lives today? Combining history with political theory, this book restores the core meaning of democracy as collective and limited self-government by citizens. That, rather than majority tyranny or human rights, is what democracy meant in ancient Athens. Participatory self-government is the basis of political practice in “Demopolis,” a hypothetical modern state powerfully imagined by award-winning historian and political scientist Josiah Ober. Demopolis’s residents aim to establish a secure, prosperous, and nontyrannical community, where citizens govern as a collective, both directly and through representatives, and willingly assume the costs of self-government because doing so benefits them, both as a group and individually. Basic democracy, as exemplified in real Athens and imagined Demopolis, can provide a stable foundation for a liberal state. It also offers a possible way forward for religious or otherwise nonliberal societies seeking a realistic alternative to autocracy.

JOSIAH OBER is currently Professor of Classics, Political Science, and (by courtesy) Philosophy at Stanford, and he has chaired both a department of humanities (Classics at Princeton) and a department of social science (Political Science at Stanford). He has held visiting professorships in the UK, France, and Australia. His previous books have won prizes from the American Philological Association, the Society for Institutional and Organizational Economics, and the Association of Academic Publishers and have been translated into French, German, Greek, Italian, Chinese, Korean, and Turkish.

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DEMOPOLIS

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JOSIAH OBER

Stanford University, California



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*For Denise, Spike, Stella, Blanche, Bindi, and Enki.
They pounced.*

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Preface: Democracy before Liberalism

Imagine a country that is secure, prosperous, and ruled by its citizens. They disagree on many things, some of them very deep and important. But they agree about the high value of collective self-government, and they are willing to pay the costs of having it. The people of this country live with freedom of speech and association, political equality, and civic dignity. But they have not settled on their stance in regard to state religion. Nor have they committed to promoting universal human rights at home or abroad. Nor have they decided on a principle of social justice for distributing the benefits of social cooperation. Call that country Demopolis and its government basic democracy.

This book asks what it would mean to be a citizen of Demopolis. What will be gained and what is lost when life in Demopolis is compared to life in a liberal democracy? I answer those questions, first, from the vantage point of a worried liberal, one who hopes to shore up the political foundations of liberal values and who believes that government could be something other than a potentially intrusive threat to personal liberty combined with a potentially paternalistic provider of distributive outcomes. But I also try to answer questions about what life in Demopolis would entail from the very different perspective of a religious traditionalist residing in an autocratic state. The traditionalist I have in mind dreams of a life without autocrats but is not ready to embrace contemporary liberal values. Does a theory of democracy have anything to say to him or her?

I focus on democracy “before liberalism” because I suppose (without arguing the point) that in the twenty-first century, liberalism is the dominant value system with which democracy has been interwoven. Political liberalism is the tradition in which I was raised and to which I remain deeply attached; I have no wish to live in a society that is anything other than a liberal democracy. But, like every value system, liberalism obscures what it does not promote. I argue that the intermixture of liberalism has obscured the positive value of collective self-government, as an instrument

to desired ends and as a choiceworthy end in itself. I hope to show liberals why it is a wrong to regard citizen participation in government as a cost that can or should be minimized. And that it is a mistake to view a preference for citizen self-government and a fear of government captured by self-interested elites as uniquely appropriate to populists, anarchists, or Schmittian agonists.¹

Liberalism is not the only system of value that can be blended into democracy or that has been imagined as inseparable from it. I offer here a theory of democracy that is not only before liberalism but also before Marxism, before philosophical anarchism, before libertarianism, before contemporary Confucianism or other theories based on “Asian values.” My hope is to show that democracy in and of itself effectively promotes various desirable conditions of existence, and that it does so quite independently of liberalism or any other theory of moral value.

The goal is not to denigrate moral value-centered political theory. I do not hope to convince anyone that “just plain democracy” is inherently superior to the various political hybrids that have been advocated by political theorists working within liberalism (or Marxism, and so on). Rather, my aim is to demonstrate what a basic form of democracy does have to offer on its own terms. Basic democracy may be analogized to a wild species in an era of well-meaning programs of hybridization. The wild species is not intrinsically *better* than the hybrids, nor should successful hybrids be uprooted in favor of a nostalgic preference for the wild original. But for reasons analogous to a biologist’s interest in the genetics and behavior of native species, we may gain from studying democracy “in the wild.” By focusing primarily on hybrids, I suppose that value theorists have failed to appreciate the relationship between the conditions necessary for democracy and liberal values and have overlooked specifically democratic goods.

This is a book about what collective self-government costs and what it can provide to people willing to pay those costs: a recognizable and potentially attainable sort of human flourishing – the chance to live as an active participant in a reasonably secure and prosperous society in which citizens govern themselves and pursue other projects of value to themselves. I suggest that the easiest way to think about the costs and benefits of democracy

¹ That mistake may be predicated on statements such as that of Ronald Reagan in his famous “time to choose” speech of October 27, 1964, in support of Barry Goldwater’s presidential candidacy: “This is the issue of this election: Whether we believe in our capacity for self-government or whether we abandon the American revolution and confess that a little intellectual elite in a far-distant capitol can plan our lives for us better than we can plan them ourselves.” On anarchists and Schmittian agonists, see Chapters 3 and 8.

without liberalism is to describe a democracy that did or might pertain in a community *before* liberal value commitments have been added to the constitutional order. But, we may also think, in either a utopian or (more likely) dystopian register, of democracy *after* liberalism, where citizens confront a society in which constitutional features associated with contemporary liberalism are crumbling or have been abandoned. I address democracy after liberalism in the epilogue.

Liberalism emerged, in the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, as an answer to certain dire problems, including wars of religion, fascism, and authoritarian communism. Those problems have not disappeared. But we now face new and pressing problems arising from the very success of the liberal solutions: technocratic government, economic disruption, political polarization, alienation conjoined with nationalistic populism and a partisan politics of identity. A theory of democracy before liberalism is no panacea for these, or other, ills of modernity. But it may point to a new direction for democratic theory and, perhaps, for political action.

Democracy without liberalism is sometimes depicted by liberal political theorists as being a fundamentally, even viciously, *antiliberal* ideology, inspired by a Rousseauian fantasy of a unified popular will and powered by unconstrained majoritarianism. I hope to show that pure majoritarianism, although a readily imaginable (if unstable) form of politics, is a corruption of democracy. It is neither the original nor the normal and healthy form of the regime type. So I hope to offer a degree of reassurance to liberal democrats by showing that some of what they value is delivered by democracy in itself and that nightmarishly illiberal consequences need not necessarily follow upon a crisis of liberalism in a democratic state. But I also hope to have something to say to traditionalists who are tired of being ruled by tyrants but who reject certain tenets of contemporary liberalism – notably, state-level neutrality in respect to religion. As matters now stand, such people may doubt that democracy of any kind is really an option for them. Their doubts are well grounded only if democracy is available uniquely as a package deal of which liberalism is an integral part.

This book presents a political theory that is at once historical and normative. It is concerned with both adaptability and stability. It is decidedly nonideal. It accepts Kant's famous claim (in Proposition 6 of his 1784 "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose") that "out of the crooked timber of humanity, nothing entirely straight can be made." But it assumes that, under the right conditions, crooked timbers can be assembled into a sturdy and adaptable framework for living together without a master. It describes a political solution to a fundamental problem of

social cooperation in a diverse community rather than a morally satisfactory solution to the problem of social justice. The solution proposed here offers people who agree on a few fundamentals a way to achieve certain valued ends. But those ends do not include the moral end of “a fully just society” – no matter how justice is imagined – much less a fully just world.

The account of democracy offered here is guardedly optimistic, in the “cup half full” sense. I seek to show what democracy without liberalism could be at its best – in the form that would most fully support the possibility of human flourishing for many people in a diverse community, if not for all people, everywhere. Even that half-filled cup requires certain conditions, backed by rules, enforced by citizens. The conditions are demanding; the rules depend on good design; the citizens must be well motivated. None of that is guaranteed. No form of government is proof against corruption, and too many regimes, self-described as democracies, have brought about conditions intolerable not only to liberals but also to nonliberals seeking a decent alternative to autocracy.

The relevant question for the sort of nonideal theory I offer here is not whether things can go wrong in a democracy – they obviously can, and often have. Rather, the relevant questions are, What would it mean for collective self-government to go right? What conditions would make that possible? Can those conditions be achieved by ordinary people in the real world? The requirement that collective self-government be humanly achievable and sustainable leavens the optimism of my account of democracy before liberalism. I consider the empty half of the cup in the epilogue.

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Works by classical Greek authors are cited according the ordinary conventions of classical scholarship. Hobbes's *Leviathan* is cited by chapter and page number in the Cambridge edition (1991).