Toward Democracy in America

A masterwork on the past, and future, of democracy

by ALAN WOLFE

In the age of Twitter, when stabs at wisdom can appear in 140 characters or fewer, it is refreshing to review a comprehensive book dedicated to a vitally important concept. Let there be no doubt: Toward Democracy makes a major contribution to both scholarship and citizenship in America. At a time when our political system is threatened by polarization and extremism, we need a reminder of why we value it in the first place. That is precisely what Warren professor of history James T. Kloppenberg offers.

Democracy is a most improbable idea. Throughout much of human history, down to the present in much of the world, the notion that ordinary people should have a say in choosing the government that rules them was as laughable as it was improbable. Rule was the province of tyrants, sometimes chosen by heredity privilege, other times determined by violent military conflict. Religious authorities conveyed the sense that people were hopelessly sinful and thus in need of firm guidance. Life was too short, too crowded with poverty, and too marked by widespread illiteracy to worry about what was taking place in distant capitals. Getting by was difficult enough. Self-understanding, let alone self-rule, was simply too far a stretch.

Kloppenberg hints at democracy’s improbability through his choice of title: the word “toward” implies that the goal of democracy has not yet been reached. If so, then his book should be viewed as a pre-history of democracy, an account of the many revolutions in thought and practice that made it possible merely to imagine a world in which the “toward” part of the title no longer applies.

Invisible Planets. It’s a commonplace that the art of translation requires negotiating cultural gaps, but sometimes a turn of phrase also poses political difficulties. In Death’s End, a character wears a tunic style known in China as a Zhongshan suit (after Sun Zhongshan, the Republic of China’s first president) and in the West as a “Mao suit.” But that usage, Liu says, “would give a very wrong interpretation”—Western readers would link the character too strongly with Chinese communism—so he opted to use the Chinese term, adding an explanatory footnote.

Liu tackles a version of this challenge even with his own English-language novels, where he’s careful to avoid shorthand that can trigger latent stereotypes. “If you start the story with a lot of Chinese people in Chinese clothes, speaking Chinese, using chopsticks, then people will immediately say, ‘Oh, I know what sort of story this is.’ You can’t do that.” He accessories his fantasy with utensils that aren’t chopsticks, and dots its skies with fire-breathing “garinafins” that aren’t dragons, giving it “a much more estranged look.” In a way, this is the trick of all his fiction: it de-familiarizes readers, and welcomes them to strange worlds. By the stories’ end—with the trickster taking the throne, or the case closed by the cyborg detective—distant places feel not so foreign, not so unlike home.

James Kloppenberg conveys the evolution of democracy from early theorists through Tocqueville’s celebration, written some years before this beatific electoral scene, The Verdict of the People (1854-55), by George Caleb Bingham.
which fundamental political equality could be taken for granted. Democracy, to cite a word this time from Kloppenberg’s sub-title, remains a “struggle.” In the United States, for example, if we take even a minimal definition of democracy—one person, one vote—that condition remained unmet until the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, only to be scuttled 48 years later by a 5-4 vote of the U.S. Supreme Court that struck down a key provision of that act.

Kloppenberg’s pre-history begins in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when two intellectual movements began to challenge a once-dominant political landscape. One emerged from the field now called political theory: thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, even if in radically different ways, began asking questions about authority; so long as they did, and so long as they were read and understood, those in power had to find means of justifying themselves. (Kloppenberg is especially good in his treatments of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and David Hume, both of whom tend to be neglected by American historians.) Ultimately the questions that Locke in particular asked led directly to the Enlightenment, whose thinkers framed the questions the founders of the United States asked as they contemplated the idea of a society with neither hereditary rulers nor an established faith.

Unlike many contemporary historians, Kloppenberg also examines the role of religion as the second factor in this profound transformation. In Europe, the Catholic Church had all too often allied itself with authoritarian monarchs and held fast to the practice of allowing only priests to read and interpret the Bible. That all changed with the Protestant Reformation and especially with Martin Luther’s attacks on Catholic privilege. Though Luther himself possessed an authoritarian personality, and continually modified his once-radical ideas, his concept of a “priesthood of all believers” prepared the groundwork for the individualism democracy required.

It is, however, too simple a story to view Catholics as the bad guys and Protestants as the good ones. Kloppenberg is especially sensitive to anti-Catholicism, which, he writes, “waxed and waned but never clearly disappeared” in the early history of New England. Still, the great accomplishment of America’s thinkers and doers was to avoid the political and religious dogmatism so evident in Europe. “Rather than trying to freeze their institutions and laws in a particular form, a temptation given their serious commitments to the apparently fixed truths of Christianity and natural law,” he writes, “the creators of the new American state governments provided for open-ended experimentation.” Their efforts were unprecedented. “By the 1790s, almost no one doubted that the United States of America was the world’s first democratic nation.”

This idea of the first democratic nation is true in one sense: the absence of a king. But, as Kloppenberg also points out, it is radically false in another: American democracy was limited to white men, and by no means all of them. So many historians of Kloppenberg’s generation have written on the role of women before they had the suffrage, or pondered the question of how America could be a democracy while sanctioning slavery, that Kloppenberg has little original material to add to these discussions. Still, his treatment of Thomas Jefferson’s inability to reconcile his faith in equality with the life of luxury that slavery afforded him is especially poignant. Slavery, Kloppenberg correctly writes, was “the deepest tragedy of American history.”

It was a mixed brew that the founders of American democracy drank; an immigrant nation naturally consumed a bewildering variety of ideas. “Shaped by a blend of Protestant Christianity, Enlightenment principles, and Scottish common-sense philosophy, the sensibilities of Madison, [James] Wilson, Adams, Jefferson, and other members of their generation combined confidence in the human capacities of reason and benevolence with a sober assessment of the dangers of passion and self-interest.” American democracy would become a test case for a particular version of moral philosophy: unlike strict versions of Calvinism, individuals would...
be allowed freedom of choice, but the dangers of anarchy would be staved off by a republican insistence on virtue and a religious insistence on restraint.

Because the American Revolution did not produce the violent anarchy of the French, the new nation was off to a surprisingly successful start. French republicans such as Maximilien Robespierre, ironically influenced by the monarchy he detested, envisioned the good society as a unified one, a position that, given the reality of human disagreement, ultimately led to terror. In Kloppenberg’s treatment, Robespierre’s antithesis was James Madison, the true genius of the American way of politics, who sought to manage conflict rather than eliminate it. Here Kloppenberg overplays the differences between Europe and the United States. That continent had produced its own Madison, Benjamin Constant; though Kloppenberg gives this Swiss-born theorist of liberal pluralism some attention, he does not give him his full due.

After the French revolution of 1830, the aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville commented that “the liberal but not revolutionary party, which alone suits me, does not exist, and certainly it is not up to me to create it.” Tocqueville never did create such a political system in France, but he became famous for describing the one across the Atlantic. Given his subject matter, the reader knows in advance that Kloppenberg will eventually encounter the author of the most famous book on American democracy ever written. And so he does, relying on Tocqueville to develop an argument closely resembling twentieth-century efforts to claim “American exceptionalism.” “In the United States,” Kloppenberg writes, “ethnic, racial, and religious differences, visible geographic and economic mobility, and, perhaps even more important, the widespread belief in such mobility, all combined with white male suffrage to discourage the emergence of a revolutionary working class.” He may be correct, but this comment raises a potential qualification to his overall effort: if multiplicity and mobility contribute to the creation of a successful democratic model, then why pay such elaborate attention to ideas? Tocqueville, for one, did not, at least relatively speaking.

In any case, as Kloppenberg approaches the middle of the nineteenth century, he hastily brings his book to a conclusion with the Lincoln–Douglas debates, the antislavery writings of Frederick Douglass, and the emergence of the Civil War. All this is understandable: Toward Democracy required years of reading, thinking, and writing to produce; had Kloppenberg continued with his detailed analysis of thinkers, this project would have emerged in multi-volume form. Perhaps it nonetheless would have been worth it. The American South, after all, was the home of the only meaningful anti-democratic sentiment in America. Kloppenberg devotes just one paragraph to John C. Calhoun, the most thoughtful anti-democrat America ever produced.

Quibbles aside, one can only hope that Kloppenberg’s book helps enrich the conversations about democracy taking place in the United States at the moment: Are we truly exceptional? Should we be? Is democracy tied to the nation-state, or does it now take global form? Does war promote or retard democratic institutions? If we believe democracy to be a good thing, should we aim to spread it where it does not currently exist? Do democratic citizens live longer than those who live in authoritarian societies? Do they live better? We have, indeed, not quite arrived at democracy. As long as we are still moving toward it, Kloppenberg’s masterwork should prove one of our most valuable guides.

Alan Wolfe recently retired as professor of political science at Boston College.

ALUMNI

World Music 2.0

Jace Clayton reflects on musical technological trends across the globe.

by LARA PELLEGRINELLI

While hunting through CDs at music shops in his former Sunset Park, Brooklyn neighborhood, Jace Clayton ’97 (a.k.a. DJ /rupture) came upon live recordings of cumbia sonidera, a Mexican offshoot of a Colombian dance genre. The style is the mainspring for parties at Latin nightclubs and quinceañeras (coming-of-age celebrations for girls) across New York City’s outer boroughs. The ballads feature square, steady rhythms and melodies voiced by accordion, trumpets, and their synthesized counterparts, but the DJs for these events are always the most ear-catching element: they constantly talk over the music.

“I thought it was nuts,” says Clayton, who also speaks Spanish fluently. “They’re relaying shout-outs from the audience that they receive via text message, Facebook, and scrawled notes. Sometimes those messages are to people in the room, but often they’re to friends and family back home across the border in Mexico or in Los Angeles”—loved ones who will generally be gifted with a CD of the event. “It’s a highly mediated way of telling someone, ‘Hey, I’m thinking of you. You’re not here, but you’re present in the music,’” he explains. And, as he also points out, it’s a medium that allows Mexican immigrants in the United States to get visibility on their own terms, whether they’re documented or not. Cumbia sonidera is just the sort of underground musical phenomenon—organically influenced by social networks and their access to technology—that attracts Clayton, a D.J., poet, journalist, and experimental composer, and that features prominently in his debut book, Uproot: Travels in 21st-Century Music and Digital Culture (FSG Originals, 2016); a selection of audio and video clips discussed are listed at http://uprootbook.com/listening-guide. Equal parts reportage, travelogue, and ethnography, Uproot was fed by Clayton’s global travels as a D.J., and his vast knowledge of styles and repertoire. Dubbed “the jet-lag king” by his wife, the East Harlem-based Clayton has plied his trade in settings as disparate as an abandoned hotel in North Cyprus, a Barcelona squat, an art gallery in Osaka, and the occasional corporate party. His art accommodates a cross-section of humanity, and allows his perspectives, and therefore his book, to leapfrog among the music of varying social strata, whether created by the Congolese street musicians Orchestre Tout Puissant Likembe Konono Nº1 or international dance superstar Moby.

Uproot explores some of the massive musical shifts prompted by new technology...