

Book Review

Brooke Manville and Josiah Ober: *The Civic Bargain: How Democracies Survive* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp. vii, 299.)

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The recent history of democracy around the world has not been an especially hopeful one. Enthusiasm for, and commitment to, democratic rule has waned since the heady decades immediately following the end of the Cold War. As events such as the enduring strength of Donald Trump and the movement he inspired and Narendra Modi's ascent to political dominance indicate, representative government is now vulnerable even in the largest electoral democracies in the world. According to recent estimates, less than fifteen percent of the world's population resides in liberal democratic polities, aligning with a "third wave" of autocratization that has swept the globe (V-Dem Institute, *Democratization Report 2022* [University of Gothenburg, 2022], https://v-dem.net/documents/19/dr_2022_ipyOpLP.pdf; Anna Luhrmann and Staffan Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here," *Democratization* 26 [2019]: 1095–113). These recent developments have understandably sparked serious concerns about the future of representative government as we know it. There is a palpable sense of despair—indeed, an acute feeling of *crisis*—among very many of democracy's supporters.

In this marvelous new book, Brook Manville and Josiah Ober seek to raise the pall of doom and gloom that has descended on democracy's defenders. Democracy, they emphasize, is a resilient and robust system of government that has prevailed over many challenges in the past. Manville and Ober's narrative is guided by two main purposes. The first is to offer a normative defense of democracy, identifying what it means as well as providing an account of its value. The second is to discuss a few historical cases of democratic resilience, identifying the lessons that contemporary defenders of democracy can glean from their experiences. "History can help us explain how democracy survives, and what citizens do to keep it alive" (50). Democracy, Manville and Ober wish to demonstrate, is both worth rescuing and capable of being rescued. This book is highly recommended reading for scholars and citizens concerned about the health of democracy today.

Democracy, for Manville and Ober, is equivalent to rule without a permanent master or boss: "in its most basic sense ... democracy means 'no boss'" (13). Crucial to democracy's survival as bossless rule, they assert, is the willingness of those who live in democracies to strike a civic bargain with one another, which involves their willingness to abide by certain rules and norms and to

make sacrifices to ensure that they can remain self-governing, masterless citizens. When citizens keep their civic bargain with one another, Manville and Ober note, democracy thrives—which, in turn, contributes significantly to citizens' individual flourishing and thriving as well. This, then, is the significance of democracy on their account. Democratic rule, they argue, "is desirable as an end in itself because the 'gets' are great, ethically as well as materially. Free, equal, dignified citizens live lives that are, all things being equal, better than the alternative" (16).

Manville and Ober's analysis of the value of democracy is compelling. Their discussion of historical case studies is brilliant, and the lessons they draw from the past experience of democratic rule are largely convincing. They are surely correct in maintaining that democracy can survive only if citizens are willing to make sacrifices and display certain civic and political virtues. I wonder, however, whether the list of conditions that they identify as the components of the civic bargain is *sufficient* for the purpose of protecting democracy and enabling it to further the goals that they accord it. This is because Manville and Ober seem not to pay sufficient attention to the issue of *economic inequality*, and the threat that it often poses to the civic bargain and the long-term survival of democracy.

The relationship between economic inequality and democratic and republican self-government has, of course, been a core concern of political theory. Theorists have long argued that the existence of huge asymmetries of wealth threatens popular rule, for a variety of reasons. For some, economic inequality fuels a desire on the part of the affluent to preserve their wealth. This desire, in turn, can lead the affluent to turn against democracy when the common good demands the expropriation of their wealth. Others have raised concerns that the wealthy can use the resources at their disposal to purchase the loyalty of ordinary citizens, thereby undermining their commitment to the common good. Yet others go in a different direction: instead of drawing the nonwealthy closer to the affluent, massive disparities in wealth, they argue, can break the social concord by weaponizing class resentment, turning citizens from different social backgrounds against one another. If these arguments are correct, economic inequality would threaten the stability of Manville and Ober's civic bargain.

Concerns such as these often led theorists in the historical republican tradition to argue that protecting self-government requires the elimination of massive inequalities in wealth. Thus Machiavelli, to take just one well-known example, exhorted republics to "keep the public treasury rich but their citizens poor" if they wished to survive (Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses on Livy*, trans. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella [Oxford University Press, 1997], 100; see also John McCormick, *Reading Machiavelli* [Princeton University Press, 2018], chap. 2). There has been also a veritable explosion, in recent years, of scholarship that relies on this critique of economic inequality to raise serious concerns about the health of contemporary democracy (e.g., John McCormick, *Machiavellian Democracy* [Cambridge University Press, 2012];

James Fishkin and William Forbath, *The Anti-oligarchy Constitution* [Harvard University Press, 2022]; and Camila Vergara, *Systemic Corruption* [Cambridge University Press, 2022]).

Manville and Ober do not ignore economic inequality entirely in their book. For example, they point out at some length that excessive wealth was a contributory factor in the collapse of the Roman Republic (chap. 3). Wealthy elites seem to be a contingent problem for self-government on their account, however, imperiling democracy in some historical contexts but not in others. They do not appear to treat massive asymmetries in wealth as an *existential* threat to democracy and the civic bargain. This is further evidenced by a lack of any mention of reducing wealth inequality in their list of conditions that they identify as constituting the civic bargain. While Manville and Ober insist that political equality and universal suffrage are constituent elements of the civic bargain (20–22), they do not recognize that norms and rules instituted to protect political equality—and hence, democracy itself—may fail in the face of pervasive disparities in wealth (see also Jeffrey Green, “Liberalism and the Problem of Plutocracy,” *Constellations* 23 [2016]: 84–95). Pertinently, massive disparities in wealth are *not* among the “obstacles to democratic renewal” that they identify as threatening the civic bargain in the United States at present (225–27).

The concern with Manville and Ober’s otherwise entirely convincing argument is thus the following. If economic inequality is a threat to the survival of democracy—a proposition that they do not contest in their book—then their failure to include the eradication of profound asymmetries in wealth as among the constituent elements of the civic bargain renders their analysis *incomplete*. Their diagnosis of what allows democracies to survive and of what is required to protect contemporary democratic regimes against corruption and decay might not be wholly adequate as a result.

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