

Response to Sofia Näsström's Review of *Democracy Rules: Liberty, Equality, Uncertainty*

doi:10.1017/S1537592722000664

— Jan-Werner Müller

Sofia Näsström is right: an exclusive focus on the critical infrastructure of democracy—political parties, and professional news organizations—is far too constricted or, as she also puts it, conservative. An endnote buried in *Democracy Rules* suggests that plenty of other institutions—trade unions, for instance—also matter a great deal, but I failed to make that point clear in the book's main part. So, I agree that revitalizing democracy (and remaining faithful to its spirit, as so clearly articulated in Näsström's book) does not happen in a vacuum.

I would maintain, however, that parties and professional news organizations, although not sufficient for democracy, remain absolutely necessary. What also remains necessary is a widely shared recognition that conflict, rather than always posing a danger to democracy as those singing paeans to “overcoming our divisions” claim, can ultimately create cohesion. But not just any conflict has this effect. Conflict has to remain within two borders— which, I hasten to add, is not to suggest that political theorists should be thought of as a kind of normative border police; there are plenty of other things that theory can and should do, including serving as arguments for transgressions in other contexts: just think of democratic disobedience.

So which borders? First, one must not deny the standing of others engaged in a conflict; if one does, surely one cannot truly recognize them as adversarial partners to the conflict. For those who claim uniquely to speak in the name of a “real people,” for instance, the other side should not really be here in the first place or is, at best, a group of second-rate citizens. Second, some minimal respect for facts is required. Of course, the notion of facts is hardly uncontested. But Hannah Arendt's basic point about facts and opinions remains crucial. Again, if we have absolutely no shared understanding of facts of the matter, one cannot recognize the other side as any kind of partner: there is just nothing to talk about.

This framing also leads me to reorient debates on democracy away from an image that Näsström employs in her generous comments (but with which my book does not operate): the center versus extremism. The notion of a center is not always meaningless or a cover for opportunism, but the equation of “being democratic” with “being centrist” is a mistake. Centristism has no lasting substantive content, and one surely can be “extremist” in policy without in any sense being anti-democratic. Centristism might either be positional (placing oneself between real or presumed extremes) or procedural (an imperative to work with the other side in systems characterized by

intricate checks and balances, and hence in need of some cooperation “across the aisle”). However, such notions lose all plausibility when, let's say, one party in a two-party system to a significant degree turns against democracy itself; for instance, by not recognizing election losses. In that case, positional or even procedural centristism might become complicit in the destruction of democracy itself (which is why invocations of centristism in the United States today ring hollow). So, although I share the concern articulated with Yeats's and Didion's and Näsström's various riffs on the center maybe not holding, I do not think the notion of the center is helpful for understanding our moment and for acting in it.

The Spirit of Democracy: Corruption, Disintegration, Renewal. By Sofia Näsström. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 336p. \$100.00 cloth.

doi:10.1017/S1537592722001177

— Jan-Werner Müller, *Princeton University*
jmueller@princeton.edu

Sofia Näsström's book, though in parts a bit inconclusive, constitutes an important contribution to democratic theory. Creatively drawing on concepts and arguments from Montesquieu and Hannah Arendt, she provides a new perspective on what is now routinely referred to as “the crisis of democracy.” Crises, she claims, are neither unusual nor unsurmountable for democracies; what truly threatens them is the corruption of their underlying principles—and the principle of democracy is emancipation. This framing is helpful in reconsidering both the meaning of institutions conventionally deemed crucial for democracy, such as free and fair elections, and controversial questions such as the extent of social rights necessary to sustain democracy. It is less helpful, however, in providing real answers to a challenge that Näsström, somewhat to the detriment of the overall coherence of the book, also makes central: the issue of how to identify “the people” in a democracy.

Näsström begins with a fundamental reframing of democratic theory. Our primary concern should not be what she calls “Rousseau's trap:” the identification of democracy with popular sovereignty. Instead, we should remember Montesquieu's insight that different regimes exhibit different “spirits.” A “spirit” is composed of an account of a regime's particular “nature” (answering the questions of who governs and how) and a particular principle, which Näsström glosses as “the public commitment” needed to “set a political form in motion” (p. 4). As she puts it nicely, rather than merely examining institutional blueprints and the outer boundaries of a polity, we should try to “listen to the inner heartbeat” (p. 4) of a given political life form.