



ADVANCE SHEET – January 31, 2025

President's Letter

We here append a book review by the British academic John Gray which has not lost its timeliness.

George W. Liebmann



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MAKING DEMOCRACY WORK

Civic Traditions in Modern Italy.

By Robert D. Putnam.

258 pp. Princeton, N.J.:

Princeton University Press.

Cloth, \$35. Paper, \$14.95.

By John Gray

ONE of the many ironies of the Soviet collapse is its unsettling impact on the Western democracies. Deprived of the easy certainties of the cold war, they have entered the post-Communist period less confident about their basic institutions and values than at any time since the end of World War II.

In the countries of continental Europe, there is deep popular estrangement from established political elites; and antiliberal movements, often harking back, implicitly or explicitly, to interwar fascism, enjoy levels of electoral support not seen since the 1930's. In the United States the end of the cold war has intensified a mood of political cynicism. American public opinion expects little from its democratic institutions, and if the experience of the last decade or so is any guide, even its most modest expectations are likely to be disappointed.

When government has been activist, as during the Reagan Presidency — which inaugurated a grand experiment in mass incarceration as its principal response to urban problems — it has failed comprehensively. At present, despite an incarceration rate five times that of the United Kingdom and 14 times

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John Gray is a fellow of Jesus College, Oxford University, and the author of "Beyond the New Right."

Does Democracy Have a Future?

Continued from page 1

that of Japan, the United States has a level of criminal violence unrivaled in any advanced country, except perhaps that found in the near-anarchy of post-Communist Russia — with nearly 2,000 people murdered in New York City in 1993 alone, compared with just over 3,000 in Northern Ireland during the entire quarter-century since civil order broke down there in 1969. Given the inability of government in the United States to protect citizens from even the most basic forms of insecurity, is there not a danger that democracy in America will wither into insignificance, as citizens retreat from any kind of civic engagement?

THIS question is suggested by three distinguished new studies of the theory and practice of democratic government. In Jean Bethke Elshtain's wise, humane and profoundly reflective "Democracy on Trial," the recent weakness of democratic institutions in America is explained by the erosion of the civic dimension of rights. According to Ms. Elshtain, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Ethics at the University of Chicago, rights of the kind originally affirmed in the Bill of Rights were understood as immunities — guarantees against government intrusion — that belonged to civic beings, to men and women rooted in a network of familial and communal relationships that made up civil society. This civic notion of rights has now been displaced by the idea of rights as the entitlements of individuals freed of "any and all ties of reciprocal obligation and mutual interdependence."

The idea of rights-based individualism is expressed by conservatives in the conception of the free market as the embodiment of basic human freedoms, rather than as a useful tool for the achievement of human purposes. On the liberal left, individualist rights are found in what Ms. Elshtain calls "the politics of displacement": every issue in private life is interpreted as inherently political and every public issue is made an episode in the personal pursuit of identity. The ideology of women's victimization and the politics of gay identity are two examples.

Paradoxically, as Ms. Elshtain shows, the displacement of the private and the public realms by an uncompromisingly individualist conception of rights has led to a politics of group identity in the United States — and, as a consequence, to a further weakening of civic ties. With this hollowing out of

civic life goes the "end of conversation," the death of public discourse that occurs when politics becomes an encounter of warring identities, be they ethnic, sexual or religious, sharing no common interests or common ground. A question unanswered by Ms. Elshtain is how, or indeed whether, civic life can be renewed in a political culture in which individual choice and self-realization are the only undisputed values. If rights trump every other moral claim, what space is left for public discourse and the practice of politics? If every major issue of public policy is framed in the absolutist terms of unconditional rights, will not civic dialogue give way to political violence, as has occurred already in the murder of people working in abortion clinics in the United States?

In "The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy," Christopher Lasch develops a passionate, compelling and disturbing argument that the ills of democracy in the United States today arise from the default of its elites, and not — as a host of antidemocratic thinkers from Ortega y Gasset onward would have us suppose — from the revolt of the masses. Lasch contends that economic elites have abdicated responsibility for the communities that business exists to serve. At the same time, he argues, intellectual elites — in academic institutions and elsewhere — have undermined common cultural standards by propagating a skeptical or relativistic outlook that recognizes no limits on individual self-realization. Lasch's argument is wide-ranging, but central to it are the fracturing of communities by the elevation of choice and mobility as the highest values and the decay of civility wrought by the demise of public institutions of all sorts — from political parties to municipal parks — in which people meet and share a life in common.

Commenting on "the absence of institutions that promote general conversation across class lines," Lasch endorses Emerson — no stranger to the value of solitude, and not usually thought of as an admirer of cities — in the view that "conversation is the city's *raison d'être*." Lasch's (and Emerson's) praise for cities and their neighborhoods as public institutions in which class differences can be transcended, or offset, in an everyday discourse that city dwellers have in common, could hardly be more apposite at a time when life in the cities is being abandoned for self-segregation in the suburbs. The residential fragmentation of communi-

ties makes political discourse — in which different classes and communities discover what they have in common — all the harder to sustain. Lasch writes: “As neighborhood hangouts give way to suburban shopping malls, or, on the other hand, to private cocktail parties, the essentially political art of conversation is replaced by shoptalk or personal gossip.”

LASCH, who was a professor of history at the University of Rochester until his death last year, is refreshingly sharp in his criticism of the liberal view that institutions are enough to make democracy work, so that “democracy can dispense with civic virtue.” He is equally acid in his comments on globalization — the freedom of capital and labor to move across political boundaries, anywhere in the world, so beloved by free-market economists. This mobility, he observes, has contributed significantly to the decline of the middle class and its distinctive culture, in which a sense of historical continuity and of place were prominent features. Here Lasch touches lightly on a development that may prove of decisive importance for democracy in the United States and in other Western democracies — namely, the proletarianization, through rising debt, falling incomes and unrelenting job insecurity, of the traditional middle classes. The United States undoubtedly leads the field in

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replicating in a Western industrial economy the middle-class impotence that is an endemic feature of many third world countries in Latin America and elsewhere. The unspoken question that his argument suggests is: How will the United States avoid the political fate of Latin American countries, if, like many of those countries, it has an economy in which resources are concentrated in a dwindling elite, and the middle classes that were the social base of democracy are ruined, their old culture decimated and their lives racked by chronic insecurity?

The last of these three studies in democratic institutions is far more academic in orientation than the other two, and correspondingly much less easily accessible to the general reader. But it has profound implications for public understanding of what makes democracies flourish — or perish.

It is rare that one comes across a classic in political science, yet in Robert D. Putnam's "Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy" we undoubtedly have one. The fruit of more than 20 years of research on regional government in Italy in collaboration with Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nanetti, Mr. Putnam's seminal work addresses in a rigorously empirical way the central question of democratic theory: What makes democratic institutions stable and effective?

Reasoning from the very different histories of

relationships of family loyalty and patron-client dependency, of weak civic associations and mutual suspicion, has renewed itself for almost a millennium, up to the present day.

If the roots of successful regional government in northern Italy are in the communal republics of medieval times, the "feudal, fragmented, alienated and isolated" society of such southern regions as Calabria is no less immemorial. Mr. Putnam's findings strikingly corroborate the political theory of civic humanism, according to which strong and free government depends on a virtuous and public-spirited citizenry — on an undergirding civic community. They demonstrate the pervasive presence of the past in political life, and its corollary, the truth that well-designed institutions will not yield working democracy if they are not supported by the traditions of the underlying culture.

What lessons can be drawn from Mr. Putnam's study about the prospects for democracy today? One lesson noted by Mr. Putnam himself is that strong civic institutions are not the result of economic progress. Rather, prosperity seems in the case of northern Italy to be a consequence of free civic institutions, and poverty and economic stagnation in the case of southern Italy a product of the absence of such institutions. The social capital of trust and reciprocity that is invested in norms and networks of civic life may be a vital contributing factor not only to effective government but also to economic progress. (Against Mr. Putnam's account, it might be objected that northern Italy has long been a commercial and manufacturing economy, while the agricultural economy of southern Italy has held back the modernization of that region. This objection begs the vital question as to why economic development took off in the north but not in the south — a question that Mr. Putnam's book helps to answer.)

One crucial implication of "Making Democracy Work" is that feeble and corrupt government, operating against the background of a weak and uncivic society, tends not to foster the creation of wealth, but rather to renew poverty. Overmighty government may stifle economic initiative. But enfeebled and unrepresentative government kills it, or diverts it into corruption and criminality.

This may not, perhaps, be a universal truth; but it is directly relevant to the prospects of democracy in the United States today. The ruling American culture of liberal individualism treats communal attachments and civic engagement as optional extras on a fixed menu of individual choice and market exchange. It has generated extraordinary technological and economic vitality against a background of vast social dislocation, urban desolation and middle-class impoverishment. Now that the Soviet collapse has deprived the American Government of the legitimacy it borrowed from the cold war, it is difficult not to foresee a further weakening of the civic culture in the United States, whose eventual result can only be economic decline. In a worst-case scenario, we may even glimpse a sort of Colombianization of the United States, in which failing political institutions become increasingly marginal in an ungovernable, criminalized and endemically violent society.

Warning that the absence of civic traditions in the post-Communist countries may produce weak government and economic stagnation in them, Mr. Putnam remarks: "Palermo may represent the future of Moscow." Will it not be one of history's crueller surprises if Palermo represents the future of Washington more closely than the future of Moscow? □

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As far as monetary gifts are concerned, please think about us when you are making out your will. I am sure that many of you spent your formative years as young lawyers here at the Library. What better way to remember the Bar Library's role in helping make you the lawyer that you are than a bequest. Honoring your past by insuring the future of the Library: what an amazingly circle of life thing to do.



Speaking Of Nice

They say that with real estate there are three things that matter: location, location, location. Well, I am not sure that when throwing a party or having an event it is all that matters, but it is in fact, very important. If you are planning anything from a graduation or retirement party, to a wedding reception, or perhaps even the wedding itself, what better location than the Bar Library. I am not sure I have ever encountered anyone who has not been impressed by the Main Reading Room of the Library. It has been described as amongst the most impressive interior spaces in the City of Baltimore. If the event is for or involves a member of the legal profession, you need look no further: you have found the place. To discuss particulars call me at 410-727-0280.

Joe Bennett

***THE AGE OF BIDEN* by George Liebmann (Advt.)**

Published January 20, 2025

Amazon.com Paperback \$25.00; Kindle \$9.99

This is a collection of more than a hundred op-ed pieces and letters on public affairs written during the Biden administration, 2020-2024. It is followed by an appreciation of Jefferson's contribution to the American polity, unacknowledged in recent years. It is a sequel to a previous volume, *Vox Clamantis In Deserto* (2021) covering the four previous failed national administrations, those of Presidents Clinton, Bush (Jr.),

Obama, and Trump. ALSO AVAILABLE: VOX CLAMANTIS IN DESERTO, A collection of articles and book reviews 1995-2020, \$25 paperback, \$9.99 Kindle. My political stance is not one that commends itself to either of today's contending factions, since I dislike bellicosity, plutocracy, and permissiveness. Foreign policies that generate millions of refugees are not to be excused on the basis of limited American casualties, nor can I overlook the proletarianization of the American work force, including the professions, or the diminution of personal character and insecurity resulting from extreme permissiveness in morals, ultimately affecting the quality of our national leadership.

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What Are We Missing?

According to Christian tradition, as recorded in the Bible:

"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'What *business* do you have with Me, woman? My hour has not yet come.' His mother said to the servants, 'Whatever He tells you, do it.' ... This beginning of *His* signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and revealed His glory; and His disciples believed in Him."

To be honest, I have never been able to see the revelation of glory, but rather something that many semi-competent magicians might be capable of doing. My wife and I once saw David Copperfield in person, and although magical, it really did not feel divine. Although what Jesus did that day was in fact a miracle and not a party trick, His best work lay ahead. I suppose it is rather arrogant of me to rate the miracles of Christ – sorry.

What I take away from the story of what happened at Cana that day was not the glory of Jesus, but rather His humanity. Frequently we concentrate on one thing to the exclusion of all other matters. Jesus tells his mother it's not time yet, and after whatever it is that she might have said to Him (we can only imagine), He does what she asked of Him. He is here on Earth for some fairly important business, and has a schedule for doing it, but when His mother says this is what you need to do, that is what He does. He is God, He is a man, and like so many of us, when your mother tells you to do something, you do it. Clearly, He is one of us.

This of course brings us to the Bar Library. What we think of, perhaps what we see,

is an old fashioned institution residing inside the walls of a one hundred and twenty-five year old space and a one hundred and eighty-five year old history. How quaint. What we fail to see is what the Library is and what it has to offer. It has the collections, the databases, the space and the services that you need to move your case or legal matter forward and to accomplish whatever it is that is in front of you in an efficient and cost effective manner. Do not miss seeing what is there by preoccupation with peripheral matters. Think it through and you will see that the Library is for you.

I look forward to seeing you soon.

Joe Bennett

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