Philosophical Inquiry in Education

Strong Democracy in Crisis: Promise or Peril? (Trevor Norris)

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Review of

Strong Democracy in Crisis: Promise or Peril?

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An Ode to Benjamin Barber and Strong Democracy

Trevor Norris's edited volume *Strong Democracy in Crisis: Promise or Peril?* is a collection of critical essays that extends Benjamin Barber's work on strong democracy into the complex terrain of contemporary democratic theory. Barber is best known for his 1984 book *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age,* but this is not to say his scholarship ends here; Barber has devoted his life to prefacing, re-framing, and re-imagining what it might mean to generate democratic communities. Serving a dual purpose, this text is also a *Festschrift* of sorts: each essay honors Barber's friendship by taking up his characteristic hope that the future will be paved with more decency and democracy. Collectively, the twelve essays in *Strong Democracy in Crisis* marshal three sets of concerns regarding the realization of strong democracy: 1) the very possibility of practicing strong democracy; 2) the influence of Barber's Rousseauian outlook on the desirability of Barber's political vision; and 3) the plausibility of enacting strong democracy in the increasingly commercial and globalized world. The text also features three disciplinary interludes that collectively problematize the practice of making political theory. After summarizing the key points of each chapter, I will highlight a few gaps in the volume's presentation of democratic crises. In calling attention to these gaps, my intent is to point toward openings for continued scholarship on the possibility and plausibility of strong democracy.

Part I: Participating in Participatory Democracy

Jane Mansbridge and Audrey Latura, Carol Gilligan, and Seyla Benhabib, authors of Chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively, present essays that push against the possibility of participatory democracy. Mansbridge and Latura consider the contemporary polarization crisis, which is to say the crisis of not listening, in relation to Barber's concept of "strong democratic talk." Following Barber's proposals in *If Mayors Ruled the World*, Mansbridge and Latura go on to imagine a "chamber of listeners" who might serve as "political translators" and thereby enact a less divisive and stronger democratic future. In her essay, Gilligan argues that, even though the advent and maturity of feminism has allowed some to claim that

we've reached a point in history where democracy is psychology possible, moving beyond the binaries of gender (and race) is a radical shift that requires both a psychological and political change. In other words, because "democracy has been corrupted by the role patriarchy has been allowed to play in our politics," uncorrupting and subsequently realizing democracy presupposes a psychological but also political understanding of human relationality (p. 76). In Chapter 4, Benhabib shifts the focus from the possibility of speech to what is said when we speak. Benhabib focuses on the tension between the language of universal human rights and the modern nation state. She argues that this contradiction is overcome when citizens of nation states appropriate the language of human rights to push against nation-bounded practices of democratic citizenship and become new political actors and public builders of a global cosmopolis.

Disciplinary Interludes: The Practice of Making Political Theory

In Chapter 5, Patrick Deneen circles back to Barber's first published work, *The Death of Communal Liberty,* to ask how, if at all, Barber's thinking on the problem of scale has evolved. Deneen rightly notes that Barber has always been more than an armchair democratic theorist—often including in his work chapters on the practical implications of his theories, and over the years reflecting, refining, and retooling his theory of strong democracy within the context of contemporary practice. Deneen's chapter is, thus, both a reflection on the evolution of Barber's thought as well as an invitation to consider how Barber has "'translated' his original concern with the local Swiss Canton by reimagining the proper setting for democracy" (p. 95). Deneen's goal is to highlight Barber's personal evolution, but in so doing he also puts Barber's orientation to democracy and education on display. Democracy, for Barber, is a mode of living one continuously works toward by engaging in public talk, public service, and public action; it is how one translates and reimagines the project of associated living.

Chapters 6 and 10 take up the political theory that contextualizes Barber's strong democracy. In Chapter 6, Lord Bhikhu Parekh reminds us that there is an important difference between the liberal and democratic vision of politics and proposes a reconstituted form of politics situated on three pillars: liberalism, democracy, and pluralism. Later, in Chapter 10, Charles Butterworth effectively takes the reader outside of the standard Western names and traditions of democratic theory and to the Arabic world of political philosophy. Once there, Butterworth reminds the reader that political theory is as much about how to organize society as it is about who rules and why.

Part II: Barber's Rousseau

It is no secret that Rousseau is Barber's most frequent philosophical interlocutor. As Robbie McClintock sees it, Barber's deep affinity for Rousseau presents a broad-spectrum educational question: Who is an educator and what do they do? In McClintock's parlance, when someone has real power as an educator, they influence both the "educatee's" stock of ideas and their agentic becoming (p. 129). In this scenario, Barber is the educatee, and Rousseau the educator. Rousseau leads Barber to the Swiss Canton, yet upon Barber's departure, Rousseau materially appears in the pages of Barber's texts just as often as he remains an "invisible presence" (p. 133). Insofar as the recursive conversation

between educator and educatee is evidence of an educational encounter, it is also how we come to know both the educatee and the work of the educator.

In Chapter 8, Tracy Strong asks whether Rousseau provides a better solution for the problem of representation than Barber. Strong points out that both Rousseau and Barber draw our attention to the ways in which representation decouples participation from democracy and that Rousseau finds a place for legitimate representation at the juncture of music and language, where mutual judgment and emotion facilitates the creation of social bonds. Kim Sungmoon also seeks to understand Barber's Rousseau, but in this case Sungmoon recovers Barber from his critics who have conflated Rousseau's civic totalism with Barber's vision. In Chapter 9, Sungmoon re-articulates Barber's political realism within the confines of his democratic faith to argue that Barber's strong democracy is sustained by the moral imperative of democratic pluralism and not Rousseauian civic totalism.

Part III: The Global Future

Rounding out the text are two chapters that jointly ask how strong democracy will fare in a media-obsessed and increasingly globalized world. Claire Snyder-Hall keys in on Barber's contention that strong democracy requires a "civil" civic culture and charges the anti-civil culture promoted by commercial, popular television with the potential to destroy the possibility of democratic self-government. In Chapter 12, Manfred Steger credits Barber with pushing the taken-for-granted disciplinary boundaries that cordon off political theory from its practical and global significance.

Finally, to end at the beginning, Barber himself pens the first chapter and takes the opportunity to walk readers of his 1984 *Strong Democracy* through the thirty-plus years of historical change, democratic evolution, and his intellectual labor that led to his latest work, *If Mayors Ruled the World*. In that book, as summarized in his opening chapter, Barber argues that strong democracy becomes possible, again, in a world without borders where the practice of citizenship finds fertile ground in "glocal" civic cooperation. Barber goes so far as to describe *If Mayors Ruled the World* as a campaign to renew democracy. Never one to reside in his armchair, as Deneen notes, Barber goes on to sketch in "concrete and practical terms" just what a "Global Parliament of Mayors" could accomplish given its roots in the universal human rights claims of a "Declaration of the Rights of the City and the Citizens" (p. 23–29). Barber's renewed mission is to, once again, achieve the substance of democracy by moving beyond the ideation of the nation state, where violence and thin democracy prevail, and onto glocal institutions that can instantiate a cosmopolis of cooperating international cities and participatory communities.

Thinking Through the Gaps

The strength of *Strong Democracy in Crisis* is its breadth—as Norris says, "reading this book is akin to taking a course in the pluralistic analysis and critique of emerging democratic potentials" (p. 3). As such, anyone interested in democratic theory will find this volume valuable. Additionally, I find that two of the volume's most intellectually interesting essays—the chapters by Gilligan and McClintock—raise challenging questions for philosophers of education. Gilligan asks her readers to consider what a

democracy premised on patriarchy teaches its citizens about their voice, while McClintock reminds us that understanding the work of educators is a vital component of education in and for strong democracy.

The breadth of *Strong Democracy in Crisis* is also its weakness. Outside of Barber's quick gloss on the international emergence of democracy and subsequent revolutions over the last thirty years, none of the volume's contributors explicitly deal with the crisis of violence. Whether it be the violence of racism, international terrorism, or gun violence, violent pathologies remain a persistent obstacle on the road to enacting strong democracy. Additionally, there are only a few theoretical nods to the twin crises of migration and immigration. Migration, while not a new crisis, has surely become one of extraordinary contemporary importance, as "Europe faces the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War, with 1 million people applying for asylum in 2015" (Migration Policy Institute, 2016). Further, one would be remiss not to mention the crisis of global warming. These are but a few pressing contemporary problems that both affect and are affected by the global change in governance, omissions all the more noticeable given Barber's own bent toward figuring out how the theories he proposes can be worked out in practice. Nonetheless, these gaps are merely that. They present openings to be filled in by thoughtful scholars who are eager to extend the conversations started here, and do not detract from the excellent collection of essays that make up *Strong Democracy in Crisis*.

Each essay is responding to the question: Do crises spell promise or peril for strong democracy? The crises of citizenship, the problems of scale, of representation, of modernity and globalization are perennial crises for strong democracy. In fact, Barber himself opens the volume by introducing the reader to the problem at hand:

> Democracy is in crisis. Again. But democracy is always in crisis.… This is hardly surprising since democracy is in large part the struggle for democracy. Any conceit that it has been realized, finalized or permanently institutionalized, is itself a sign of its failure. (p. 15)

Despite the admission that crises are both intrinsic to and necessary for democracy, Barber concedes that those facing democracy today are a "more daunting problem—a function of the changed world in which political regimes operate today" (p. 17–18). Thus, the question is more accurately stated as: Which crises reveal democratic creativity and generative community-making and which promise failure?

Together, Norris's introduction, the volume's cover art, and the fact that this volume began as a *Festschrift* might hint at an answer. In his introduction, Norris reminds the reader that democracy is a site of struggle, hard practice, and invention. Nevertheless, given its difficult practice and messy nature, Norris admits that "the rough terrain of democracy has become an emotional battlefield, and it remains unclear whether that will help or hinder democracy" (p. 2). The text's cover art features an image of a dandelion, a weed by most accounts, growing through asphalt. To my mind, the image is a nod to the hard practice and struggle strong democracy faces as it aims to overcome the local, historically-situated habits that pave over the soil of civil cooperation. As I see it, if strong democracy is to emerge, it will demand growth in spite of it, but also a strong root system. Thus, it is worth noting that the emergence of democratic creativity in spite of contemporary crises as well as the emotional ability to keep slugging through the disciplinary, social, political, and historical barriers to achieving strong democracy often depends on charitable friendship with differently-situated others.

References

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