

DEMOCRACY AND ITS NIGHTMARES

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Gutmann, Amy, and Dennis Thompson. *Democracy and Disagreement*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1996

Ankersmit, F. R. *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996

FROM THE BEGINNING, democracy has confronted a recurring nightmare. In order to identify and pursue worthwhile collective goals, concerted, coherent, and purposive social action is necessary. But what if this invariably involves a higher degree of social control, discipline, and hierarchy than any recognizably democratic social ideal could ever tolerate? Plato was perhaps the first to canvas this possibility. If he is right, the circumstances of human life render self-defeating (and hence irrational) the democratic aspiration to empower and improve society by liberating it.

Most of the historical and contemporary contributions to what we today call “democratic theory” can plausibly be seen as attempts to confront, dispel, or cope with particular variants of this nightmare. Opponents of the Ancien Regime monarchies needed Rousseau to explain how citizens could collectively identify and pursue their own

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common good better than an enlightened despot who claimed to represent them; early Americans needed Madison to explain how democratic conflict could be exploited to combat rather than exacerbate the perceived instability of democratic self-rule; reluctant parliamentary reformers in nineteenth-century Britain needed Mill to explain how wider political participation might edify rather than corrupt public debate; cold warriors needed Schumpeter to redefine democracy so as to reconcile the democratic pretensions of the liberal nation-state with its systematically oligarchical reality.

Convincing or not, these contributions all presuppose some interlocutor who charges either that democratic attempts to secure important public benefits are typically self-defeating, or that non-self-defeating social action must be basically undemocratic. Historically, such charges haven't just reflected anti-democratic prejudice. This is presumably one reason why we are able to take the idea of democratic *theory* at all seriously: if there were nothing but unreasoned fear and prejudice fuelling the democratic nightmare, theoretical argumentation would hardly seem a necessary or appropriate response. Only reasoned challenges to democratic politics call for, or deserve, reasoned apologies.

The two works of democratic theory under consideration here confront, more or less explicitly, and with mixed success, contemporary variants of the democratic nightmare. This is harder to see in the case of Gutmann and Thompson's *Democracy and Disagreement*, because the authors decline to offer a systematic justification for the form of democracy that they recommend (7). Instead, the book engages a particular debate among proponents of democratic politics. As the authors conceive it, the participants in this debate all acknowledge the need to constrain democratic rule in various ways, but disagree about the form and location of the appropriate constraints. Gutmann and Thompson oppose those who would limit these constraints to either (a) a series of rules of a purely procedural nature, intended to ensure that the political process is fair and/or (b) a set of constitutionally defined and judicially enforced restrictions intended to ensure that certain fundamental social values are upheld (27-39).

Gutmann and Thompson don't deny the importance of these sorts of constraints, but rather want to embed them within a broader and in their view more basic set of democratic constraints (40). They formulate these broader constraints as a set of rules of moral argument to guide citizens' (not just judges' or academics' [4-5, 45]) deliberations about public policy. On their model, principles of "reciprocity," "publicity," and "accountability" structure the deliberations themselves, and determine what counts as an appropriate resolution, while the values of "basic liberty," "basic opportunity," and "fair opportunity" form the subject matter of the deliberation (348). According to Gutmann and Thompson, by observing these principles citizens can make up a "deliberative deficit" whose contemporary symptoms include "communicating by soundbite, competing by character assassination, and resolving political conflicts through self-seeking bargaining" (12).

A critic of democracy might reasonably regard these as chronic and perhaps decisive failings of representative democracy. However, Gutmann and Thompson aren't ready to give up on democracy, and they suggest that deliberative democracy will yield public decisions that are "more morally legitimate, public-spirited, mutually respectful, and self-correcting." As they concede, this "is more than democracy in America now offers most of its citizens most of the time" (51). The clear implication is that contemporary "soundbite" democracy typically produces morally questionable outcomes, undermines mutual respect and fellow-feeling among citizens, and fails adequately to correct its own mistakes. It is here that *Democracy and Disagreement* offers a response, albeit tentative, to a familiar contemporary variant of the democratic nightmare. Gutmann and Thompson want to convince us that their deliberative principles can inject (a currently often absent) moral coherence and rationality into the democratic process. By encouraging a sense of "collective moral purpose" (62), deliberative democracy can express "as complete a conception of the common good as is possible within a morally pluralistic society" (93).

Democracy and Disagreement does not set out to vindicate deliberative democracy against all-comers. Instead, Gutmann and Thompson aim simply to sketch the outlines and likely virtues of a new democratic model and to invite further reflection on its prospects. However, the idea that their recommended forms of deliberation can be expected to enhance democratic debate and decision-making is open to question.

By what standard do Gutmann and Thompson assess the quality of debate and decision for the purposes of developing their account of democratic deliberation? Throughout the book, they insist that the relevant test concerns the degree to which procedural, constitutional, and deliberative democracy can “resolve” moral disagreement. But why should this be the appropriate barometer of the relative merits of these three kinds of democracy? The answer suggested by Gutmann and Thompson in several passages is that all three conceptions accept the principle that political decisions ought to be justified on the basis of reasons that are acceptable to citizens bound by them (26, 39). I doubt that this is a sufficient answer. Gutmann and Thompson here mobilize a very vague principle of political legitimacy and authority accepted by a huge range of theories (democratic and nondemocratic). Plausible as it is as a general condition for legitimacy, it nevertheless leaves us well short of the demand that citizens publicly resolve their moral differences as far as possible.

Moreover, focusing exclusively on this aim surely reflects an oddly narrow view of the point of the democratic project. Far more natural criteria by which to judge the merits of different democratic forms might include the extent to which they: empower citizens, realize the value of self-government, curb the power of elites, make society more just, encourage worthwhile forms of life, etc. And why would realizing any of these less obliquely salient goals necessarily require citizens to aim as far as possible for public “resolutions” of their moral disagreements? Perhaps suitably empowered, self-governing, just, and worthwhile forms of life are ones in which most moral dis-

agreements are authoritatively settled without “minimizing rejection” (85) of views held by citizens. Setting aside cases in which moral disagreement threatens serious social dislocation or instability (which seem irrelevant to the proposed comparison between procedural, constitutional, and deliberative democracy), public moral reconciliation isn’t automatically self-justifying.

Gutmann and Thompson, of course, aren’t expecting citizens to reach comprehensive moral consensus on all disputed questions. Still, their form of deliberative democracy “imposes obligations on citizens to seek moral accommodation when their comprehensive conceptions differ” (39). But perhaps democrats, and particularly deliberative democrats, might reasonably view this obligation as a liability, not an asset. Could they not conclude that the perpetual imperative to “economize” on disagreement is likely to constipate the deliberative process? Or that sometimes a bit of healthy disrespect is a reasonable price to pay for a robust democratic discourse that realizes the value of self-government or strives with “collective moral purpose” to eliminate injustice? If so, such democrats could reasonably reject both Gutmann and Thompson’s model of deliberation and the criterion by which they favorably contrast it with procedural and constitutional democracy.

Suppose, however, we concede this point to Gutmann and Thompson. Could we then accept their argument that deliberative democracy promises to “resolve” moral disagreement more “satisfactorily” than its competitors? For this argument to be convincing, we would obviously need a fairly clear account of what makes some “resolutions” of moral disagreement more “satisfactory” than others. Unfortunately, Gutmann and Thompson leave this crucial issue fuzzy. At different points, they suggest that more “satisfactory resolutions” (44) are those that: increase the likelihood that citizens are able to respect each other (43, 51, 56, 80), increase the “justifiability” of outcomes (43), promote “moral learning” (93), are fairer (26, 52-3), are more likely to elicit citizens’ compliance and co-operation (41-2, 67), enhance civic virtue and public-spiritedness (42). These aren’t obviously equivalent or even compatible (perhaps more “justi-

fiable” outcomes express “disrespect” toward certain citizens’ reasonable points of view, and perhaps citizens won’t want to comply or co-operate with “fair” decisions). Given this, it is difficult to extract from *Democracy and Disagreement* clear reasons for thinking that deliberative “public reason” improves on other ways of resolving moral disagreement under democratic conditions.

There isn’t space here to examine this question in full, but one can appreciate some of the relevant issues by contrasting Gutmann and Thompson’s own view with an alternative way of addressing moral disagreement that they explicitly reject: the model of toleration. According to them, “toleration requires majorities to let minorities express their views in public and practice them in private” (61). As interpreted by Gutmann and Thompson, deliberative democracy goes beyond this in two ways. First, citizens are asked to resolve discursively, not merely express, their views in the public sphere. Second, deliberative democracy requires that citizens aim to respect, not merely tolerate, each others’ views: the deliberative goal of moral accommodation requires citizens to learn the difference between “respectable and merely tolerable differences of opinion” and adopt a “favorable attitude toward” those with whom they disagree (79, 93). Although Gutmann and Thompson aren’t clear on this point, it seems reasonable to suppose that the model of toleration affiliates most naturally with a constitutional conception of democracy. Certainly, one very obvious way of institutionalizing toleration is to impose firm constitutional restrictions on the rights of majorities to interfere in others’ ways of life. In any case, Gutmann and Thompson clearly oppose this way of dealing with moral disagreement: “mere toleration...locks into place the moral divisions in society and makes collective moral progress far more difficult” (62-3).

But is it obvious that this approach to moral disagreement is inferior to Gutmann and Thompson’s deliberative alternative? Suppose we concede to Gutmann and Thompson the claim that “resolutions” of moral disagreement are more “satisfactory” insofar as they promote greater mutual respect among citizens who disagree. Even judged by this standard, it seems to me an open question whether

deliberative democracy is a better way of coping with moral disagreement than the model of toleration. It is true that if “mutual respect” requires a strongly “favorable attitude” toward those with whom one disagrees or “collective acceptance of individual moral beliefs” (93), then the model of toleration doesn’t demand or expect citizens to display it in the context of political debate. But by itself this claim is hardly decisive. A defender of toleration can respond in several ways.

First, she might deny that Gutmann and Thompson can simply arrogate all desirable forms and elements of “respect” to their own view. “Respect” and “mutual respect” are vague terms that gesture toward a cluster of complex and underspecified moral claims and attitudes. Given this, it isn’t obvious that one who rejects deliberative democracy and opts instead for the model of toleration also rejects mutual respect. For example, in the current climate, I find it very hard not to regard the views of the NRA and of those who oppose strict gun control with contempt. Presumably, however, deliberative democracy would impose upon me an obligation to accommodate these views when I deliberate with my fellow citizens about gun control policy. But suppose I reject this requirement, and choose instead to express my intransigent views about the gun lobby within the looser terms of democratic debate implied by the model of toleration. Gutmann and Thompson might then accuse me of failing to be appropriately respectful toward those with whom I disagree. But to this I can reasonably reply that the model of toleration has its own account of “mutual respect.” While under the model of toleration I’m not required to affirm the respectability of the NRA’s *views*, I am obliged to respect the constitutional rights of the NRA to defend them, and those of other citizens to make up their own minds. This demands much less than deliberative accommodation, but upholding others’ constitutional rights does arguably express a kind of respect toward them. In the absence of some fuller argument for the claim that this constitutionally mediated kind of respect is insufficient, the vague concept of “mutual respect” can’t automatically serve as a tie-breaker between deliberative democracy and the constitution of toleration.

Second, while it is true that toleration doesn't *demand* that citizens strongly affirm the respectability of views they reject, or impose obligations upon citizens to reach binding accommodations through public deliberation, that doesn't mean that it prevents dissenting citizens from developing strong attitudes of mutual respect in other ways. All that it means is that we shouldn't necessarily expect public debate about social policy to foster appropriately respectful attitudes toward those with whom one is arguing. Sometimes, Gutmann and Thompson seem to imply that if citizens fail to develop attitudes of mutual respect in this context, there are no other venues or ways in which citizens might learn to respect each other's moral views. Thus they say that under the model of toleration, "[c]itizens go their separate ways, keeping their moral reasons to themselves, avoiding moral engagement" (62).

However, such claims are almost certainly exaggerated. Political debate that aims for an authoritative resolution of moral disagreement is only one arena within which I interact with my fellow citizens and can learn about their "moral reasons" and beliefs. Indeed, the proponent of democratic toleration might plausibly suggest that this is a particularly unsuitable arena for fostering attitudes of mutual respect. Perhaps the highly charged context of debate over public policy, in which entrenched social interests are playing for high political stakes, and where individuals often become psychologically invested in their positions, tends to exacerbate antagonism and contention. If so, it might turn out that the model of toleration actually indirectly promotes greater mutual respect, by encouraging deliberative encounters among dissenting citizens to take place in less polarizing environments.

These counterarguments may not be decisive, but I hope they suggest some of the issues that need to be addressed if Gutmann and Thompson's project is to be carried forward. It's worth noting that answering these questions would require at least some consideration of the practical viability of deliberative public reason. Although Gutmann and Thompson consider an impressive array of actual political disputes, they do so mainly to illustrate the moral content of

deliberative democracy, not to assess its viability empirically (7). Until the empirical preconditions for successful deliberative democracy are addressed, however, doubts of the sort canvassed here will remain.

This raises a final question about *Democracy and Disagreement*: how is it possible for Gutmann and Thompson to intervene in these actual debates and recognize appropriately “reciprocal” resolutions without actually directly consulting the participants, and in the absence of empirically informed assessments of how one might reasonably expect deliberations to proceed in practice? The answer to this question highlights a fundamental feature of their theory: ultimately, the standard of “justifiability” that deliberative democracy uses to determine whether an appropriate “resolution” has been reached is nonempirical. That is, it isn’t a question of what citizens *have accepted* or *likely would* actually accept, but of what they could, and should, accept if they think through the relevant issues in the appropriate fashion. Whether or not we agree with Gutmann and Thompson that the institutionalization of deliberative public reason would be a good thing, it is clear from their own discussion that one doesn’t need to institutionalize it in order to recognize the sorts of public policies it is likely to recommend. This is what allows Gutmann and Thompson to enter debates (about, for example, abortion, paternalism, affirmative action, and environmental protection) as hypothetical deliberative participants and identify resolutions that citizens should accept as binding. Gutmann and Thompson’s discussions of these and other cases form the most valuable parts of their book, and taken as direct theoretical analyses of the issues, they are always lucid and often thought-provoking. It would be an excellent thing if citizens deliberating about public policy could match the standard of argument set by the discussions of such issues in *Democracy and Disagreement*.

But what is necessary to make this possible? Again, Gutmann and Thompson draw back from systematically addressing this question. However, they make some telling remarks *en passant*. In one passage, they concede that certain “background conditions” must be met in order to prepare citizens for worthwhile deliberative partici-

pation, and they mention: “the level of political competence (how well informed they are), the distribution of resources (how equally situated they are), and the nature of political culture (what kinds of arguments are taken seriously)” (42). Later on, they discuss the kind of “civic education” that is necessary to sustain deliberative democracy: such education, they say “would teach children not only to respect human dignity but also to appreciate its role in sustaining political cooperation on terms that can be shared by morally motivated citizens” (66). These aren’t insignificant conditions, and realizing them might require considerable institutional reform. Gutmann and Thompson sometimes recognize this. For example, they say that cultivating the appropriate “moral character” is “likely to require some significant changes in traditional civics education” (359). How might civics education be re-organized so as to cultivate the appropriate kinds of civic virtue? Gutmann and Thompson say “it would be pedagogically self-defeating if schools were to teach this lesson dogmatically or through indoctrination. But they are not bound to remain neutral on a question that affects the nature of democracy itself” (66).

This tantalizing formulation raises difficult questions. What would “not remaining neutral” actually mean in practice? When schools punish students for cheating or stealing are they neither “remaining neutral” nor indoctrinating them about good moral behavior? If so, would the required civics education authorize the punishment of those who refuse to acknowledge “human dignity” and the values of deliberative civic virtue? When one asks such questions about this and all the other preconditions for deliberative democracy mentioned by Gutmann and Thompson, the democratic nightmare returns to haunt us. Even if a deliberative, civically virtuous, and mutually respectful polity is a worthwhile collective goal, it may be that achieving it would require forms of discipline and social control that are hard to reconcile with the freedom and equality that democrats characteristically prize.

It is difficult to imagine a work of democratic theory more antithetical to Gutmann and Thompson’s book than Ankersmit’s *Aesthetic*

Politics. Apart from the fact that he emphatically repudiates the tradition of Anglo-American analytical political theory within which Gutmann and Thompson operate, Ankersmit also explicitly rejects many of the assumptions that underlie their deliberative model. In contrast to their claim that moral and civic engagement are conditions for political accommodation, Ankersmit asserts that it “is only because we do not personally care about every problem confronting society and are indifferent to a large number of issues that political compromise is possible at all” (103). And unlike Gutmann and Thompson, Ankersmit believes that “political debate is positively antidialectic...[T]he argument of one’s opponent has to be rendered innocuous, shown [to be] not worthy of serious consideration” (106). Such claims illustrate the deliberately provocative and unconventional tone of this often dazzling, but profoundly muddled, book.

Ankersmit’s goal is to introduce and defend a form of “aesthetic” political philosophy. He believes that this is a necessary task because he thinks that almost all mainstream forms of political analysis remain mired in the bankrupt assumptions of what Richard Rorty and other so called “postmodern” writers call “the metaphysical tradition.” According to Ankersmit, we can fully escape the pervasive “neo-stoicism” of these modern modes of thought only by embracing completely his alternative “aesthetic” approach (119). Instead of trying to excavate foundational political truths, “postmodern aesthetic political theory” artfully reconstructs political reality in the manner of painters or composers (161). The chief intellectual resource on which this alternative kind of political understanding draws is the practice of historical interpretation, which Ankersmit also takes to be essentially aesthetic. This is one reason why the centerpiece of *Aesthetic Politics* is an extended meditation on the historical predicament of modern representative democracy (350). Ankersmit chooses to illustrate the *modus operandi* of aesthetic political philosophy by offering a challenging and marvelously erudite historical interpretation of representative democracy in Europe and America.

Ankersmit has an additional reason for using representative democracy as a testing ground for aesthetic political theory, and it is here

that the democratic nightmare again comes into view. He believes that contemporary democracy is in trouble: “we all know that there is something fundamentally wrong in the relationship between the citizen and the late twentieth-century democratic state that we all want to mend—but we simply do not know how to mobilize our collective will.” For Ankersmit, this situation is exemplified in the “unchecked reign of unintended consequences that is the major political problem of our age” (12). Though Ankersmit concedes that the problem of unintended consequences is a generic feature of human affairs (and compares it to Machiavelli’s *Fortuna*), he nevertheless believes that this problem has been greatly exacerbated in recent history. He cites environmental exploitation, overpopulation, and the self-defeating character of much modern welfare policy as examples of the failure of democratic states to control the forces they have deliberately unleashed (13, 220, 370). Such problems expose the debility of contemporary democratic government, and for Ankersmit the “greatest challenge for the future will be how to deal with this kind of problem without falling back into new forms of feudalism and autocracy” (152). Ankersmit thinks that contemporary political theory, still hopelessly snarled in the “inevitable fiascoes” of neostoicism, has been blind to the predicament of representative democracy and is unable to recommend appropriate responses. Only his own aestheticized political theory is up to the task of saving democracy from itself.

Why is traditional democratic theory ill-equipped to respond to, and indeed detect, this new variant of the democratic nightmare? Ankersmit’s answer is that neostoic metaphysics encouraged generations of theorists to construe democratic representation *mimetically*. On this view, the goal of democratic politics is for representative institutions to act in accordance with some putatively independent and objective entity like “the public interest” or the “will of the people.” But such a project presupposes that we can objectively measure the degree of correspondence between (say) the wishes of the represented and the actions of the representative, an assumption that cannot survive the postmodern assault on all notions of objective correspondence (38). In order to supersede this alleged confusion

we must understand democratic representation along aesthetic lines. Instead of aiming for photographically accurate depictions of that which they represent, aesthetic representations offer creative reconstructions that “substitute for reality” (45-51).

As should by now be clear, Ankersmit is a (high) priest of (high) postmodernism: he wants to do for postmodern democracy what Schoenberg did for chromaticism. *Aesthetic Politics* is the most substantial and ambitious contribution to democratic thought that “postmodern theory” has yet offered. As such, it affords a unique opportunity to assess the usefulness of postmodern paradigms for democratic theory. Unfortunately, Ankersmit’s attempt to marry democracy and postmodernism is deeply problematic.

To begin, why is it obviously useful to project debates about democratic representation onto the characteristic postmodern distinction between discourse that tries to “mirror” reality (the “metaphysical” tradition) and discourse that aims at aesthetic redescription? Even if we concede (for the sake of argument) the validity of the postmodern assault on traditional epistemology, it’s not clear that the point carries over unproblematically into the arena of democratic representation. Perhaps there is a rough analogy between the aspiration to reflect accurately some mind-independent reality and the attempt to disclose the real will or interest of the people for the purposes of impartial political representation. But there are several disanalogies that Ankersmit doesn’t adequately address.

One very basic disanalogy can be brought out in the following way. In the second context, the relevant standard of “impartiality” is a moral one, whereas in the first the operative criterion of “objectivity” refers to some nonmoral measure of accuracy or correspondence. Even if we accept the postmodern argument that no viable measure of correspondence is available for those seeking to cut nature at its joints, why would that show that *moral* impartiality is similarly problematic? Consider, for example, the case of a corrupt military regime that uses force and intimidation to maintain the rule of an unaccountable, self-serving cabal of oligarchs. The oligarchs and

their military associates claim to represent the best interests of the public, but actually they exploit their power to subsidize their own lavish lifestyle and to protect themselves against popular insurgency. Most of us would be inclined to say that this regime's claims to be genuinely representative are transparently spurious. Is it clear that when we do so, we automatically fall into naively mimetic understandings of representation, as Ankersmit suggests (38)?

I don't think so: when we indict this regime's unrepresentativeness, we aren't claiming that the regime is *inaccurately depicting* the interests of the citizens, or failing to *perceive objectively* the "will of the people." The problem is rather that the regime simply disregards any considerations other than its own partisan interest, and that this is *unfair*. The appropriate remedy for this would *not* be an optimally *accurate* representation of the public interest (whatever that might mean), but rather a regime in which the partisan interests of the current ruling elite don't enjoy an arbitrary and unjustified privilege. The issue here isn't accuracy, but *fairness*. This kind of representation is more or less "impartial" insofar as it gives due weight to all relevant social interests. It is this ethical standard of representation, or something close to it, that I take to be primarily relevant to democratic theory. But identifying this with the goal of reflecting "the people represented as accurately as possible" (28) seems to me to miss its point.

Ankersmit's determination to assimilate these two forms of representation results in a caricatured account of traditional theories of democracy. Ankersmit claims that on the traditional, nonaesthetic view, "the *identity* of the represented and the person representing is the ideal of all political representation" (28). In one sense, Ankersmit is right; democrats' characteristic (and in Ankersmit's eyes misplaced) enthusiasm for popular sovereignty and forms of direct democracy supports this assertion. But Ankersmit interprets this in a misleading way. It's not true that democrats have advocated narrowing the gap between representatives and represented because they aim for mimetic accuracy. Rather, they have argued that narrowing this gap increases the likelihood that citizens' interests and

points of view will be given a fair hearing, and guards against the possibility that certain social groups enjoy unjust privileges. Again, the argument centers on norms of justice and fairness, not standards of mimetic correspondence.

These points can be reinforced by reflecting on the practice of democratic representation. From the perspective of traditional democratic theory, it seems eccentric to think of democratic representatives, like senators or ministers of state, giving *descriptions* of their constituents and the citizens they represent in either mimetic or aesthetic terms. The relevant relations of representation are wholly different. They involve, for example, interpersonal practical relations of authority, delegation, accountability, and trust that just don't naturally map onto the model of intellectual reflection that is in play in the epistemological arguments that have made postmodernism famous. It's true that senators and other public officials need to "know" what their constituents want from, and expect of, them. But the activity of representation doesn't consist in *gathering* this information (38-9), but rather in being authorized to *act* upon it in various complicated, institutionally-specified ways.

Ankersmit's obsession with the slogans of postmodernism, then, cause him to beg all the important questions against ethical theories of democratic representation. But even if his criticisms of traditional democratic theory are misguided, it is still possible that Ankersmit's alternative analysis of democracy contains important insights. Does postmodern, aesthetic political theory provide valuable hints as to how representative democracy can survive and flourish in the "Age of Unintended Consequences"?

The key to Ankersmit's nonmimetic theory is the idea that representative democracy is essentially a device for controlling a particular kind of social conflict (123). According to Ankersmit, representative democracy originated as a way of negotiating an historically specific conflict between post-Enlightenment ideologies of tradition and revolutionary reform (137f). Democracy deals with this enduring legacy of the French revolution by channeling revolutionary and

reformist aspirations through the party political system. But this way of taming the revolutionary impulse requires maintaining a delicate balance, a “*juste milieu*,” between the state (which instinctively resists change and seeks to avoid conflict [110]) and elements of civil society (which seek in various ways to capture the state to further some reformist agenda [138]). But in the “Age of Unintended Consequences,” the state is constantly tempted to address macro-social problems (e.g., the degradation of the environment, welfare policy) in neofeudal or autocratic ways, and this threatens the equilibrium between state and civil society on which representative democracy depends (150-154, 194-211). This brief summary of Ankersmit’s characterization of modern democracy doesn’t do justice to the richness of his discussion. His account of the nature and historical predicament of representative institutions is largely independent of its problematic postmodernist setting, and it deserves to be taken seriously.

However, Ankersmit’s aesthetic *response* to this predicament is another matter. It’s not just that Ankersmit regards all ideals of direct democratic control and popular sovereignty as obsolete and delusive, though this will be bad enough for many democrats. There are deeper worries. For one thing, Ankersmit effectively concedes that problems like environmental degradation are more effectively dealt with autocratically than democratically (150-153). Again and again, Ankersmit calls for a stronger state, and he makes it clear that this is likely to require insulating complex policy arenas from direct democratic influence. It will be better for all of us if (for example) the environmental issue is dealt with by experts. This is not the sort of job for which representative democracy is best suited. What role then is left for aesthetic representation, and how will it help us to “mobilize our collective will”?

Ankersmit’s answer centers on the aesthetic category of “style.” The role of the democratic “stylist” is artfully and creatively to “represent” public policy to civil society (voters) (54). On this view, the state assumes the role of a canvas or “scene” (372), on which creative politicians paint (and thereby politically organize) an aestheti-

cally appealing portrait of how civil society's conflicting aims, fears, and desires are reconciled with each other and with public policy. Just as artistic "style" permits painters to produce compelling portraits, so political "style" enables the skilled politician to "organize political knowledge" (39) in a powerful and stabilizing way (157). As the picture is painted (and presumably endlessly repainted), the state assumes a "representation" that reflects civil society to itself (191). The institutions that facilitate this ongoing process are political parties, as they vie for the allegiance of voters and craft manifestoes and platforms (370). Ankersmit maintains that using the medium of party politics to effect this sort of aesthetic self-representation is a desirable substitute for the traditional but defunct democratic goal of self-government.

Such puns on the word "representation" are presumably the essence of aesthetic virtù, but what would aesthetic democracy actually look like? Ankersmit's proposal suggests a dualist view. The responsibility for addressing large-scale social problems will be left to a stronger, less accountable state (360), and its decisions will likely be made extrademocratically (151-152). Meanwhile, the party system (which Ankersmit regards as part of the state, a sort of ministry of ideological conflict resolution) will work on civil society's self image. Through skillful aesthetic redescription, citizens will be led to recognize themselves in the "representation" of the state disseminated by party political "stylists." On this view, citizens learn to see the state's actions as their own, but only in the "hyper-reality" of rhetorical self-representation (150, 210). It turns out, then, that for Ankersmit the democratic future lies not in increasing citizens' control of public policy, but rather in politicians like Ronald Reagan (Ankersmit's paradigm of the political "stylist" [158]) and institutions like advertising companies, already quite adept at using aesthetic techniques to reduce consumers' cognitive dissonance. But to see these agencies as the vanguard of democratic renewal strikes me as perverse. Today, while key political decisions affecting our livelihood and future are made in secret by unaccountable organizations like central banks, political parties seem obsessed with issues of political style ("spin") to the exclusion of substance. It is hard to see how

democrats could possibly be enthusiastic about these developments, but Ankersmit's theory implies that democrats should welcome and embrace them. If this is the best future for which friends of democracy can hope, who needs the democratic nightmare?

Democracy and Disagreement and *Aesthetic Politics* are both attempts to redeem the promise of democratic politics at a time when its recent successes around the world ring strangely hollow. But their diagnoses and proposed remedies move in opposite directions. Like many today, Ankersmit is tempted by the cut-price radicalism advertised by theorists of the "postmodern." This drives him to view such traditional democratic values as self-government and fair representation as useless relics of a now defunct "metaphysical tradition." Whether or not that tradition (if it really exists) is worth defending, I fail to see the utility of associating it with such perfectly reasonable social ideals as fair representation and self-government. The idea that these values are merely the idle daydreams of a certain foolish philosophical culture is an insult to those who have fought to realize them. Moreover, Ankersmit's aesthetic remedies seem less a solution than a surrender to the more problematic features of modern representative democracy.

By contrast, Gutmann and Thompson's work is both more compelling and more promising. But this is at least partly because it is difficult, perhaps impossible, for us to oppose wholeheartedly the idea that democracy should become more deliberative. The reason for this is that those attributes of which we humans are typically most proud (intelligence, forethought, consideration, magnanimity, fair-mindedness, detachment, etc.) are already built into our concept of deliberation. Gutmann and Thompson have made a useful start on reconciling these deliberative virtues with democratic ideals and procedures. But can their sort of deliberative democracy shift the burden of proof back onto the shoulders of those under the sway of the democratic nightmare? Is it likely that deliberative ideals and democratic practice can cooperate rather than endanger each other? Readers of *Democracy and Disagreement* will find that these remain open questions.