"Dragonslaying." Review of Democracy Defended, by G. Mackie

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REVIEWS

Dragonslaying

Don Herzog†


Early in the *Iliad,* the Achaians convene an assembly. There are a lot of them and they’re unruly, too. “[T]he place of their assembly was shaken, and the earth groaned / as the people took their positions and there was tumult. Nine heralds / shouting set about putting them in order, to make them cease their / clamour and listen to the kings beloved of Zeus.” Clutching the scepter that has come to him ultimately from Zeus, the very symbol of his right to speak and be heard, Agamemnon bitterly proposes that the Achaians give up. Nine years of struggle in vain against the Trojans have revealed that Zeus is adamantly opposed to their prevailing, even if he did once promise victory for Agamemnon. (The Greek gods were anything but trustworthy.)

Agamemnon’s words “stirred up the passion in the breast of all those / who were within that multitude and listened to his counsel.” Homer likens the audience to a wave stirred by the wind. They head to their ships and start preparing for the voyage home. But Athena whips Odysseus into action. He grabs the scepter and races around reproaching those on the retreat. “Whenever he encountered some king, or man of influence,” he would urge that “[i]t does not become you to be frightened like any / coward. Rather hold fast and check the rest of the people.” But “[w]hen he saw some man of the people who was shouting, / he would strike at him with his staff” and scold him: “Sit still and listen to what others tell you, / to those who are better men than you, you skulker and coward / and thing of no account

† Edson R. Sunderland Professor of Law and Professor of Political Science, University of Michigan. Thanks to Adrian Vermeule for talking me into doing this Review and for comments on an earlier draft.

2 Id book II, lines 142–43, at 80.
3 Id book II, lines 188–91, at 81.
whatever in battle or council. / Surely not all of us Achaians can be as kings here. / Lordship for many is no good thing."

If you've managed to miss the point, Homer underlines it in one of my absolute favorite episodes in literature. The assembly reconvenes and Thersites launches into a tirade: "This was the ugliest man who came beneath Ilion. He was / bandy-legged and went lame of one foot, with shoulders / stooped and drawn together over his chest, and above this / his skull went up to a point with the wool grown sparsely upon it." Achilles and Odysseus hate him—and now, "The Achaians / were furiously angry with him, their minds resentful." What's this baseborn clown doing daring to address the assembly and take on Agamemnon? You might think at least some of his charges and observations reasonable; I sure do. Agamemnon, he complains, gets "the choicest / women" whenever the troops win a victory. Does he want even more gold? or even more women? Thersites bitterly scorns his fellow soldiers as contemptible wimps: "you women, not men, of Achaia, / let us go back home in our ships, and leave this man here / by himself in Troy to mull his prizes of honour / that he may find out whether or not we others are helping him." (Shades of Schwarzenegger on girlie-men: so think about why political debate routinely features scurrilous gender talk. Hint: do not think about efficiency, even if that momentary abstinence is painful. Another hint: no, it's not because all of social life does.)

So what's the response from famously clever Odysseus? "Fluent orator though you be, Thersites, your words are / ill-considered. Stop, nor stand up alone against princes. / Out of all those who came beneath Ilion with Atreides / I assert there is no worse man than you are. Therefore / you shall not lift up your mouth to argue with princes."

Thersites has no standing to speak at the assembly. He should listen to his betters. Odysseus goes on to threaten him: try this stunt again, he sneers, and I'll strip you naked and beat you." This time, he generously leaves Thersites' clothes on but beats him anyway. In pain, frightened, Thersites sits down and cries. His fellow soldiers are sorry for him, but they vigorously approve. They even laugh.

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5 Id book II, lines 216–19, at 82.
6 Id book II, lines 222–23, at 82.
7 Id book II, lines 226–27, at 82.
8 Id book II, lines 235–38, at 82.
9 Id book II, lines 246–50, at 82.
10 Id book II, lines 258–64, at 83.
"Come now: Odysseus has done excellent things by thousands, bringing forward good counsels and ordering armed encounters; but now this is far the best thing he ever has accomplished among the Argives, to keep this thrower of words, this braggart out of assembly. Never again will his proud heart stir him up, to wrangle with the princes in words of revilement." \[^{11}\]

No agitators for democracy, these soldiers know their place and are happy in it. No egalitarian forum, their assembly is a place for instruction from their betters.

We should not dismiss this episode as another drubbing in a culture familiar with violence. In another ancient poem on the fall of Troy, Achilles grieves over the fallen body of the beautiful Amazon, Penthesileia. \[^{12}\] Thersites pounces, calling him a sex-obsessed wretch who can't keep his mind on the imperatives of war. Achilles suddenly slams him, hard enough to knock the teeth out of his head—and kill him. \[^{13}\] Once again, the troops approve. "Not good it is for baser men to rail / On kings,” they insist. \[^{14}\] Justice and destiny will punish offenders who dare speak audaciously against their betters. Their turning the world upside down violates the order of nature.

That hierarchical nature, through all its conceptual twists and turns, enjoys splendid longevity. For centuries, it's readily enlisted against dastardly egalitarians. Shakespeare assigns Odysseus (here Ulysses, the Latin form) a famous statement of the view in *Troilus and Cressida*.

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre

Observe degree, priority, and place,

Infixture, course, proportion, season, form,

Office and custom, in all line of order. . .

O when degree is shaked,

\[^{11}\] Id book II, lines 272–77, at 83.
\[^{12}\] Quintus Smyrnaeus, *The Fall of Troy* book I at 55 (William Heinemann 1913) (Arthur S. Way, trans) (originally written in Greek, fourth century A.D.) ("Achilles' very heart was wrung / With love's remorse to have slain a thing so sweet, / Who might have borne her home, his queenly bride, / To chariot-glory of Phthia; for she was / Flawless, a very daughter of the Gods, / Divinely tall, and most divinely fair.").
\[^{13}\] Id book I at 59–61 ("[T]he mighty heart / Of Peleus' son leapt into flame of wrath. / A sudden buffet of his resistless hand / Smote 'neath the railler's ear, and all his teeth / Were dashed to the earth.").
\[^{14}\] Id book I at 61.
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick. How could communities,
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenity and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
But by degree stand in authentic place?
Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows.  

Conservative pundits have quoted these lines endlessly, but I
doubt Shakespeare means to endorse them. I think he has more than
sneaking sympathies with, you guessed it, scabrous, offensive, leering,
sneering Thersites. Shakespeare has Ajax, a notorious strength hero of
the usual blockheaded variety, clobber Thersites five times in the same
scene. But still Thersites bounces back with maddeningly clever impu-
dence. “Thou sodden-witted lord,” he sneers, “thou hast in thy skull no
more brain than I have in mine elbows.” Agamemnon, he quips later,
“has not so much brain as ear wax.” Past this stylized contrast be-
tween Homer and Shakespeare, there is a serious and complex story
to be told—relax, not here—about the downfall of biceps and the tri-
umph of brains, a consoling tale for skinny-shouldered, high-
foreheaded male readers of journals like this one. Instead, though, I
want to remind you that hatred of democracy has to be the longest
running tradition in the history of political theory. Even when the
claims of biceps are flagging, plenty of jaundiced writers leap to assure
their readers that ordinary men and women are just too stupid to be
citizens, too dull to be active participants in political decisionmaking.
No, they must remain passive subjects.

There’s a lovely set piece in Sir Philip Sidney’s perennially popu-
lar and immensely influential Arcadia of 1590. A “mutinous multi-

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15 William Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida act I, scene 3, lines 85–88, 101–10, in 2 The
16 Shakespeare, Troilus and Cressida act II, scene 1, lines 44–45, at 757 (cited in note 15).
17 Id act V, scene 1, line 49, at 777.
18 For a review of some of the most thoroughly jaundiced, see Don Herzog, Poisoning the
19 Mervyn James, Society, Politics, and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England 387–88
(Cambridge 1986).
20 Sir Philip Sidney, The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner
1891) (H. Oskar Sommer, ed) (originally published 1590). I’ve modernized the spelling.
tude" and "unruly sort of clowns" start madly attacking. "Every one commanded, none obeyed, he only seemed chief Captain, that was most rageful."21 After the usual showers of blood, our heroine (actually, our cross-dressed hero, but that too is another tale) Zelmeane tells the crowd that their prince Basilius is in the nearby lodge. The prince has sent her with a simple message: choose someone, a representative, to bring your "griefs or demands."22 It's a time-honored gambit: shove aside the bold citizens and replace them with humbly petitioning subjects who will dutifully buckle under to gentle paternal authority.

The only problem is that the poor multitude can't even organize enough to articulate their complaints:

When they began to talk of their griefs, never Bees made such a confused humming: the town dwellers demanding putting down of imposts: the country fellows laying out of commons: some would have the Prince keep his Court in one place, some in another. All cried out to have new counselors: but when they should think of any new, they liked them as well as any other, that they could remember, especially they would have the treasure so looked unto, as that he should never need to take any more subsidies. At length they fell to direct contrarieties. For the Artisans, they would have corn & wine set at a lower price, and bound to be kept so still: the plowmen, vine-laborers, & farmers would none of that. The countrymen demanded that every man might be free in the chief towns: that could not the Burgesses like of. The peasants would have the Gentlemen destroyed, the Citizens (especially such as Cooks, Barbers, & those other that lived most on Gentlemen) would but have them reformed. And of each side were like divisions, one neighborhood beginning to find fault with another. But no confusion was greater then of particular men's likings and dislikings: one dispraising such a one, whom another praised, & demanding such a one to be punished, whom the other would have exalted. No less ado was there about choosing him, who should be their spokesman. The finer sort of Burgesses, as Merchants Apprentices, and Clothworkers, because of their riches, disdaining the baser occupations, & they because of their number as much disdaining them: all they scorning the countrymen's ignorance, & the countrymen suspecting as much their cunning.23

21 Id book 2, ch 25, ¶ 6, at 214.
22 Id book 2, ch 26, ¶ 2, at 217.
23 Id book 2, ch 26, ¶ 3, at 217–18.
Some of the language has drifted over the centuries. Those “Citizens” are city dwellers, not politically dignified agents holding the franchise. And the “Apprentices” who mysteriously qualify as of a finer sort are barristers of less than sixteen years’ standing. Diction aside, it’s enough of the passage to give you the central idea. Offered a chance, then, to tell the prince what has so upset them that they’ve taken up arms, the people babble incoherently. Intelligent they are not.

Why not? Sidney has different (not contradictory) ideas in play. There are objective conflicts of interest. Then the bizarre variety of desires, even whimsical impulses, makes it impossible for the multitude, famously the many-headed monster, to speak with one voice. (Compare Madison in Federalist No. 10: “The latent causes of faction are . . . sown in the nature of man.” People think differently; they even love disagreeing. “So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions, and excite their most violent conflicts.”

Psychology aside, though, “the most common and durable source of factions, has been the various and unequal distribution of property.” But Sidney is also flirting with the conjecture that ordinary folks are too stupid to be politically responsible: so his passing swipes at “butcherly eloquence,” “confused muttering,” and “the rugged wilderness of their imaginations.”

Plenty of others have been unequivocal, not flirtatious, on this hoary theme. In the seventeenth century, Thomas Pope Blount was caustically blasphemous in dismissing “[t]he numerous rabble” as not even human. True, they “seem to have the signatures of man in their faces,” but they are “brutes in their understanding . . . ”[T]his is by the favour of a metaphor we call them men, for at the best they are but Descartes’s automata, moving frames and figures of men, and have nothing but their outsides to justify their titles to rationality.”

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26 For an overview, see Christopher Hill, Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England ch 8 (Harvard 1975) (chronicling the antidemocratic ideas and disdain for “the masses” in sixteenth and seventeenth century English thought).
27 Federalist 10 (Madison), in The Federalist 56 (Wesleyan 1961) (Jacob E. Cooke, ed).
28 Id at 59.
29 Id.
32 Blount, A Natural History at 43–44 (cited in note 31).
venient, isn’t it? how human intelligence maps onto social class. (Did someone whisper The Bell Curve?33) It makes democratic debate too strenuous for the underlings. “In the disclosal of Opinion,” Coleridge maintained in 1795,

it is our duty to consider the character of those, to whom we address ourselves, their situations, and probable degree of knowledge. We should be bold in the avowal of political Truth among those only whose minds are susceptible of reasoning: and never to the multitude, who ignorant and needy must necessarily act from the impulse of inflamed Passions.34

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, ostensibly hardheaded social theorists revealed that democracy was impossible, anyway. The few would always rule, even in the face of universal suffrage. “[N]ever have the many, especially if they were poor and ignorant, ruled the few, especially if they were fairly rich and intelligent.”35 After all, “equality is contrary to the nature of things.”36 Notice the agility with which antidemocratic theory here skips merrily over a conceptual transition. For Sidney and Shakespeare (or at least for his Ulysses), “nature” was teleological, shot through with purposes, a critical standard. By the twentieth century, “nature” had become a giant causal mechanism, a realm of empirical phenomena subject to laws of necessity. No matter: equality was unnatural either way. The iron law of oligarchy dictated that all organizations, however egalitarian their aspirations, would for technical and psychological reasons hand over power to a small group of experts. New democrats would assail them—and succumb to the same oligarchic mechanisms in turn. “It is probable that this cruel game will continue without end.”37 Walter Lippmann drew on cognitive and social psychology to explain that the questions of politics were too remote to make any vivid impression in voters’ minds:

The amount of attention available is far too small for any scheme in which it was assumed that all the citizens of the nation would, after devoting themselves to the publications of all the intelligence bureaus, become alert, informed, and eager on the multi-

36 Id at 470.
tude of real questions that never do fit very well into any broad principle. . . . The purpose, then, is not to burden every citizen with expert opinions on all questions, but to push that burden away from him towards the responsible administrator.\textsuperscript{38}

In a less sententiously scientific vein, consider some of H.L. Mencken's delicious and incendiary one-liners: "Democracy is the art and science of running the circus from the monkey-cage." "Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard." "If $x$ is the population of the United States, and $y$ is the degree of imbecility of the average American, then democracy is the theory that $x \times y$ is less than $y$.\textsuperscript{39}"

Lest you think all this should be written off as so much crotchety right-wing nonsense, I report that the left has been happy to pitch in, for its own purposes and so with the predictable ideological modulations about structural exploitation. Take this unsigned comment from anarchist Emma Goldman's journal \textit{Mother Earth}, which I believe Alexander Berkman wrote shortly after emerging from his fourteen years in jail for the attempted murder of Henry Clay Frick:\textsuperscript{40}

Freemen! Listen to the clarion call! lay down the tools of your labor! rest from your weary toil! exercise your sacred prerogative! Vote!

It is true that it does not matter whether you vote or not, since the result will be precisely alike. The sensation of being eaten by Mr. Lion or Mr. Tiger is essentially the same; nevertheless, lucky freeman! you have your choice. Say which you will be eaten by! What! you would prefer to be devoured by a sheep? Fool! sheep do not eat sheep. What? you do not wish to be eaten? Oh, dear! how funny! as if that were the question!

Ho, freeman! come cast your votes! Oh, holy and precious privilege! Oh, marvel of the ages! the flock may choose by whom it shall be devoured! Which shall it be? Mr. Tiger or Mr. Lion?\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} H.L. Mencken, \textit{The Citizen and the State}, in H.L. Mencken, ed, \textit{A Mencken Chrestomathy} 621, 621–22 (Knopf 1949). For much more in the same vein, see H.L. Mencken, \textit{Notes on Democracy} (Knopf 1926).
\textsuperscript{40} Henry Clay Frick was the chairman of the Carnegie Steel Company during the famous Homestead Strike of 1892. He hired Pinkerton agents to break the strike, leading to the deaths of ten strikers. Berkman, an anarchist, decided to assassinate Frick in revenge. Remarkably, despite being shot twice and stabbed seven times (with a poisoned knife, no less), Frick was back at work in a week. For an account of the events, see Emma Goldman, 1 \textit{Living My Life} 96–98 (Knopf 1931).
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Observations and Comments}, Mother Earth 4, 5 (Nov 1906).
And there is always the ready recourse to false consciousness, the conviction that the people don't really know what's good for them, and the equally ready recourse to a vanguard elite to act against their expressed wishes but ostensibly on their behalf. (For the record, the first instance of "false consciousness" I know of is from Bentham of all people, who with his typical acuity says it's when a party "believes or imagines certain circumstances to subsist, which in truth do not subsist."

These invigorating comments are a tiny and more or less arbitrary sprinkling from the torrents of denunciations of democracy. We've already seen that antidemocratic theory was nimble enough to survive the transition to a mechanist view of nature. But, to continue the story in the same stylized way, especially in the twentieth century it faced a potentially devastating pincer attack. First, democracy stopped being a dirty word—for a long time people knew well enough to translate the Greek as "mob rule" and not our pathetically sanitized "rule of the people." Instead, democracy became all the vogue, with Thersites on a triumphant march around the globe. Indeed, twentieth century observers were treated to the bitterly amusing spectacle of thuggish regimes proudly claiming the mantle of democracy. But why not? Others cram all kinds of good things into the label democratic: human rights, free markets, religious toleration, you name it. "There is a good deal of muddle about democracy," complained distinguished leftist C.B. Macpherson in 1965. You can decide whether Macpherson was clearing things up by accepting the democratic credentials of the day's one-party African and Asian states. (And you can decide whether it's fair to adduce the later histories of states like Kenya and the inevitably named Democratic Republic of Congo.) How could he call such states democratic?

[W]here there is a relatively classless general will for certain great objectives like national independence and economic growth, where this will is originally stronger in each person than any divergent wills for subsidiary objects, and where this will has to be kept stronger through a long and sacrificial period of capital accumulation and structural reorganization, and can only be kept strong by drawing more people more actively into conscious political life, there the political system which can best do this may not improperly be called democratic."

44 Id at 29.
Not improperly, Macpherson explained, at least if the party was reasonably open to control by its members, if people were free to join, and if membership wasn’t too onerous. Anyway, one-party states could “claim to be democratic in the broader sense”: they were “moving towards a firmly-held goal of an equal society in which everybody can be fully human.” This first development—the historical reverse producing a jubilant celebration of democracy—puts pressure on antidemocratic theory. No longer can these grouchy writers pose as spokesmen for the regime or preach to the choir.

Second, and no surprise to readers of this Law Review, is the astonishing success of what I see as a fanciful dogma of much of modern social science: that individuals are rational. Remorselessly, relentlessly rational in the economic sense, and not just in market domains but as a quite general matter. Man is that animal which by nature maximizes quasi-concave utility functions: you gotta love it. However fanciful the view, though, it puts pressure on antidemocratic theory. For again one potent ingredient in that witches’ brew is the thought (or, in more genteel circles, the insinuation) that common people are uncommonly stupid. I suppose certain kinds of stupidity are wholly compatible with economic rationality. The usual von Neumann–Morgenstern formalization of utility means that however bizarre someone’s actions, as long as he meets some axiomatic conditions of consistency and sensitivity to risk, we can describe him as maximizing his utility. But antidemocratic theory has often mocked people as acting at random, in the clutches of savage bursts of whim and passion, and so on. So unless you’re willing to make economic rationality vacuous, it does seem flatly opposed to the portrait of human motivation offered up for centuries by antidemocrats.

Antidemocratic theory has survived this pincer attack, too. The key insight, to take the title of a noteworthy book, is Rational Man and Irrational Society. The problem isn’t the capacities or motivations of individuals, nor even the alleged infantilization that overwhelms them in crowds. It’s the structural dynamics that surround what usually gets dubbed preference aggregation. The simplest form of the insight goes back to Condorcet. Imagine a community of three peo-

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45 Id at 33.
47 See, for example, Gustave le Bon, The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind (Viking 1960); Sigmund Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (Norton 1959) (James Strachey, trans).
Dragonslaying

With due deference to formal theory, let's christen them A, B, and C—facing three alternatives, colorfully named 1, 2, and 3. Here are their preference orderings.

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<td>first choice</td>
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<td>second choice</td>
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<td>third choice</td>
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Each voter’s ordering satisfies the usual axiom about transitivity. A prefers 1 to 2; she prefers 2 to 3; and she prefers 1 to 3. So far so good. But now watch what happens if we give our tiny polity the same pairs of alternatives. 1 beats 2 (A and C vote for it); 2 beats 3 (A and B vote for it); but now 3 beats 1 (B and C vote for it).

This weird result might seem a mathematical curiosity of no political interest. But consider two immediate inferences. One: if someone can always propose a new vote, the polity will mindlessly cycle from one alternative to another. Two: if that someone is an agenda-setting chair and knows the distribution of preferences, he can always get whatever outcome he wants—and proudly show that it was endorsed by majority vote.

Like a vulture, antidemocratic theory in all its variegated splendor lit down in American political science departments, though I rather doubt many of its spirited patrons had any particular knowledge of their predecessors. Countless empirical studies have revealed that ordinarily, anyway, voters’ heads are full of corn mush. They have no stable ideological views and suffer astonishing ignorance of basic facts about politics.49 In the 2000 National Election Study survey, fewer than 11 percent of Americans were able to report what office William Rehnquist held.50 Meanwhile, in 1998 only 2.2 percent of American voters—

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50 The 2000 National Election Study variable 1450, produced and distributed by the Center for Political Studies (Ann Arbor), online at http://www.umich.edu/~nes/studypages/2000prepost/2000prepost.htm (visited Feb 17, 2005). People were polled from September through December (variables 6, 128), and the news coverage of the Florida debacle must have driven up his name...
teenagers could name Rehnquist when asked who the chief justice of the Supreme Court was. But—I strongly suspect this number is too high to trust—94.7 percent knew that Will Smith played the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air on television. The public choice story about rent-seeking, which as I write has been published a modest 2,279 times, is well known among academic lawyers. So too is the iron triangle theory of regulatory capture. And everyone knows why it's allegedly irrational to vote. The probability that your marginal vote will decide the election is some infinitesimal epsilon. If you voted for Bush in 2000, Bush won; if you voted for Gore, Bush won; if you voted for Nader, Bush won; if you voted for Pat Paulsen, Bush won; if you stayed home, Bush won. The same marginal calculations about voting for presidential candidates do not, as it turns out, apply when sitting justices of the Supreme Court vote on the matter. (Rehnquist's name recognition must have gone up after Bush v Gore, but I bet not as much as you might imagine, and not for as long, either.) And then proverbially we add that you could be hit by a bus on your way to the polls. (Or, rewarding you for your patent stupidity, on the way back.) So it’s irrational to vote. (You can test the sincerity of your friendly neighborhood economist by finding out if he acts on the theory. But you can’t find out by asking him: then he’ll just think about whether it’s rational to lie to you. Can I get away with saying such irreverent things in the august pages of The University of Chicago Law Review? Apparently, and any earnest leftist would be happy to explain why: it’s another bit of pernicious repressive tolerance that makes us look more free than we actually are.)

Gerry Mackie (who may be graciously forgiven if he’s been wondering impatiently if I was ever going to get around to mentioning his Democracy Defended, which I am supposed to be reviewing and will indeed be reviewing; indeed which I already am reviewing, with the desultory longue durée contextual frame we theorists are prone to; and who may well be frustrated by this initial passing reference, unless indeed he’s skimming madly by now; and whom I exhort to hang in there, for frabjous news is coming soon) writes, “By democracy I mean recognition by December. Thanks to Jake Bowers, Nancy Burns, and Lynn Sanders for helping me decipher the cryptically reported raw data.

52 Id.
54 Herbert Marcuse, Repressive Tolerance, in Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse, A Critique of Pure Tolerance 81 (Beacon Press 1965).
something like free and equal people associating and communicating in public spheres, informed by liberal presuppositions, and governed politically by representative institutions based on wide suffrage and contested elections" (p 1). But many political scientists have been impatient with these categories for a long time. In the name of realism, they talk about pressure groups and preference aggregation. Already in 1908, one political scientist rubbished appeals to ideas and arguments and insisted that until and unless people studied interest groups pressuring the legislature, they hadn’t got down to facts. It’s easy to ridicule the pressure-group picture of pluralism, especially when people start talking with straight faces about legislation as the vector sum of pressures on the legislator: this is the rhetoric of hard-boiled mechanism working as science fiction and fantasy. (The recent festive celebration of deliberative democracy is best understood, I think, as an unfortunate overreaction to the dismissal of arguments by these earlier self-styled realists. My own view remains that any plausible account of democratic politics has to focus on how interest and strategy, principle and argument, are interwoven.) Similarly, in one of the earlier imperialist land grabs of economics, in 1942 Joseph Schumpeter imagined electoral markets, with parties competing for votes. At least interest group pluralism has some sociological structure. Preference aggregation, the stuff motoring the theory of social choice, has none. In his landmark little book, Social Choice and Individual Values, Kenneth Arrow stated a theorem that elegantly generalizes the Tinkertoy puzzle from Condorcet. Suppose a population of individuals with ordinal utility rankings (each can report his first choice, second choice, and so on, but not how much more they prefer one choice to another: that is, no cardinal claims of the form, “I would get 2.85 times as many utils from this alternative as from that”) that meet the usual criteria of completeness and transitivity. Arrow showed—he called it a general possibility theorem, but mathematical lingo aside it would have been more sensible to christen it an impossibility theorem—that no social choice function can satisfy four allegedly plausible, even minimal, conditions. I’ll sketch them quickly, and therefore not entirely accurately. One: the social welfare function has to be able to accept any and all combinations of individual preferences. Two: if all individuals in the population prefer x to y, the social welfare func-

56 See Herzog, Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders at 146–52 (cited in note 18).
57 Joseph A. Schumpeter, Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy ch 22 (Harper 2d ed 1947).
59 Id at 59.
tion will rank \( x \) ahead of \( y \). Three, the crucial "independence of irrelevant alternatives" condition: if we need the social welfare function to tell us whether \( x \) is better than \( y \), any changes in individual preferences over \( z \) or other choices should be irrelevant. Four: no individual may be a dictator; that is, the social welfare function may not always adopt that individual's ranking regardless of the preferences of other individuals.\(^6\)

Mackie does an awfully nice job explaining and exploring Arrow's work. He is meticulously careful, though alas readers without a grasp of math notation will sometimes feel excluded from his discussion, and those without the patience to muck through such voting procedures as the Borda count will tune out. I remember being baffled by the independence of irrelevant alternatives when I first read Arrow's book in graduate school—and still being baffled after I knocked on Arrow's door for clarification. I sensibly assumed the problem was mine and vowed to work harder. Mackie persuasively argues that many participants in this literature—including Arrow himself! whose prose account of the matter departs from his formal notation—have simply misunderstood what the condition actually requires (pp 124–31).

One gloss on the condition turns out not to be required to generate Arrow's result, but commentators often insist on that one. It's another gloss on the condition that's required. Mackie persuasively argues too that it's not obviously crazy or irrational to deny either gloss on the condition, so that the casual reader needn't be snookered into thinking that Arrow's celebrated result follows entirely from minimal premises (pp 142–50).

All these points have been worked out in the formal theory literature, often by Amartya Sen.\(^6\) Mackie is careful to acknowledge his debts to others, but he is also breaking new ground. Still, a surprising number of political scientists and others who traffic in these matters and easily refer in passing to "IIA," as the cognoscenti like to call the independence of irrelevant alternatives, seem unaware that there are murky confusions and difficulties surrounding the condition. It's great to have a crisp, clear presentation of what's at stake. So Mackie's chapter (six) on the condition, standing alone, is more than worth the price of admission to this hefty volume.

As careful as he is with Arrow's formal theory, though, Mackie's passionate interest—and original contribution—lies in shredding the

\(^6\) Mackie provides a formal introduction to the Arrow conditions in chapter four (pp 80–81), and discusses each in more depth at the end of that chapter (pp 92–94) and in chapters five and six.

extensions and empirical applications offered by the late William Riker and his followers at Rochester, who notoriously have pushed hard, no, sorry, harder than that, on the two politically interesting results from Condorcet’s simple scheme that I noticed above. To remind you, given such a distribution of preferences, a population can cycle endlessly over the alternatives. And that, in turn, means that someone controlling the agenda can secure whatever outcome he likes. Riker’s prose is clear enough, if sometimes quirky, with neologisms like “heresthetic,” though I concede, or insist, that it’s not bad by the standards of political science, where leading publications seem to have been written by Bulgarian bureaucrats about to flunk their third semester of English as a second language. But the relative clarity makes painfully clear that some of Riker’s claims are flatly nonsensical. Like Mackie, I never could figure out why officeholders should be disciplined by the threat of losing an election if that threat were essentially random. But Mackie is right that the work of Riker and his followers has been hugely influential (pp 9–16, 23–26). Political scientists are now supposed to be conversant in n-dimensional issue spaces, multi-peaked preferences, strategic voting, win sets, median voters, minimal winning coalitions, equilibrium strategies and the introduction of new dimensions to create disequilibrium, chaos theorems, and the like, though I can’t help fretting that some of the people who sling around the language don’t know exactly what they mean.

It’s darkly hilarious that rational-choice theorists so often defend their views with crass instrumentalism: all that matters, they tell us, is prediction. But the usual theory predicts that no one votes. So too with Riker and his followers of the Rochester school’s apparatus: in actual legislatures, we don’t observe endless cycling. In the Rochester tradition, that fact is not a challenge to the theory, but an opportunity to develop it further by trying to figure out what countervailing mechanisms generate stability. Perhaps institutions prevent instability; perhaps uncertainty about voter preferences prevents parliamentary


64 The classic statement is Milton Friedman, The Methodology of Positive Economics, in Milton Friedman, Essays in Positive Economics 3 (Chicago 1953). Notice that a theory with bizarre assumptions and exotic mechanisms that nonetheless made consistently successful predictions would not satisfy our desires for sound explanations. Instead it would generate a further explanatory puzzle: how could such a theory consistently track the truth?
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chairs and others from bringing new alternatives to a vote; and so on. If nothing else, it’s a great recipe for publishing up a storm: first defend a theory that makes counterfactual predictions, and then try to figure out why your theory’s predictions aren’t true.

In Mackie’s view, the reason we don’t observe endless cycling is that the premises of the modeling are farfetched. There’s no reason to expect cycling and so no reason to build clever theories to explain why we don’t observe it. The whole research program is dreadfully misbegotten. Yes, it is logically possible for cycling and agenda control to kick in: even the simple Condorcet story shows that much. But if, for instance, preferences are single-peaked (for a helpful picture, see p 174)—that is, if or (the numbers matter) insofar as on the usual left-right continuum (or any equivalent) every individual would prefer the positions of parties closer to his ideal point to those farther away—none of the chaos and impossibility results kick in. So too if we relax the ordinality assumption and permit members with weaker preferences to cede the day to (or be overridden by) their ardent opponents, some cases of cycling will evaporate.

Then again, is it actually true that we never observe cycling? The modelers are fond of invoking some historical examples that Riker presented. Perhaps Riker’s most famous example of cycling centers on the Wilmot Proviso of 1846, a legislative proposal to prohibit slavery in land President Polk wanted to acquire from Mexico. Congress had three proposals to consider: the original appropriation Polk requested (OA), the appropriation with the Proviso (WP), and no appropriation or the status quo (SQ). Riker thinks he can get his hands on some independent measure of representatives’ preferences and demonstrate a cycle: he thinks he can show that the House preferred OA to WP, WP to SQ, and SQ to OA. And of course the fate of the Wilmot Proviso mattered politically; it played a key role in the run-up to the Civil War. So cycling here wouldn’t be a trivial or quirky affair of logic; it would be politically crucial.

Mackie’s response is so devastating, so mortifying, that I stopped breathing when I read it. Riker, Mackie declares, got mixed up in the pages of the Congressional Record on which measure was being voted on. The bottom line: “Riker wrongly believes that the vote he reports of 79 yeas and 93 nays was on adopting the amendment to the original appropriation” (p 243). Well, continues Mackie, there is no vote of anything like that margin on the page of the Record that Riker cites. On the preceding page, Mackie tells us, there is a vote of 78 yeas and 93 nays. But that vote is not on the amendment standing alone, but is

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on the whole bill as amended (pp 244–45). That in turn means that Riker has no good evidence for a claim he absolutely needs about preferences in the chamber, namely that a majority preferred $SQ$ to $WP$. And then, with a nasty but deserved bit of sarcasm: “Yes, the great cycle that initiated the disequilibrium that culminated in the Civil War is all based on a simple misreading of the record” (p 243). Ouch. (Readers perverse enough to treasure excruciating winces should also zip to page 353, where Mackie displays commentators on Riker further garbling Riker’s already garbled account of Adam Clay- ton Powell’s amendment to an education bill in 1956.) Piling on:

Theoretically, any reader should be able to detect the nonsensical error embodied in Riker’s claim that $SQ > WP$ [that the status quo was preferred to the appropriation with the Proviso] even without going back to check the references to the records of Congress, yet for almost twenty years many intelligent people have repeated this story without reporting the error (p 246).

Nor is Mackie’s account here purely destructive. He goes on to offer a limpid account of the “mishiefs and blunders” (p 241) that led to the defeat of the Proviso. That account illuminates the fiendish political maneuvering that can accompany high-stakes political choices without ever teetering towards the nihilistic vocabulary and inferences of Riker and his followers.

Mackie is beyond tenacious; he is the Inspector Javert of polemics, in ruthlessly tracking down and demolishing every single purported instance of cycling Riker offered, as well as other instances floating around in the literature. His reexamination of the historical record in these cases is original and profound. It goes past pointing out the tiresome equivocations and circular arguments routinely surrounding revealed-preference conceptions: Riker is opportunistic, cavalier, in deciding which expressions of preference are sincere, which strategic, so he ends up telling just-so stories of cycling that logically could be true, even if the evidence for them is worse than scanty. These are stories that grownups shouldn’t tell. Mackie doesn’t merely press this logical rejoinder; instead he digs in and explores the evidence. In his zeal, he pens inadvertently hilarious sentences: “Altogether, I identify 11 errors of fact and interpretation in Riker’s account” of the Depew amendment (p 217). A lot of tedious research went into these chapters—at least a lot of research I’m glad I didn’t have to do—and we are much in Mackie’s debt. I don’t want to take anything away from his signal contribution, but it is sobering testi-

66 See id at 227.
mony to disciplinary folly that these claims have been echoed approvingly so many times. Looks like a lot of fancy modeling has no actual empirical application. *Democracy Defended* is emphatically not a no-holds-barred attack on formal modeling or rational choice *per se*. But Mackie's empiricist enough, as am I, as are the spirited members of the movement for post-autistic economics, and as you should be too, to be skeptical of the value of theories that do no lifting in the world of fact.

Mackie's book is big. Read chapters six (on the independence of irrelevant alternatives) and eleven (on the Wilmot Proviso), together a mere fifty pages or so, and you'll learn what you need to know. You may even feel less enamored—or intimidated—by much of today's gospel in political science. Not many heretic tracts are as fun as this one, either.

I should report a cavil and a more serious complaint. I tend to see the higher lunacies of political science as safely squirreled away in soporific lectures and unread pages in musty journals. It is an enduring and endearing Swiftian spectacle, the mad projectors of the academy of Lagado with rather loftier pretensions about themselves and their accomplishments. So to my ears, Mackie sounds like an alarmist in worrying that the work of Arrow, Riker, and their fans is doing or will do serious damage in the world:

The irrationalist doctrine is taught in America's leading political science departments, law schools, and economics departments. Students absorb these teachings, and then move on to join the political and economic elites of the world. I shudder to think of the policies demanded in the international consultancies and financial agencies and the national treasury departments of the world by people who were taught the findings of Arrow as interpreted and expanded by Riker's school of thought (p 4).

I dunno. Those views have been numbing the minds of university students for decades now, and last I checked all kinds of international groups were still gung-ho for promoting democracy around the globe. Yes, jaundiced observers worry that the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund run roughshod over democratic decisions to impose their will on debtor countries. That may well be so, but the

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67 The Post-Autistic Economics Movement is dedicated to reforming the current academic approach to economics, which it characterizes as "a social mathematics in which analytical rigour is everything and practical relevance is nothing." See http://www.paecon.net (visited Feb 17, 2005).
high gospel of structural readjustment and financial austerity doesn't depend on anyone preaching the absurd indeterminacies of democratic politics. Put differently, those IMF guys with the elongated limos, capacious expense accounts, and pricey suits are the Leninist vanguard elite of the right. In fretting about the disasters that Arrow and Riker have allegedly created outside the academy, Mackie wants to be St. George slaying the evil dragon, but the stakes just aren't that high.

Worse, sometimes Mackie overstates his case. No stranger myself to brash polemics, I know it's crucial to make sure you make your charges stick. Mackie knows it, too: "I have made many astounding errors in earlier drafts of this volume and I fear that, despite my best efforts, astounding mistakes and misunderstandings remain" (p 130). I've unearthed two, though maybe not astounding ones, or so I think. First, Mackie basically accuses Riker of plagiarizing from Pareto and Burnham.

Riker seems to borrow many ideas, and even some phrases, from Pareto, but does not acknowledge or mention Pareto as an influence. The one major element of the irrationalist doctrine that is not immediately apparent in Pareto—the content of Riker's contrast of liberalism to populism—looks like it comes straight from Burnham, again without acknowledgment (p 425).

Or again, "the echo of Pareto in Riker, not only in ideas, but in phrasing, is remarkable" (p 428). It's possible. On the evidence Mackie offers, though, this echo is likely nothing more than the usual recycling of the basic tropes and categories of antidemocratic theory.

Second, Mackie writes, "The students in Harvard's core course in politics are told that politicians are venal, immoral, disgusting scoundrels" (p 434). Wow, I thought, really? Now that would be surprising. No, not the vibrant language, though that's surprising too. Rather that a stuffy university sedulously grooming a social elite would dish out such disparaging views. I checked the textbook Mackie cites and found this:

We are all familiar with reproaches in the popular press and in everyday coffee-break conversations about politicians. Their sins are routinely depicted; their persons are often held in contempt; and their actions are regularly alleged to border on the venal, the immoral, and the disgusting. In nearly every culture politicians are taken as scoundrels of one sort or another—sometimes charming, even enchanting; necessary evils at best, but scoundrels nonetheless.68

This won’t do. The textbook merely reports that others hold a view. Mackie claims the textbook itself endorses that view. Libel law may sometimes run roughshod over the difference—for obvious enough reasons, you can’t defend yourself against a claim of libel by saying that you were merely quoting what someone else said—but readers should not. True, the authors don’t exactly disavow the view. But for them it’s not an opportunity to bash democracy or politics more generally. Instead, it’s a setup for a rhapsody on the scientific method. They want their readers to realize that political science has outgrown normative work and thick description and is all about explanation and analysis. So Mackie is wrong. The poor Harvard students aren’t being indoctrinated into time-honored antidemocratic cant. They’re being sold a bill of goods about social science.

Champions of the Rochester school may seize on these unfortunate swipes to suggest that Mackie is flailing, that his critiques are untrustworthy, that business should proceed apace. (If indeed Mackie doesn’t suffer the usual fate in academic publication of having his work fall stillborn from the press.) I’m confident that’s wrong. Despite some overstatements and implacable zeal, Democracy Defended really does demolish the central claims of Riker & Co. It’s probably too much to hope that that shop will wind down business: communities of knowledge don’t usually work that way. Indeed I think it would be deeply wrong to hope for quite that. But it would be nice if Mackie’s work emboldened people working in other traditions to shed their insecure sense that the wizards of modern political science are about to cart them off to the dung heaps of history. It would be nicer yet if this book sparked constructive conversation among the increasingly balkanized communities of people working on democracy. Shall we begin?