

FORUM:
“Democracy” in the American
Nineteenth Century

Introduction

D. Berton Emerson

Whitworth University

Gregory Laski

United States Air Force Academy

In the summer of 2015, an unlikely figure announced his bid for the nation’s highest office.

The Harvard law professor Lawrence Lessig was running for president, and his platform was at once familiar and unusual. As he explained in the video announcing his candidacy, America had “lost” something important. Such an assertion might easily be read as a campaign cliché: that elastic attempt to marshal support for whatever ideological agenda the speaker supports, a facile ploy to rally a population to “take back the government.” But for Lessig, the matter was more fundamental. For him, what had been lost is democracy itself, or more precisely, the political equality that constitutes the critical component of democracy. He had entered the presidential race expressly to restore this equality—not to take anything back but, as he put it, to “take” this “shot to make democracy possible.”¹

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election returns, Lessig’s short-lived candidacy seems like a footnote, an already forgotten archive of twenty-first-century democracy in America. But regardless of their duration, campaigns always perform a pedagogical function—and this arguably was the sole purpose of Lessig’s. For in making a run as a “referendum president,” seeking election but promising to resign as soon as political equality had been restored, Lessig sought to remind citizens just how separated “America” and “democracy” have become.² These

were the very terms that Walt Whitman declared synonymous more than a century earlier.³ If for Whitman, speaking of "democracy" and "America" was redundant, for Lessig the utterance engendered cognitive dissonance. In his argument, the foundational principle holding one citizen as equal to another has all but disappeared amid the proliferation of super PACs and the representative powers of special interests. Such a principle was already belied upon ratification of the Three-fifths Compromise and the Constitution's unequal distribution of representation. Lessig's selective narrative of loss and decline accordingly follows Whitman's example in *Democratic Vistas* (1871), which ignored the afterlife of racial slavery made material in Jim Crow violence. Regardless of their oversights, both Whitman and Lessig yoke "America" and "democracy," insisting on a promise inherent in this pairing. But what is it?

Amid the various configurations of partisanship and forms of exclusion animating our political present, this forum asks what the study of democracy in the long nineteenth century can teach us now. The essays gathered here consider the relationship between "America" and "democracy" from multiple disciplinary angles—history, literary studies, and political theory—and from different moments in this historical era, from the revolutionary epoch to the ostensible failures of the post-Reconstruction United States. Collectively, they explore the scholarly, political, and pedagogical stakes of attempts, on the one hand, to bring "democracy" and "America" into proximity and, on the other, to mark the gaps inhering between them.

Among other questions, the contributors ask: What can the long nineteenth century teach us about democracy, as a political and cultural form or as an analytic designation? What happens if we consider "America" not as a term indexing the "United States" exclusively but as one that can be applied both to larger, hemispheric scales and smaller, nongeographically defined spaces and collectivities? What are the practices that embody democracy, and where and when do they take place? Just how far might we stretch the terrain of democracy to account for reform, radicalism, and revolution? Does democracy have an affective structure? If so, how does it feel? In what way does our sense of this political expression depend not only on the historical period we study but on the particular archives we deploy and the methods we use to read them? And what interpretive work is needed to expand, enrich, and contest settled accounts of democracy?

As any student of the long nineteenth century knows, questions about the meaning of democracy are scarcely new. Preparing for a speech

at the New York ratifying Convention about the various kinds of political organization—republic, monarchy, aristocracy, democracy—Alexander Hamilton noted “great confusion about the words.”⁴ As the political philosopher Danielle Allen argues in the first essay of this forum, for Hamilton and other founding figures the problem was not so much whether to designate the new nation as a “democracy” or “republic,” though this remains a widely held belief. Rather, Allen claims, the question was—and is—how to enact a commitment to a government where sovereignty resided in the people. Hamilton’s question proved prophetic, as did his evocative comment: “confusion about the words.”

Authors and activists, politicians and ordinary people, in Hamilton’s America and beyond have mined this confusion to different ends. This forum does not promise to end the confusion. Instead, the essays gathered here present the long nineteenth century as a rich site to explore the meaning of “democracy,” its promises and problems—past and present.

In *Toward Democracy* (2016), the intellectual historian James Kloppenberg offers a vocabulary that serves as a useful point of reference for our contributors’ attempts to think through this confusion. In Kloppenberg’s conception, democracy is “an ethical ideal . . . rooted in the shared assumption that all citizens should have the capacity to shape their own lives within boundaries established by the standards and traditions of their communities, and that all citizens should be able to participate equally in shaping those standards and revising those traditions.” Similarly helpful is Kloppenberg’s identification of democracy’s core elements: “popular sovereignty, autonomy, and equality,” which take “deliberation, pluralism, and reciprocity” as their “underlying premises.” As Kloppenberg argues, “The persistent struggles over these principles and premises help explain the tangled history of democracy in practice as well as theory.”⁵ These struggles continued through the nineteenth century, and they endure today.

Allen concentrates her readings of this “tangled history” in debates among politicians and newspaper writers in early American political culture even as she clearly marks the implications of this foundational tension for civic education in our present. In the forum’s next essay, the historian James Sanders offers a hemispheric assessment of this long-running “confusion about words” that refuses to reproduce another confusion: the conflation of “America” with the “United States.” Turning away from state-building politicians and intellectual elites, Sanders draws our attention to how ordinary people in the mid-nineteenth-century

Mexican and Colombian public spheres used the petition—a neglected archival source—to define “democracy” and to stake a claim to being included in the status of the *pueblo*. In listening to the petitions of the dispossessed—villagers whose landholdings were under threat, a mother whose son was forced into domestic servitude—Sanders offers a case study for Jacques Rancière’s thesis that “to understand what democracy means is to hear the struggle that is at stake in the word.”⁶ Indeed, if theorists such as Jodi Dean and Wendy Brown have expressed doubts about the capacity of democracy to produce an alternative contemporary politics, Sanders’s archive narrates the backstory of such concern.⁷ But in challenging democracy’s spatial coordinates and its archival instantiations, he also offers an occasion to enrich our present theorizations of what counts as democratic expression and what such expression means.⁸

Both Sanders and Allen focus on words and the democratic visions to which they give rise. Identifying an institution’s or a political framework’s designation—what it already is and what it might become—is crucial democratic work. Yet there remain questions of how far democratic imaginings and actualizations might go, what types of change they condone or permit. In his contribution to this forum, the literary scholar Kelvin Black approaches debates about terminology and definition through a reading of Frederick Douglass’s shifting convictions about the constitutionality of abolition. Looking back to eighteenth-century political philosophers, Black tracks the divergent conceptions of reform and revolution, terms that were largely synonymous before upheavals in the United States, France, and Haiti. Through the influence of Edmund Burke’s conservative interpretation of the French Revolution, the notion of “change with continuity” gave way to the idea of “revolution” as “disruption and discontinuity.” Black identifies this transatlantic history as the necessary context for understanding Douglass’s opinions regarding the best way to deploy foundational principles and documents in order to bring slavery to an end.

Understood thus, the question of abolition raises concerns not just about the meaning of popular sovereignty, as in Allen’s reading of Hamilton, but about the various forms and structures that might realize this principle. In this regard, Sanders’s focus on petitions and Black’s focus on Douglass’s stances about antislavery activism resonate with Dana Nelson’s arguments in *Commons Democracy* (2016) that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the question of popular power was, importantly, not reducible to governmental institutions. Accord-

ingly, when we think about democratic possibility, “sovereignty” may not be the best word. Instead, in her study of the collective practices of ordinary early Americans and in writings by and about them, Nelson finds a “civic commons,” a “non-hierarchic political power generated outside of formal institutions, among and by people.”⁹ Sharing an interest in the ongoing theorization of the commons but taking this work in a slightly different direction, Bonnie Honig has recently urged attention to the “public things”—schools, parks, infrastructure—that cultivate and facilitate “the action in concert that is democracy’s definitive trait.”¹⁰

In her contribution to the forum, the literary historian Sandra M. Gustafson posits the town meeting as a local instantiation of the commons, a tool for self-government that merges the formal and the informal and can facilitate deliberation about public things. Though often identified with colonial New England, the town meeting persisted after the Civil War, and in his Reconstruction-era novels Albion Tourgée imagined it as a mechanism for racial integration in the South. Exploring Tourgée’s fictional depiction of this historical phenomenon, and sketching his connections to the Chautauqua Institution, a postbellum incarnation of the town hall ideal, Gustafson situates this practice in the wake of democratic failure: the radical energies of the Civil War giving way to the federal government’s abandonment of Reconstruction. The town hall as it was embodied in the Chautauqua system served white women well and advanced religious diversity, even as it failed to adequately include African Americans. Nonetheless, as Gustafson argues, this historical outcome does not diminish the town hall ideal, and Tourgée’s works—read within the context of his vexed biographical relationship to Chautauqua—offer us an opportunity to revisit its democratic possibilities for our moment, one characterized by competing claims of various constituencies that all feel themselves to be disempowered.

As Tourgée’s experience demonstrates, if we are to realize the promise of democracy, we must confront its potential stumbling blocks and even its limitations head on. This is precisely the aim of the political theorist Jason Frank in the closing contribution to this forum. If Rancière also reminds us that “democracy” as a word has always been “an expression of hatred . . . the ruin of any legitimate order,” Frank asks us to consider how this democratic disorder manifests itself in and as disgust.¹¹ Taking a fresh look at early national condemnations of this political form, Frank examines how critics of democracy used metaphors of the body to articulate their disgust. As his essay reveals, disgust, in this historical moment, is the affective reaction of those

who are unsettled by challenges to normative procedures and persistent hierarchical modes. Importantly, Frank concludes, those who are disgusted by democracy capture something essential about it, and thus, disgust and democracy cannot—and should not—be separated.

Frank's insights have much to teach us, for in our current order, democracy and disgust seem an especially potent combination. Martha Nussbaum has expressed doubts about the utility of another emotion—anger—in our current political climate, questioning whether our democratic system can overcome affective conditions that challenge the norms often associated with deliberative procedures.¹² Such an argument shows little faith in democracy-as-ethical-ideal even as it asks us to reconsider what we mean by "civil procedures." And yet, given polarization and the tendency toward reactionary politics, one wonders what good can be done amid a landscape of animosity and divisiveness.

Here, yet another insight from the nineteenth century might serve us well. As the historian Kyle G. Volk has revealed in his *Moral Minorities and the Making of American Democracy* (2014), the various reform movements of this epoch functioned to interrogate "majority rule" as a crucial democratic value. But if questions regarding tyranny of the majority are familiar—though certainly no less relevant today—Volk's study also offers an additional lesson: we do not know just who these "moral minorities" might be at any given moment, or the various coalitions that might crystallize among them. In Volk's study, African Americans, Jews, and Catholics occupy this position, but so do "entrepreneurs" and "drinkers." Strangers in many ways, these diverse cohorts were forced to imagine and express "an alternative vision of democracy" as they "challenged . . . received wisdom" from the majority. For Volk, the formula taken up by these minorities remains instructive: "vigilant activism and persistent organization coupled with compelling arguments about the moral sanctity of human equality and constitutional freedom."¹³

Of course, as our contributors reveal, these "compelling arguments" about sovereignty, the people, equality, and freedom are arguments, finally, about the meaning of "democracy"—the "confusion about the words" that Hamilton noted in 1788. And yet, this isn't necessarily a bad thing, especially if we imagine ourselves as teacher-scholars working in and among various publics. With this position in mind, we might render this "confusion" a productive—though also difficult—call for deliberation, examination, exchange. Indeed, one way to understand the essays collected here is to appreciate the ways they demonstrate a commitment

to close reading across fields of study. Intriguingly, the political theorists and historian contributing to this forum seem at least as invested in close reading as the literary scholars.

With this observation we issue some closing questions as provocations for further discussion: Does democracy require close reading? If so, how might we view our twenty-first-century classrooms—in their manifold forms—as a space for such exchange?¹⁴ More simply put, what new imaginings of “America” and “democracy” can we realize there?

Notes

1. Lessig 2016, “Equal Citizens First,” YouTube, August 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CagrQz71bMk>.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, ed. Ed Folsom (1871; repr., Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 4.

4. “New York Ratifying Convention, Notes for Speech of July 12 [12 July 1788],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified October 5, 2016, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-05-02-0012-0060>. [Original source: *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, vol. 5, June 1788–November 1789, ed. Harold C. Syrett (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 149–56.]

5. James T. Kloppenberg, *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5–6. On the attempts of nineteenth-century authors and activists to realize democracy in the wake of racial bondage, see Gregory Laski, *Untimely Democracy: The Politics of Progress after Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

6. Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 93.

7. See Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), and Wendy Brown, “We Are All Democrats Now . . .,” in Giorgio Agamben et al., *Democracy in What State?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 44–57.

8. Stacey Margolis challenges us to look beyond “explicit political expression” in *Fictions of Mass Democracy in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7. For visions of democracy that attend to the ephemeral, the mystic, and the spiritual, see Michelle Sizemore’s forthcoming *American Enchantment: Rituals of the People in the Post-Revolutionary World* (New York: Oxford University Press) and Christopher Castiglia’s *The Practices of Hope: Literary Criticism in Disenchanted Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

9. Dana D. Nelson, *Commons Democracy: Reading the Politics of Participation in the Early United States* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 37. See also Jennifer Greiman, *Democracy’s Spectacle: Sovereignty and Public Life in Antebellum America* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010). D. Berton Emerson’s book project, “Local Rules: American Literary Misfits and Their Alternative Democracies, 1828–1861,” similarly tracks nonprocedural democratic expressions of the least likely political agents.

10. Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 5. Honig compares her public things model to both shared space and commons paradigms, outlining productive points of harmony and fault lines on 89–97.

11. Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, 2. While admitting this hatred, Rancière endeavors to restore the subversive potential of democracy.

12. Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

13. Kyle G. Volk, *Moral Minorities and the Making of American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2, 218. For related concerns from a political philosophical perspective, see Ian Shapiro, *Democratic Justice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999). Lloyd Pratt’s theory of strangerhood as democratic praxis is important here as well; see *The Strangers Book: The Human of African American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

14. For pedagogical implications, see Peggy W. Prenshaw, "Humanities Study and Public Deliberation," *Higher Education Exchange* (1998): 64–69, <http://www.unz.org/Public/HigerEdExchange-1998q1-00064?View=PDF>. See also Christopher Castiglia, "Teaching, Hopefully," *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 41, no. 2 (2011): 182–92. Wendy Brown explores the diminishment of the democratic ideal in higher education in *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), esp. 175–200.

A Democracy, If You Can Keep It

Danielle Allen

Harvard University

The question of whether the United States counts as a democracy has become a theme that introduces partisan bickering. Although the United States is in common parlance now called a "democracy," some insist that the only proper label for its political form is that of "republic." Take as an example the education system of the state of Utah. The 1895 Utah constitution guarantees a free public education to all, and the state code (amended as of 2003) requires the state's public education system to "offer a world-class core curriculum that enables students to successfully compete in a global society, and to succeed as *citizens of a constitutional republic*."¹ Utah's US Government and Citizenship Core, voted into effect in August 2010 by the Utah State Board of Education,² establishes as the first objective of the first standard that students "investigate the ideas and events that significantly influenced the creation of the United States Constitution and the United States' form of government, a compound constitutional republic." The third standard sets the expectation that "students will understand the distribution of power among the national, state, and local governments in the United States federal system, or compound constitutional republic." And the sixth standard, which requires that students understand the links between the United States and international systems, tasks students with comparing "different political systems with that of the United States; e.g., dictatorship, democracy, theocracy, monarchy, totalitarianism."³ Students in Utah are bound to learn that the United States is not and was never intended to be a democracy. Will they have learned the right lesson?

The question of whether the United States is best understood as a republic or a democracy is, in my view, a nonquestion. In fact, it can seem a real question only if the compromises that secured the early American