

Simone Chambers: *Contemporary Democratic Theory*. (Cambridge and Hoboken NJ: Polity, 2024, Pp. xi, 274)

In *Contemporary Democratic Theory*, Simone Chambers charts the political theory of democracy since roughly the late 1990s. She avoids approaching her topic in the usual way: by comparing various models of democratic politics (liberal, participatory, and so on). Instead, Chambers adopts a thematic or problem-based approach and embeds it in a framing narrative about how academic debates are changing, partly in response to real-world problems such as the new authoritarian threats from outside liberal polyarchies (such as the rise of China and its impressive performance on some metrics of good governance) and from within (e.g., Trump).

After a short introduction (ch. 1), the first half of the book asks whether democracy is valuable and, if so, why? Chambers distinguishes “intrinsic” from instrumental justifications (ch. 2), where the former appeal to how democratic institutions embody values such as equality (ch. 3) or freedom (ch. 4) and the latter appeal to their good outcomes, such as political order (ch. 5) or wise decision-making (ch. 7). *Democratic Theory* also surveys work by technocrats, Confucians, and others who argues that political decisions are better when they are less democratic, or not democratic at all (ch. 6).

The second half of the book summarizes recent debates on specific topics: populism and the idea of popular sovereignty (ch. 8), representation (ch. 9), the public sphere (ch. 10), and popular protest and democratic innovations (ch. 11)

Chambers paints a picture of democratic theory as an enterprise increasingly concerned for democracy’s fate and chastened about its ambitions. The primary

question for many theorists is no longer “what is the best form of democracy?”, as it might have been in the optimistic unipolar world of the 1990s and early 2000s, but rather: “how can we save democracy?” (13-14). The field today seems to have become more realistic about inequalities of power and voice and more sensitive to oligarchic aspects of liberal regimes. It is also disillusioned about the grander claims made on behalf of democracy. Dishearteningly, Chambers herself sometimes seems to be disillusioned too, for instance when denying the possibility of a democratic society in which equality is “deeply and widely embodied as a way of life” (p. 120).

The death of Rawls and Rawlsianism hangs heavy over *Contemporary Democratic Theory*. The subtle and windy abstractions of a work like *Political Liberalism* have, over the past thirty years, given way to more empirically (and sometimes historically) grounded theorizing that is more attentive to questions of power and interest and more conscious of the need for careful instrumental reasoning about politics, as a supplement to moral philosophizing.

The field, as Chambers reliably depicts it, is also more vigorous and vital than ever before. The keen awareness of the bite and sting of anti-democratic ideas and of real anti-democratic forces has lent democrats focus and energy. The specters of oligarchy and authoritarianism stalk the world and theorists face them with a new zeal for understanding institutions, proposing reforms, and aiding those who fight for democracy. As well as seizing new weapons, such as instrumental reasoning, we have drawn old allies closer, by engaging more closely with empirical social scientists and with new kinds of political actor, such as the practitioners who facilitate democratic

innovations. “Threats to democracy created an interest in democracy”, Chambers argues, and “democratic theory is rising to the occasion” (227).

As this overview suggests, *Contemporary Democratic Theory* surveys lots of scholarship and weaves it into a nuanced and mostly persuasive narrative about how and why democratic theory is changing. And it does it very well indeed: its insights penetrate, its analysis enlightens, its summaries inform, and its occasional lapidary critical comments reliably hit their targets. The middle section of the book, covering instrumental critiques and defenses of democracy, feels particularly current and alive, and the work as a whole is a valuable introduction to developments in the field.

This book would make excellent reading for graduate students trying to get a handle on the field, for established theorists seeking re-orientation or updating, and perhaps also for readers in related fields, such as law or empirical social science. Even fresh-faced young scholars of democratic theory and even old hands, stuck neck-deep into the field and its literature, will discover new perspectives on familiar turf.

There is very little to fault in *Contemporary Democratic Theory*. A work of such broad horizons will sometimes strain to contain its multitudes and, occasionally, a particularly nuanced distinction or argument flashed by too quickly for this reviewer, especially during the discussions of pragmatism and epistemic democracy. Some readers will also, inevitably, feel that a pet topic did not receive attention, or not enough of it. One could take issue, for instance, with the lack of discussion about conceptualizing democracy (which is defined only in passing, at pp. 48 and 125), even though it probably really matters whether we focus on political equality, or self-rule, or something else, as its conceptual core, as Christina Lafont has recently argued. One

could also quibble with minor aspects of the book's organization, such as the decision to lump bottom-up popular protests and top-down (i.e. government-run) democratic innovations together in the same chapter (though Chambers is aware of this incongruity and defends the decision at pp. 198-200).

Contemporary Democratic Theory could also possibly have adopted a more partial and critical stance in relation to contemporary debates. So long as the treatment of material is rigorous and fair-minded – something we can reliably expect with Simone Chambers as our guide – taking sides can make an introductory text more engaging and accessible for students, as Andrew Walton and his co-authors have recently demonstrated in *Introducing Political Philosophy* (OUP, 2022).

Finally, while this book references plenty of work by Europeans, it doesn't dwell on topics whose salience rises dramatically as one flies eastwards across the Atlantic, for instance about democratizing transnational governance or constitutionalism, or connected topics such as constituent power (but see p. 225). And English-language democratic theory produced further South or East is often passed over in silence. We do hear about recent contributions by leading Chinese thinkers, such as Bai Tong Tong, but not, for instance, about the substantial English-language debate on consensus democracy that has taken place in African philosophy and politics departments over the last twenty years, building on the exchange between Kwasi Wiredu and Emmanuel Eze.

When the time comes for another introduction to the field in fifteen or twenty years – Chambers has surely written the definitive text for some time – it will be interesting to see whether the transnationalization of Anglophone democratic theory

will be treated as a major theme, or whether an ongoing sense of crisis in so-called mature democracies will continue to keep the focus firmly on the North-West.

Daniel Hutton Ferris
Newcastle University