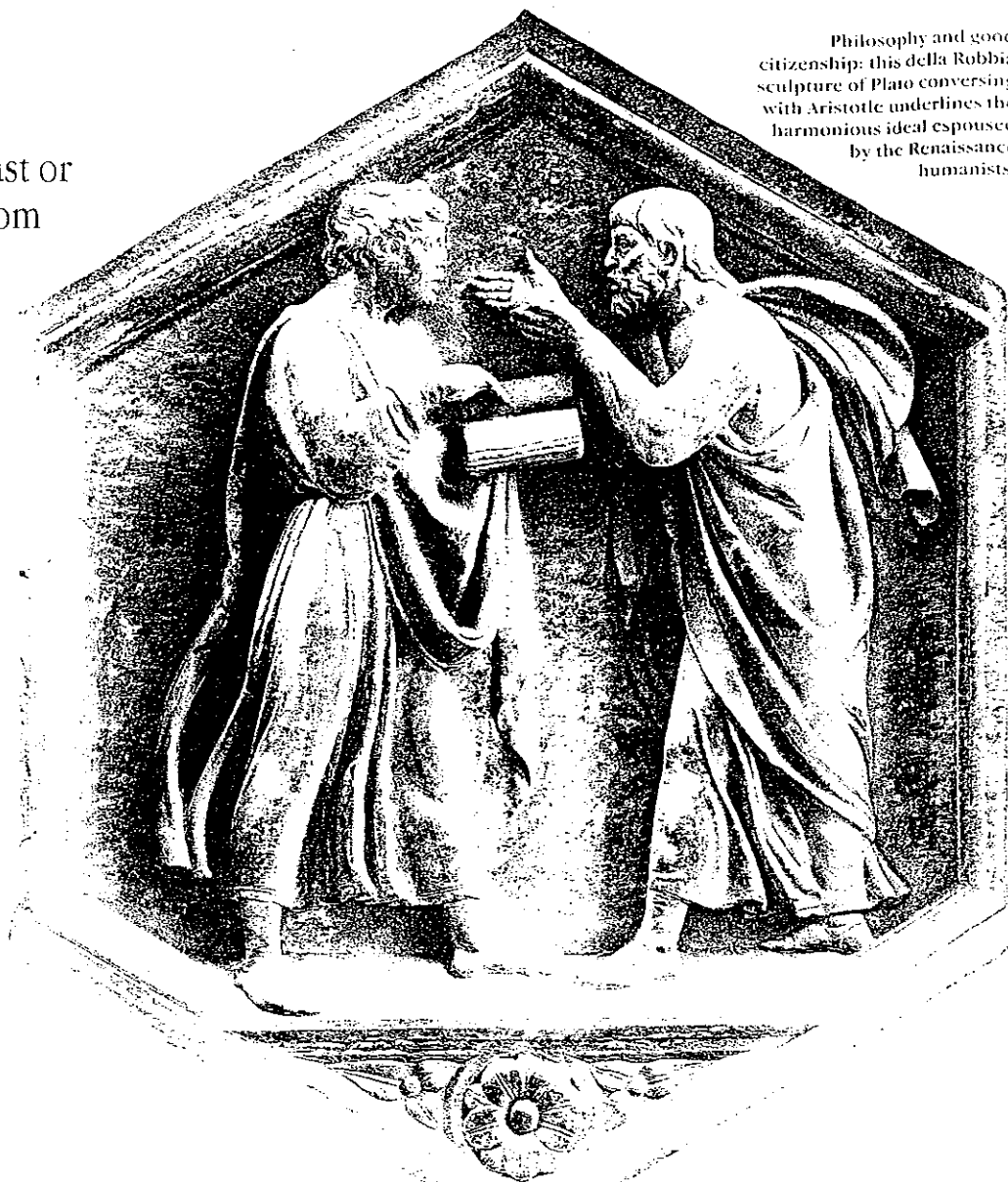


Can democracy, past or present, benefit from the ministrations of the philosophers? **Benjamin Barber** concludes our series on the history of 'people power' with observations spurred by the claim that Plato's persona of Socrates is a democratic one.



Philosophy and good citizenship: this della Robbia sculpture of Plato conversing with Aristotle underlines the harmonious ideal espoused by the Renaissance humanists.

THEORY AND PRACTICE DEMOCRACY AND THE PHILOSOPHERS

Plato and the remarkable character Socrates whom he created and with whom he is often conflated have both long been associated with scepticism about democracy. Platonic idealism has been understood to be a 'foundationalist' view incompatible with the constructivist and creative tendencies of democracy. If we believe ideals are written somewhere in stone – in nature or heaven or science – (or that everything exists in an ideal form) human institutions can only mirror them. Only if we believe they are human constructions, are we responsible for them. Foundationalism and democracy are inherently at odds with one another.

Recently, however, some commentators have tried to rescue Socrates from his creator Plato and argue that Socrates is a kind of democrat.

Socratic method is, after all, discursive, even conversational, and reflects the democratic belief that truth emerges from debate. Now I am a political theorist rather than a classicist, and I do not have the classicist's command of ancient Greek. I approach our subject here in a fashion that serious classicists, if they are polite, will deem at best casual. Nonetheless, since my ultimate aim is to discuss the relationship of democracy and philosophical foundationalism, I will venture to tread on classicist turf. For there is no better way to show how far the democrat's position is from foundationalism than to challenge the (to me) spurious claim that Plato's Socrates is, in his own fashion, a kind of democrat.

In what follows, I will address the problematic relationship between the attempt to set political and moral norms in some kind of metaphysical groundwork (what philosophers call 'foundationalism') and the democratic insistence that all social norms be subject to ongoing discussion and revision. In particular, I want to challenge the argument some have made, that a controversial approach to rhetoric of the kind exhibited by Socrates is the same thing as democracy. On the contrary, I will argue, while philosophical discourse and rhetoric are about truth and knowing things, democracy is finally about common decision-making and action, about doing things in common, in the absence of truth and in the presence of conflict – even ignorance.

On the way to distinguishing democracy from mere rhetoric, and common action from the philosophical search for truth, I will also have something to say about political education (civic education) as it arises out of, and conditions, my understanding of democracy. To do so will, I believe, help illuminate the premises and the entailments of what I understand to be democracy – something about as far from the Socratic purview as can be imagined.

If one wants to pursue the Platonic conviction that politics rests on knowledge, that prudent 'doing' derives from adequate 'knowing', one might compare Socratic dialectic and democratic political deliberation. But it is the character of politics in general, and of democratic politics in particular, that it is precisely *not* a cognitive system concerned with what we know and how we know it, but a system of conduct concerned with what we *will* together and *do* together and how we agree on what we will to do. It is practical, not speculative, about

action rather than about truth. It yields but is not premised on an epistemology and in this sense is necessarily pragmatic. Where there is truth or certain knowledge there need be no politics, even though (as Plato warns) politicians and citizens may wantonly ignore truth and certain knowledge in pursuit of base interests or raw power.

Man of the people? A Roman copy of a Greek statue of Socrates; is the relationship between the man, his Platonic persona and democracy equally removed from the original reality?



But democratic politics begins where certainty ends. The political question always takes a form something like: 'What shall we do when something has to be done that affects us all? We wish to be reasonable, yet we disagree on means and ends and are without independent grounds for making the choice'. For Socrates the point is to secure the independent ground – whether through dialectical discourse or pure speculative reasoning. Neither leave room for politics.

To believe in democratic politics is to renounce foundational sources of conflict resolution. In this sense politics is ineluctably pragmatic and so, as William James says in *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth*, pragmatism turns its back resolutely and once and for all:

... upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers ... away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins.

As democratic politics is pragmatic, so pragmatism is democratic: 'See already how democratic [pragmatism] is', James rhapsodised; 'Her manners are as various and flexible, her resources as rich and endless ...'

Politics occupies the domain of practical action and, as John Dewey, the great American champion of pragmatism, who applied pragmatic principles to education, libraries, citizenship and democracy in the first half of the twentieth century, suggests in *The Quest for Certainty* 'the distinctive characteristic of practical activity ... is the uncertainty that attends it'. The philosophical quest for certainty inspires a longing:

... to find a realm in which there is an activity which is not overt and which has no external consequences. 'Safety first' has played a large role in effecting preference for knowing over doing and making.

Like the Platonists, modern foundationalists continue to believe that the:

... office of knowledge is to uncover the antecedently real, rather than, as is the case with our practical judgement, to gain the kind of understanding which is necessary to deal with problems as they arise.

However, what Bertrand Russell said ruefully about the quest for mathematical truth seems to me to fit perfectly the quest for political truth in the form of foundations antecedent to democratic politics:

Real life, is, to most men, a long second-best, a perpetual compromise between the ideal and the possible; but the world of pure reason knows no compromise, no practical limitations, no barrier to the creative embodying in splendid edifices of the passionate aspirations after the perfect, from which all great work springs. Remote from human passions, remote even from the pitiful facts of nature, the generations have gradually created an ordered cosmos, where pure thought can dwell as in its natural home, and where one, at least, of our nobler impulses can escape from the dreary exile of the actual world.

Politics is not an ordered cosmos in which our nobler impulses can be given expression, it is how we try to govern ourselves in 'the dreary exile of the actual world'. Here we are, to use a metaphor favoured by both philosophers, Charles Sanders Peirce and Michael Oakeshott, afloat on an

open and endless sea where, in Peirce's words, we must rebuilt our ship 'on the open sea, never able to dismantle it in dry dock and to reconstruct it out of the best materials'. Plato's Socrates pretends to argue the principles of navigation while on the open sea, but in truth he has his own charts and co-ordinates and a clear sense of his destination. He is not really trying to adjudicate different notions of an ideal port or to facilitate a consensus among the crew about how to navigate; he is merely educating them (by the circuitous but pedagogically and rhetorically sound path of question-posing) to the truth of *his* destination and *his* co-ordinates. He is out to correct error, not forge provisional agreement; he wants to get to his home port, not live on the open sea. Or perhaps, as a true philosopher, he wants merely to contemplate the starry firmament; he certainly does not wish to *do* anything in particular or in common with his fellow voyagers.

Because philosophy always seeks to 'create the world in its own image' (Nietzsche), its tyranny is to transform the discussion of politics into a discussion of knowledge, even among those wishing to defend the autonomy and sovereignty of politics, which means that even citizens in search of a provisional basis for action may be seduced into a discussion of the foundations on which the criteria by which decisions are taken must be based. This is the turf of philosophy, where the politician and the citizen cannot but acquiesce to its mode of argumentation, if not its actual substantive arguments.

Foundationalists invite us to admire the manner in which Socrates pursues truth and (since he claims it is dialectical) suggest that it models the dialectical strategy of politics – as if politics too were a form of truth-seeking. Daniel Webster is closer to the mark, however, when he reminds us that governments are instituted for practical benefit, and not to serve as subject of speculative reasoning. The question is not which politics is made legitimate by a certain dialogical epistemology, but which epistemology is made legitimate by a certain democratic politics.

Epistemological concerns enjoin a definition of democracy in terms of its root values and antecedent normative foundations and then ask us to assess the methods by which they can be discovered and affirmed. A strictly political construction of democracy, on the other hand, focuses on active citizenship and ongoing practical

deliberation. It assumes a regime in which we make (will) common decisions, choose common conduct and create or express common values in an ever-changing practical context of conflicting interests and competition for power – a setting, moreover, where there is no necessary agreement on prior goods or certain knowledge about justice or right, and where we must proceed on the premise of the base equality both of interests and of the interested.

Voting is not a discretionary option for determining what is to count as true; if it were, majority rule would

certainly be absurd. But in practice it is a compulsory entailment of the need to choose in common under conditions where interests are equal and where objective (i.e. non-normative) standards do not obtain. This political definition suggests certain attributes of democratic politics that help explain why democracy cannot and does not rest on 'foundations' in the way that (say) natural law or Platonic justice do, and why, however similar the mode, philosophical discourse and political debate are essentially distinctive modes of human intercourse. Among democracy's

The death of Socrates (at the hands of the restored Athenian democracy): the frontispiece to a 1675 English translation of Plato's *Apology*. The role of the philosopher in the 'real world' is one that is key to Plato's Socrates and his arguments.



most central attributes is its revolutionary spirit, which is tied to its spontaneity, its creativity and its responsiveness to change.

Plato may have been a dialogician and Socrates may have sought a conversational form of truth-seeking that has something in common with democratic discourse, but who would regard either of these ancient heroes as a model revolutionary? Democracy is animated by a spirit of revolution and spontaneity that to ancient aristocratic philosophers could only have appeared as profoundly corrupt and corrupting – the very opposite of that 'well-ordered commonwealth in speech' that Plato hoped to establish in *The Republic*. Democracy always brings with it a whiff of revolutionary self-assertion: that sense of fresh ownership that each generation brings to a constitution or political order by re-embracing its principles. Democracy is in this respect arrogant, wanting to install the Now as the permanent arbitrator of the past and the future, wanting to make revolution a *permanent* feature of the political landscape rather than just a founding mechanism for a new, more legitimate politics of stability or the *locus classicus* of law and order.

American founding statesman and educational philosopher, Benjamin Rush, reminded would-be democrats that, though in the American system 'all power is derived from the people, they possess it only on the days of their elections'. Thomas Jefferson loved 'dreams of the future more than the history of the past'. Can the same be said of citizen Socrates? Jefferson warned against looking 'at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem(ing) them like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched'. Does Socrates urge his interlocutors to show *less* reverence for the *politeia* and the *nomoi*? Even when he challenges the *nomoi* of Athens, does he not insist (in *The Crito*) that they be treated with deep respect? Finally, Jefferson is known famously for his insistence that 'the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure'. Could Socrates share such sentiments? Would his rhetoric lead him to boast as Jefferson suggested in his letter to James Madison of January 30th, 1787, that a 'little rebellion now and then' was a 'good thing' in and of itself? And if not, how democratic is he? If we are to put Socrates' beliefs to a democratic test, surely Jefferson's revolutionary audour and not some abstract notion of discourse is the



proper standard.

It might be suggested that both Socrates and Jefferson were constitution-builders, but there is a paradox here. To be sure, a revolution is always a founding and thus a foundation, as well as the kindling of a certain spirit of spontaneity hostile to foundationalism. As Hannah Arendt, the émigré political philosopher and

One man's active citizenship – such as that advocated by America's philosopher founding-father Thomas Jefferson (above) – could be another's *sans-culotte*, as this 1831 engraving (below) of the friends of Tom Paine 'agitating' for Reform with iconographic echoes of the French Revolution, implies.

author of *The Human Condition* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, has observed, in America the revolutionary spirit founded a constitution which in time came to be at odds with that spirit – as social contracts and fixed laws are always likely to grow at odds with the spirit of innovation that creates and ratifies them. Jefferson saw democracy itself, more particularly ward government and active participation by citizens in self-governance, as the remedy to the ossification of the democratic constitution. To the ancients, ossification (that is to say predictability and government by law) was the whole point of a republican polity. The call for ward government and full participation by citizens 'not merely at an election one day in the year, but every day' was a way to put the demes in the place of a constitution. To Socrates, a constitution was a way to put law in the place of government by the demes.

The lesson taught by Jefferson is that original consent derived from the foundational principles of natural right (the essence of social contract reasoning) is inadequate to the democratic mandate – which is why I have spent so much of my career trumpeting the benefits of strong, participatory democracy. By this logic, it is not just foundationalism, but foundings themselves that imperil the democratic orders they establish. The tension between constitutional order and the revolutionary spirit has been the subject of two recent books that pointedly capture the contradictions between founding and democracy: Gordon Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* and, perhaps even more suggestively, Bruce





Reaching out to people: FDR shaking hands with a miner during the 1932 Presidential election campaign. Was Roosevelt's 'New Deal' an expression of constitutional order or the revolutionary spirit?

Ackerman's *We The People: Foundations*.

In his book, Ackerman offers a provocative version of 'dualist democracy' in which 'Rights Foundationalists' face advocates of the actual exercise of popular sovereignty in a contest over the meaning of democracy and of the revolution that made it. Ackerman sees in historical moments like the Founders' rejection of the Articles (and the procedural principles the Articles mandated), or Roosevelt's New Deal, revolutionary emblems of the nation's true democratic spirit. Foundationalism, even where it represents an authoritative establishing of the credentials of democracy, tends then to undermine democracy, and democracy both requires and entails an immunity to its own foundations in order to flourish.

Michael Oakeshott once said rationalists are 'essentially ineducable', by which he meant that, wedded to formal models of truth and cognition, they were closed to the evidence of their senses about the here and now, and the commonsense conversation of those around them. It was presumably Socrates' aim to buttress the soul against the misleading prejudices of the senses and to replace ordinary conversation with the dialectical discourse of truth-seekers. Socrates was indisputably an educator, but just as indisputably, he was himself essentially ineducable, and thus immune to democracy. Others may need his dialectical help, but he knows his truths up front and has nothing to learn from them or from the democratic process they fashion in order to

see them through a world of uncertainty. Democrats do not just engage in democratic dialectic: they learn. Democracy enjoins constant, permanent motion – a gentle kind of permanent revolution, a movable feast that affords each generation room for new appetites and new tastes, and thus allows political and spiritual migration to new territory. Does this really describe the temper of Socrates or the object of his dialectics?

The democrat also insists that democracy itself, along with its discourse and rules and *modi vivendi*, all remain subject to on-going correction – that they be seen as provisional not permanent. Democratic principles originate in historically important, psychologically pertinent and morally admirable grounds and may be helped along via some form of rational discourse. But their legitimacy – how we *know* them politically – depends on the democratic process itself. Political knowing here meets John Dewey's standard: 'Knowing', he writes, 'is not the act of an outside spectator, but of a participator inside the natural and social scene (so that) the true object of knowledge resides in the consequences of directed action'. Not Socrates thinking and discoursing about a problem, but engaged, affected participants trying to do something about its consequences is what makes a politics democratic. The criterion by which this form of knowledge is judged 'lies in the method used to secure consequences and not in metaphysical conceptions of the nature of the real'. Dewey's 'method' turns out to be

democracy itself. Dewey thus concludes that:

the method of democracy ... is to bring ... conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised, where they can be discussed and judged in the light of the more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately.

Dewey is portraying something like a general will, where the coincidence of particular wills describes a common good which can be willed on behalf of the community. The process modifies and legitimates as 'public' not only the interests and principles that adjudicate them, but the process itself. Hence, Article V of the US constitution renders the constitution itself subject to revision via a difficult but specified set of democratic procedures. The operating principle of democracy produced by the imperative of autonomy is reflexivity. Democratic rules, the definition of citizenship, the character of rights – however they may originate – become legitimate only when subjected to democratic deliberation and decision. Surely, no one would want to suggest that Socrates makes reflexivity the chief principle of his mode of discourse? *Its* test, surely, is how effectively it arrives at a truth already established in some ontological sense. Socratic discourse neither yields nor wills truth: it discovers or discerns or reveals truth, already-made by some other means. Will simply does not come into it, and so common willing has no relevance.

Democracy on the other hand is self-correcting: its insufficiencies are corrected democratically rather than by the imposition of externalities on the democratic process. The process is dynamic because it is self-transforming: in the fullest sense educative. Dewey not only links democracy and education, but suggests that:

popular government is educative as other modes of political regulation are not. It forces a recognition that there are common interests, even though the recognition of *what* they are is still confused; and the need it enforces of discussion and publicity brings about some clarification of what they are.

Clarification can take a long time, but democracy holds out to those with the patience to struggle with, rather than against the promise of reform from within. It took nearly 150 years for American citizenship to be extended from propertied white males to all adult Americans. But the struggle that led to the gradual expansion of the civic ambit was a democratic struggle in which the

rules of democracy were used to modify the rules of democracy. A benevolent king or a Platonic Guardian would have acted far more quickly and decisively, but at the expense of the liberty of those in whose name democracy was evolving. Jefferson's notion that the remedy for the ills of democracy is more democracy speaks to its self-correcting character.

Perhaps the clearest way to differentiate democratic from foundationalist reasoning is to contrast cognitive judgement and political judgement and the differing forms of education they entail. Foundationalism reverts to epistemological modes of understanding and sees in education the necessary cultivation of cognitive faculties. Plato's account of education in *The Republic* is the paradigm. Democracy, by contrast, is firmly rooted in politics and publicity and understands education as an apprenticeship in liberty (Tocqueville): the acquisition of public judgement – something for which politics itself is a useful training. I will not rehearse the arguments I have offered elsewhere in defence of political judgement as an enterprise distinct from other forms of judgement, but there is much to be said for the view that political judgement is defined by activity in common – rather than thinking alone – and is, therefore, what democratic politics produces rather than (as with foundations) what produces democratic politics. Democratic political judgement can be exercised only by citizens interacting with one another in the context of mutual deliberation and decision-making on the way to willing common actions.

What is required is not a foundational mandate or individual mental acumen in rigidly applying fixed standards to a changing world, but such political skills as are necessary to discovering or forging common ground. What is right, or even what a right is, cannot in itself determine political judgement. Rights themselves are constantly being redefined and reinterpreted and are hence dependent for their normative force on the engagement and commitment of an active citizen body. Bills of Rights, Madison warned, are paper parapets from which real liberty cannot be defended – more of Hobbes' 'covenants without the sword'. In any case, the citizen wishes only to act in common in the face of conflict, not to know with certainty or to uphold ancient norms that claim to be foundational. The object is to resolve or

find ways to live with conflict, not to discover the grounds of bliss or a path to eternity. Civic judgement is thus always provisional, constrained by a sense of uncertainty. It is made uneasy by every form of absolutism, including foundational rights absolutism. Democratic politics is what men do when metaphysical foundations fail, rather than metaphysical foundations reified as a constitution.

Democratic education is thus always part socialisation in democratic norms like tolerance and reciprocity and part lesson in scepticism and subversion. It means learning to live with uncertainty, and its posture is necessarily critical. It prefers challenging truths to imparting them. Its demeanour is humble rather than hubristic, social rather than solipsistic. Where philosophy posits, democratic education questions, my earlier argument is apposite here:

If political judgement is understood as an artful political practice conducted by adept citizens, then to improve our judgement we must strengthen our democratic practices. To think aright about politics, we must act aright, and to act aright calls for better citizens rather than better philosophers. If we find our political judgement defective, it may be the fault of too little rather than too much democracy. (From Barber, *The Conquest of Politics*, Princeton University Press, 1988).

Democracy may be established by a foundational logic but it is sustained only by a logic of citizenship and the requirements of civic education. It is made in Athens but enacted and practised in Sparta (the Athenians, said Rousseau, knew how to think aright; the Spartans how to act aright).

Citizens, to conclude, are men and women who have learned to live freely and in common under rules they make for themselves, and who are thus capable not just of survival but of flourishing both in spite of the foundations that have supported their birth and in the absence of all foundations. Like every political system, democracy too has a birth mother, and thus rests on foundations. Unlike every other political system, however, democracy is necessarily self-orphaned, the child who slays its parent so that it may grow and flourish autonomously. This may dismay those like Burke who believe that, in hacking up its aged parent, democracy destroys its soul; and it would be reviled by Plato, because it abandons the founding forms and embraces the flawed copies. But democracy is government for, by and of the flawed, so that, paradoxically, its strength lies in

its acknowledgement of weakness and its adequacy derives from its recognition of insufficiency, (an insufficiency, which – because it is shared – is the basis for our equality).

Reflexivity conditioned by civic education once again turns out to be democracy's great virtue. Democracy is the debate about what democracy is; education for democracy establishes the meaning of democracy; citizenship entails an argument about whom democratic citizenship includes; democratic politics debates and ultimately defines the limits of the democratic policy, thus adjudicating issues of private and public, society and state, individual and community. Popular sovereignty means common ground trumps revealed truth. Truth's jealous lovers (philosophers) can hardly be expected to befriend common ground or provide discursive models for securing it.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 1984) and *The Conquest of Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1988); William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Harvard University Press, 1978); Plato, *The Republic* (Cornford or J.A. Richards); L. Scheffler *Four Pragmatists* (Humanities Press, 1974); Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (Basic Books, 1962); John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action* (Capricorn Books, 1963; originally published in 1935).

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A poor thing but mine own? Popular democracy at London's Speakers Corner – soapbox oratory is more about participation than philosophic reflection.

