

*Review Articles*

*Democracy before Liberalism: a Discussion of  
Josiah Ober's Demopolis*



**The Importance of *Demopolis* for Today's Political  
Science**

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Josiah Ober, (2017) *Demopolis: Democracy Before Liberalism in Theory and Practice*.  
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I am grateful to have had the chance to bring together such a lovely and lively dialogue around Josh Ober's latest and best book, *Demopolis: Democracy Before Liberalism in Theory and Practice*.

*Demopolis* is fundamentally a book about conceptual misunderstanding. Ober's main aim in the book is to carve out clearly the distinction between democracy as a political system and liberalism as a distinct and separable political orientation. Ober does this, not in the usual philosophical way by simply making a theoretical argument using conceptual analysis, but instead by bringing to bear the rich history of democracy in ancient Athens with modern game-theoretic tools to illustrate how individuals in today's society could create a democratic order despite being skeptical of political liberalism. Ober's aim isn't to disparage liberalism, but instead to make a point that needs

making: liberalism is not democracy, and when citizens and scholars think about the value of liberty, they make a mistake when they assume liberalism. The most important contribution *Demopolis* makes to research today is that it convincingly shows that political theorizing needs a bit of a reboot: scholars must think more carefully about precisely what values we endorse and what those values truly recommend politically.

In the essays that follow this one, Daniela Cammack, Jane Mansbridge, John McCormick, and Nadia Urbinati offer stimulating discussion of some of the major claims and themes that Ober develops in *Demopolis*. In brief and barest description, those essays explore the incompatibility of populism and democracy (Urbinati), skepticism about the ability to truly separate democracy from liberalism in a practically-viable way for today's modern societies (Mansbridge), worries in the opposite direction that modern societies have allowed too much of the wrong kinds of freedom by allowing the unadulterated amassing of wealth and by curtailing the state's ability to employ capital punishment (McCormick), and finally, historically grounded arguments that ancient Athenian democracy, without a commitment to liberalism, allowed for majoritarian domination with no significant loss in political stability (Cammack).

Ober himself addresses these concerns in his typically magnanimous manner in his response to the other contributors, and so in this short introduction, rather than rehashing the interesting and important themes of the book, the goal is to instead offer here a brief frame for thinking about the contribution Ober's book makes (or should make) to the discipline of political science as a both a research and teaching endeavor.

## 1 Contribution to Political Science Teaching

Ober frames the book partly as an intervention directed at non-academic, anti-autocrats who are dissatisfied in some fashion or other with liberalism. There are many of these individuals in societies today, ranging from the many religious who are sick of feeling as though their way of life is disrespected to the economically insecure who have been promised by one newly-elected politician after another that their basic needs will be prioritized over helping the rich get richer. Ober has undersold his book's value in framing it this way. When thinking of the non-specialized reader, *Demopolis* is additionally and aptly positioned to make an excellent entry point for college students engaging with academic research that directly bears on today's political environment.