

Book Reviews

Ian Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), xi • 183 pp., £12.95, ISBN 0691115478

The State of Democratic Theory is not quite what the title implies. Those looking for an overview of current debates and positions in democratic theory should look elsewhere. But Shapiro's book does set forth a compelling view of democracy, compares that view to some rivals, and draws out its implications for a number of different issues. Shapiro is the author of many recent books on democratic theory and is exceedingly well informed about the relevant literature.

The opening chapters criticise two conceptions of democracy. Aggregative views see the purpose of democracy as a means by which individual preferences may be combined to reveal the common good. Deliberative views try to transform preferences through deliberation to arrive at agreement on the common good. Against these, Shapiro defends a third view, which sees democracy 'as a means of managing power relations so as to minimise domination'. Two assumptions may be questioned here: first, that these three views are mutually exclusive and, second, that together they are exhaustive of theories of democracy. The latter is not obviously the case. It is not clear that John Stuart Mill's view of the educative functions of democracy as set out in *On Representative Government*, nor David Estland's theory of epistemic democracy, to name just two, fall into any of Shapiro's categories.

Regarding the first assumption, Shapiro is aware that the views are not incompatible, because his view combines the virtues of both the others. With respect to aggregation, he concedes the objection of social choice theorists that there may be no rational social choice that is the outcome of aggregation, but argues that this need not be such a bad thing. That democratic majorities might favour A over B in one election, B over C in another, and C over A in another may seem irrational, but it does help to ensure that none of the supporters of A, B, or C can dominate the others. Regarding deliberation, Shapiro argues that it is not always valuable, but only when and in so far as it is a means for preventing domination. This means letting those most unavoidably affected by decisions to decide how much and on what terms deliberation is to take place.

The book sketches the institutional arrangements that flow from the minimising-domination view of democracy. These include: making power subject to competition and held for limited duration, rather than trying to divide it between different branches of government; a qualified endorsement of proportional representation; the break-up of the two-party monopoly in the United States; and a limited role for judicial review — courts are to hold up government decisions that increase domination, but rather than making alternative decisions themselves they are to return the matter to legislatures for a revised decision. While always interesting and enlightening, the arguments here are difficult to evaluate because Shapiro says little about the idea of domination. Besides the comment (definition?) that it arises only from illegitimate exercises of power, there is almost no analysis of the notion. With this somewhat nebulous standard it is difficult to judge which political arrangements are best.

Two more questions are addressed: what conditions are conducive for the establishment of democracy and its continued success, and what are democracy's effects on the distribution of income and wealth? Regarding the first, Shapiro argues not much (but something) can be said about conditions for the establishment of democracy. A bit more can be said about its continuation: economic growth, a parliamentary rather than presidential system, and incentives such as a realistic possibility of winning the next election or some other way of having influence, all help ensure democracy's survival. Shapiro provides a lucid survey of the vast literature on this question.

Regarding democracy's influence on economic distribution, Shapiro begins with the observation that, despite Tocqueville's prediction, democracies have not witnessed the redistribution of wealth to the poorest in society. There are various reasons for this, some on the supply side—why politicians are reluctant to propose redistributive schemes—and some on the demand side—why voters tend not to go for such schemes. Again, Shapiro's survey lucidly covers a large literature. But his point is not just to explain causes. Like the rest of the book, his arguments direct us to areas that require reform out of a concern for minimising domination.

The book is a bit too US-centric, though not as much as others in democratic theory. It also has a terrific 20-page bibliography. Even if one does not share his grounds, Shapiro's arguments should be of interest to anyone who cares about democracy.

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