Democratic Temperament

Miller, Joshua I., Wolin, Sheldon

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Miller, Joshua I. and Sheldon Wolin.
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I see now that in writing *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James* I tried to create a role model. In William James I found an advocate for political action based on conviction, doubt, and mutual respect. Political actors assume that their causes are based on truth, but, according to James, they should also understand that they cannot be sure. However unlikely, committed political actors should leaven their convictions with a seed of doubt. No one possesses all of the truth, so you should not demonize your opponents because they might be right to some degree. This attitude allows for disagreement without demolishing the community.

In the paragraphs that follow I will trace my intellectual path to William James, but then question the relevance of James’s democratic temperament in the post–Trump era. In the Jamesian spirit I will try to articulate some of the political stances of both the Right and Left, and then ask if he is a good guide for political action in our day.

I thought that by writing this book I was achieving independence from my mentors who had such deeply held convictions, including my father, Jay Miller, and political theorists John Schaar, Sheldon Wolin, and Wilson Carey McWilliams; I wanted to be my own man. I realize now that each of them possessed aspects of the Jamesian ideal.

From the ages of twelve to forty-two, I was an absolutist. I grew up in Chicago during the 1960s as the child of prominent left-wing activists. Like them, I wanted to ban the bomb, stop the Vietnam War, and support labor, civil rights, and civil liberties. In college, I traded individualism for community, called myself a conservative radical (see Henry Adams), and hoped to preserve the environment. I revised my ideals but advocated them with equal fervor.

But Jamesian seeds had been planted. My father, an ACLU executive, was a free speech absolutist; you challenged the existence of nat-
ural rights at your peril. And yet, the ACLU fought to preserve the free speech rights of those who might later become Trump supporters: Nazis, racists, misogynists, and homophobes. Dad insisted that the government must never interfere with speech, only with violence. (James said something similar in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.”)

At the University of California, Santa Cruz, I was introduced to political theory by John Schaar, who advocated community rather than individual rights. In his essay, “The Case for Patriotism,” in *Legitimacy in the Modern State* (1981), Schaar sought to create common ground between leftists and conservatives. He urged young people not to see the United States as only a violent, imperialist, racist country. Instead they should appreciate the noblest democratic facets of the American tradition; the Left could find patriotism appealing if only they would separate it from nationalism. Schaar claimed that Abraham Lincoln offered a democratic aspiration for ideological opponents. At the end of his first inaugural address, Lincoln said,

> I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Perhaps to a fault, Lincoln said that Southern enslavers were as much human beings as Northern whites. Northerners would be no more likely to oppose their economic interests than were Southerners. Likely a role model for James, Lincoln taught that people should hold tightly to moral principles while respecting others or at least doing them no harm.

The author of *Politics and Vision* and *Democracy Incorporated*, Sheldon Wolin was my thesis advisor at Princeton. He wrote the foreword for this book, and his reflections on the manuscript are interpolated in it. In his essay “Archaism, Modernity, and *Democracy in America*,” Wolin posited that, while he opposed these movements, there was a democratic element in the fights for mandated school prayer, censor-
ship of public libraries, and the teaching of creationism. I wrote about this dimension of Wolin’s theory in “Conservative Democracy in Politics and Vision,” in Theory and Event (2007). Wolin did not advance an abstract theory of mutual respect but rather asserted that there was a point of connection between these movements and his own advocacy of radical democracy.

Rutgers professor Wilson Carey McWilliams, a student of Schaar and Wolin, solicited this book for the American Political Thought series published by the University Press of Kansas. Carey contained multitudes and saw the value of almost every political position except liberalism, and when he encountered actual liberals, he found common ground. (See The Democratic Soul, 2011.)

In short, my teachers’ political ideas made a place for people with whom they disagreed. In contrast to founders of certain utopian communities, they did not want to populate a city with the like-minded. My point is that the components of William James’s democratic temperament were not completely new to me, as I had thought when I began working on the manuscript.

* * *

I lost my democratic temperament when Donald Trump was elected president in 2016. Who could respect fellow citizens who voted for a fascistic, vulgar, and misogynist bigot? Must I be friends with them? I have come to wonder if populist democracy, the foundation of my political value system, is a good thing.

I assumed that the election of Barack Obama signaled that the country had moved toward mutual respect among races, religions, classes, genders, and sexualities. Apparently not. I have come to understand that Trump voters feel threatened by cultural and political change, especially the election of a black president. To be fair, they also are afraid for their jobs and social status.

In my last vestiges of Jamesian democratic temperament I will try to identify the political attitudes of Donald Trump’s supporters and many conservatives. I must first clarify the term liberal. Conservatives often use the word liberal to mean “left,” lumping together everyone from moderate Democrats to Socialists. When I was coming of age, “liberal” meant “vacillating.” Phil Ochs sang, “Love me; I’m a liberal.”
In Santa Cruz we distinguished “liberal” political theory that emphasized individual rights—including Hobbes, Locke, Jefferson, and Mill—from that of radical democratic communitarians such as Rousseau, early Marx, and the People’s Party or American Populists. Just as those on the Right lump together centrists with socialists, I will link Trump supporters with the vague term “reactionaries.” I realize that there are a variety of opinions among reactionaries. Reactionaries are a subset of conservatives and not all conservatives support Trump.

Overall, as reactionaries see it, liberals are willing to sanction mass murder in the name of women’s right to choose abortion. Liberals accept homosexuality and trans identity; they welcome to America dangerous Muslims and “illegal” immigrants, who include gang members, murderers, and rapists. The liberals would put “illegals” on welfare at the taxpayers’ expense. If “illegals” do not want their families to be separated, do not bring them into the country. Liberals would be as happy to have Sharia law as the Constitution. They would eliminate the Second Amendment and take away guns from the very people who would protect the country’s safety and the American way of life. Elitist liberals care more about blacks, Latinos, Muslims, “illegals,” prisoners, and the spotted owl than they do about working-class white people. Immigrants and the liberal elite have taken away white jobs. Liberals do not acknowledge black racism against white people and ignore violence directed at police and ICE officers. Blue lives matter.

Reactionaries and conservatives often state that the liberal point of view is promoted by liberal professors who teach students to be politically correct, undermining both patriotism and common sense. They know that liberals claim that their critics are guilty of “white privilege.” Many points of view are censored at the institutions where debate should be encouraged. Students are not permitted to even suggest that women should be mothers first or that those accused of rape have the right to defend themselves. Innocent jokes are called sexist and racist. Boys are put on trial for being boys, and girls take no responsibility for getting themselves into situations in which things can get out of hand. College students who live in a liberal bubble are in for a rude awakening when they enter the real world. Whatever sins Donald Trump may have committed in his personal life, and no matter how obnoxious he
is, his actions support the best American values. You might not know
the good things that Donald Trump does because the lying media will
not give him a break.

Opponents of these views are also divided, but many of them be-
lieve that Trump supporters are racist, homophobic, violent, and
cruel. Gun rights advocates enable horrific almost daily mass killings.
Unrecognized or unacknowledged racism has been a fundamental
part of America since 1619, and slavery continued after the Emanci-
pation Proclamation as peonage, mass incarceration, and Jim Crow.
Police murder black people with impunity. Genders are fluid and non-
binary; call people the pronouns they desire. Climate change is real
and public lands should be protected from developers. The treatment
of prisoners and undocumented people, especially family separation,
is shockingly cruel. There is a desperate need for housing and food
among poor and even middle-income people. Universal health care,
education, abortion, and contraception are human rights and should
be free. Trump supporters are comfortable with their views because
they have white privilege. Social analyst Ta-Nehisi Coates says that you
cannot be a nonracist Trump supporter.

How can people who hold such opposing views live together in a
democracy? If he were alive today, would James still advocate mutual
respect? In the essay, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings,”
James called for the reconciliation of workers and owners. At this
point in time, however, mutual respect feels like the wrong goal. How
can you respect cruel people who do not see themselves as cruel? Some
liberals, in the Jamesian spirit, are trying to heal the rift, which they
blame on media-consumption habits. One group watches Fox News
and the other CNN. On Twitter and Facebook you choose who you
want to follow and therefore are not exposed to positions other than
your own, so you should add your ideological opponents to your Twit-
ter feed and watch Fox News. Yet a friend said, “Why do we have to
reach out to them? Let them reach out to us.”

I opened by remembering that in this book I constructed James as
a role model for a democratic temperament that includes mutual re-
spect. In the wake of Trump’s election, I am losing the Jamesian spirit.
I do not want Trump supporters in my Twitter feed or as Facebook
friends, and I will not watch Fox News. I hear the Trump point of view in the *New York Times*, NPR, and from many of my students and colleagues. See above.

Should William James serve as an intellectual and political role model for our time? Maybe not. He was a white Harvard professor from one of America’s wealthiest families—the epitome of white privilege. If we listen to James at all, what part of his ideas should we accept or reject? In the name of mutual respect, should we debate the existence of racism, the science of climate change, the rights of trans people, and the supposed threat of Muslims to the West?

It cannot hurt to realize that the other side feels as right about their views as we do ours. Although Americans are deeply divided we cannot be divorced, so we might as well try to understand the other as much as possible. I do not know what will ameliorate America’s intense conflict. I do not know if James can or should be heard today, but if the intense friction in American politics were reduced, William James should again be our guide to create a democratic temperament.

Joshua I. Miller
Easton, PA
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