Democratic Temperament
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Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James.

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PREFACE

It is no small burden to try to bring someone new into theory's conversation about politics. "No room! No room!" Epic theorists—Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, Mill, and Marx—take up a lot of space at the table, and other European giants—Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Benjamin, Foucault, Habermas—also command positions. Some Americans occupy seats, despite the supercilious glances of the Europeans: Winthrop, Jefferson, John Adams, Paine, Madison, Hamilton, Calhoun, Lincoln, Henry Adams, John Dewey, Randolph Bourne, Jane Addams, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Hannah Arendt. Should James have a place at theory's table?

Convincing theorists that William James was a significant political thinker will certainly take work. One night at a political science convention, I was hoping to impress a theorist over a drink. She was jazzed about a new study group on postmodernism at her university. "What are you working on?," she asked.

"I study American political thought, and I'm doing a book on William James."

"William James? Didn't he write The Turn of the Screw?"

"No, that was his brother, Henry. William was a psychologist and philosopher who lived from 1842 to 1910. He was the author of Pragmatism; his Principles of Psychology used to be the standard textbook in psychology courses throughout the country; he was America's preeminent philosopher at the end of the nineteenth century. The New York Times once published a front page interview with him about his ideas. I'm trying to draw out the implications of his thinking for political theory."

"That's interesting," she sighed. After a few minutes of conversation on other topics, she asked me again what I was working on.

"William James." I realized that romance was a dimming possibility.

"Yes, you said that. That's not very postmodern, is it?"
I could have replied that James actually was postmodern in crucial ways. Although not denying the existence of truth or God, he rejected the idea that they can be known with any certainty. He believed that convictions and causes are risky choices whose veracity cannot be guaranteed by reference to an external standard. The link between James and postmodernism has been made explicit by Richard Rorty, a liberal postmodernist philosopher who has invoked James and pragmatism as a direct antecedent of his argument for the benefits of antifoundationalism, which is the recognition that one's truths do not rest on objective grounding. And there are close similarities between James and political theorist William Connolly's case for ambiguity and "agonistic democracy." The postmodernists' preoccupations with contingency, truth, belief, difference, and action were at the heart of James's concerns.

I could have told her that the perverse nature of contemporary political life makes listening to James particularly urgent. Public conversation about politics has become strikingly uncivil. Campaigns are built on attack ads, which everyone deplores while the ads remain effective. Generosity toward opponents is defined as weakness. Every scrap of personal failing, mistaken utterance, or controversial vote is used as a weapon to destroy one's adversary. Moderates on abortion are denounced as baby killers, opponents of the death penalty are said to be soft on crime, and to suggest that taxes need to be raised or that the poor need more help is political suicide. Advocates of every position claim the moral high ground and denounce those who disagree as enemies of the people. In the aftermath of the Civil War, James asked how proponents of various causes could act without trying to demolish, conquer, or demonize the other side.

I should have told my friend that if she shared with many postmodernists a faith in radical democracy, she should study James's theories of action and mutual respect, because if she happened to wonder why people take part in politics and asked if the "typical" motivation for action is compatible with regard for opponents, she could find in James illumination of the complexities of democratic political consciousness. I might have summed up by saying that James's great contribution to political theory is his comprehension of the political actor's psychology. But that night in the bar, having abandoned hope, I mentioned none of this. I could not yet quickly convey what mattered in James's thought.
I began to study James without knowing what I was looking for in his work. Wilson Carey McWilliams proposed to me that the contributions to American political thought of a number of philosophers, including Royce, James, and Santayana, might be more fully articulated. I offered to write on James because I knew him to be a localist and a great writer, even though I distrusted pragmatism as the potential enemy of visionary, i.e., radical politics.

In this record of my engagement with James, I have attempted to create a work of political theory rather than an intellectual history. As I understand theory's task, it is to address contemporary political problems by examining how previous theorists have grappled with similar issues. I have tried here to bring James into the political dialogue of the present by articulating his ideas concerning democratic action. By explicating, criticizing, and meditating on James, I develop my own ideas about issues facing democracy and democrats today. Although taking James as my focal point, I am attending to contemporary problems that preoccupy theorists. Therefore, I am quite selective in the themes that I treat in James's thought, focusing on the themes that concern significant issues in democratic theory and practice.

At the heart of the book is James's description of the democratic temperament, which I take to be a healthy corrective to the distemper that characterizes so much of politics today. The democratic temperament includes a willingness to act, placing the public good ahead of private comfort, generosity toward one's opponents, and a nearly universal respect—which, for James, included women, African Americans, workers, inhabitants of the Third World, and even white members of the middle and upper classes.

I could have written a more empirical book in which I used primarily historical and contemporary examples of democratic politics to illustrate James's theory of democratic temperament, describing the members and leaders of unions, parties, cause organizations, and experiments in egalitarian or consensus decision making. I might have studied the biographies of politicians and activists, perhaps even interviewing them about their worldviews and self-understandings to see if they corresponded to James's categories. Instead of following either of those approaches, in writing about James on political consciousness I have drawn on my own po-
litical experiences, those I have witnessed, and those about which I have read.

My political education began at home. My father was a trade union organizer and business agent before assuming a leadership role in the peace and civil rights movements. Later he became a career official of the American Civil Liberties Union. My mother studied labor education in graduate school at the University of Chicago before becoming an education director and a social services director, first in the Midwest and then nationally, for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. She was one of the founders of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, serving for many years as its president, and was the first woman to sit on the executive board of the AFL-CIO. Through my parents, I met many people whose lives are devoted to social change. I have had some political experiences of my own, as a participant in the antiwar movement as a high school student and, after college, as a community organizer for two years in the South. My sister, Rebecca, is the political director of 1199, the National Health and Human Service Employees Union.

Perhaps because of this family background, when I write about politics I usually am thinking about visionaries and activists of movements and organizations, and sometimes public officials, who work to bring about major changes in the political order. Abraham Lincoln, Ida B. Wells, Jane Addams, Tom Hayden, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John Lewis are often on my mind. These men and women are the political equivalents of James's “saints" described in his Varieties of Religious Experience. My preoccupation with transformative politics is consonant with James's religious, moral, and political concerns. Although he sometimes emphasized the preservation of American institutions, he was equally interested in how societies are radically altered and in the mental outlook of the people who lead society through those changes.

My first debt of gratitude in writing this book is to Carey McWilliams, one of the most prominent political theorists in the United States. We had many helpful conversations about James, and the book is much stronger because of his skill and insight in reviewing the manuscript. I incorporated many of his ideas into the final version, and I am grateful to Carey and to
Fred Woodward, director of the University Press of Kansas, for their warmth and enthusiasm for this project.

I began by being a bit unnerved about discussing James's thought without knowing my mentors' estimation of him; they never lectured on James. Then I took some pride in my intellectual independence. As Flannery O'Connor wrote in a letter, "I keep clear of Faulkner so my own little boat won't get swamped." Without commenting on the draft chapters of the manuscript I sent them, they still offered crucial advice. John Schaar, professor of political theory at the University of California, Santa Cruz, advised me not to jump on the bandwagon of the pragmatism revival by arguing primarily with contemporary commentators but to instead face James directly. In our several conversations about the book, Sheldon Wolin, my former graduate adviser in Princeton's political philosophy program, urged me to look at the historical forces that led James to theoretical paradoxes and insisted that a conventional book about James would not be worth writing.

After nearly six years of work, I had completed what I assumed was the final substantive draft of this book. At that point, Wolin offered me his suggestions for revising the manuscript. This act of remarkable generosity took Wolin away from his own writing projects to dictate several hours of comments on microcassettes, which I transcribed to nearly twenty single-spaced pages of invaluable ideas for revision and numerous insights into the theoretical issues with which I was wrestling. He reminded me of the history of those issues in the tradition of political theory and proffered alternative interpretations of James. Fred Woodward wisely allowed me just three months to make revisions. How to incorporate and properly credit Wolin's work became a dilemma. I have included many of his remarks in the text and notes and cited them as his; in other places, I have silently (and more traditionally) integrated his editorial recommendations into the text. I wished to share his insights with the reader, and I believe this unusual inclusion of commentary into the text will make for interesting reading. It was a pleasure to work with Wolin on the book, and I am grateful for his efforts.

I have also benefited from the intelligent critiques of various chapters by Charles Hersch, Brian Weiner, Elaine Thomas, Janet Ewald, Laurie Maffly-Kipp, Ernst Manasse, Casey Blake, Romand Coles, Ingrid Creppell, and Richard Rorty. I had no intention of writing a chapter on James
and gender until I fell under the influence of a seminar on race and gender at the National Humanities Center in 1993–1994. At the last meeting of the seminar I presented my chapter and received extraordinarily helpful comments from Paula Giddings, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Claudia Koonz, Luise White, Judith Bennett, John Thompson, Gary Shapiro, and Mark Mazower.

My teacher, the late Maurice Natanson, and my friends Nicholas Xenos and Wendy Brown provided important counsel on the writing and publication of this book. I delivered an early version of the chapter on education as a Jones Lecture, “Democratic Pedagogy,” at Lafayette College in spring 1993 and presented another to the Political Science Club at North Carolina State University in fall 1994. I also profited from discussions with students and faculty at the University of Texas, Austin, and Tulane University as well as from panels of the American Political Science Association and the Western Political Science Association. Students in my spring 1995 graduate seminar on pragmatism and politics in the Political Science Department at Rutgers University helped me to clarify my ideas, as did the members of my senior seminar on democratic action at Lafayette College in fall 1994.

Completion of this book depended upon public funding for the humanities, and I am very grateful to the National Endowment for Humanities for supporting a revivifying year at the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, during which most of this book was written. Every member of the center's administration and staff, from the director to the engineer, believes in the cause of scholarship and does everything possible to make a Fellow's stay productive and pleasurable. Also, Lafayette College generously granted me a sabbatical, a summer research fellowship, and student research assistance. Nicole Piccione proved to be an excellent copyeditor, and Terese Heidenwolf and Vaswati Sinha of Skillman Library's Reference Department solved many bibliographic problems for me. I did my own typing and printing, but Lafayette's Computing Services Department—including its former director Les Lloyd, Tracy Logan, Lori Young, and students Diane Lorenzo and Bridget Solimeno—provided me with the equipment I needed and patiently solved many mysteries of its use. A gift from my grandmother allowed me to acquire the other tools I needed to complete the book.

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At the conclusion of the race and gender seminar, Judith Bennett declared, “I’m sure that we all like William James more than we did before we read Josh’s paper.” I was pleased by her remark, but persuading readers to like James is not my goal; my primary aim is to stimulate the reader’s thinking about the issues concerning democratic action raised in the various chapters. Nevertheless, it would be good if more people read James. I can attest to the fact that a serious engagement with James is an intellectually pleasurable and transformative experience.
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