
Review

The eyes of the people: Democracy in an age of spectatorship

Jeffrey Edward Green

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Jeffrey Green's book *The Eyes of the People* challenges theorists to re-examine the widely held assumption that democratic politics only occur when the people raise their voices and compel the powerful to listen. Against this dominant 'vocal' model of democracy, Green counterposes an 'ocular' version of political life in which democracy hinges on the 'popular gaze' (p. 11). The properly democratic object of the people's attention, furthermore, shifts from the law to leaders. Thus, Green advises a brave turn away from what most theorists presuppose as the core of democratic politics: the idea that the people legislate for themselves. This means that not autonomy but rather 'candor' ought to be the guiding 'critical ideal' for democracy today (p. 13). The conditions of a meaningful democratic politics are fulfilled, Green argues, if leaders lack 'control of the conditions of their publicity' as the people watch them act on the people's behalf, although not at the people's behest (p. 13).

To some, the idea of explaining how democracy survives even if the *demos* just mutely attends as officials make public decisions for them will seem to reflect a form of theoretical suicide. It is a self-snuffing by enlightenment-style democratic theory, however, that Green proposes as an act of principled responsibility, given the need for 'a novel ethical paradigm for the pursuit of democracy' (p. 16). For Green, the demand for such an ethical framework stems from simple realism regarding the habits and capacities of the individuals who populate mass societies today: 'The ocular model of popular empowerment is justified because its mechanics do not assume that everyday citizens are what they clearly are not (choice-making, speech-making, legislating, active deciders of public affairs) but, on the contrary, acknowledge the passive, non-participatory, *spectatorial* nature of everyday political life' (pp. 16–17). Green thus hopes to convince readers that the shift to ocularity enables us

to understand the extent and limits of democratic life in a way that is both ethically robust and appropriately chastened about the possibilities for popular action, given how most people are today, most of the time.

Green elaborates the moral and intellectual stakes of his project in the first main chapter by reminding readers of Aristotle's valorization of not just the virtue of ruling, but also 'the virtue of being ruled'. For Green, a renewed appreciation for this corollary virtue to wise ruler-ship has become indispensable given the gargantuan scale of many polities, modern constitutions that codify most citizens' non-participation in public office, and the vast 'extent of government involvement in the everyday life of ordinary individuals' (pp. 38–39). Green seems insufficiently troubled by the departure from Aristotelian logic that comes from divorcing the ethos of obedience from the task of ruling well, since achieving excellence in one virtue arguably depends on maintaining its balance with the other. Still, Green's suggestion that a passive form of political experience may have an ethically democratic content deserves serious consideration. So, too, does his related contention that modern egalitarians should acknowledge the dignity implicit in the everyday experiences of ordinary people and beware of diatribes about depoliticization that mask an elitist contempt for the masses.

Green criticizes a series of figures, including canonical theorists, political scientists and contemporary political theorists, who, he claims, have mistakenly fetishized popular self-legislation and official accountability for substantive policy decisions in their accounts of democracy. Theorists as disparate as Rousseau, Madison and J.S. Mill may have disputed the relative wisdom of direct democracy and representative government, Green argues, but were of one accord regarding the 'vocal, legislative ontology of popular power' and the notion that the people should always in some core sense decide public matters for themselves (p. 75). In our own time, deliberative democrats err by fantasizing that 'a civic ethics of public reason' could be engaged universally despite mostly negligible levels of actual participation in deliberative activities (p. 59). Most pitiable are voting behavior and public opinion scholars who cling to the mirage that the people can express an articulate will and hold representatives accountable, when their own research shows that neither elections nor polls serve these purposes.

Having critically scrutinized this encrusted preoccupation with citizen voice and self-government, Green proposes his watershed alternative: a theory of 'plebiscitary' democracy, which he contends 'empowers' the people rather than evincing 'totalitarian or proto-totalitarian tendencies', as plebiscitary forms of governance are commonly thought to do (p. 120). The plebiscite's power derives from its capacity to 'observe the few without being observed in turn by them' under conditions when what the people 'gets to see is not preprogrammed or rehearsed but constitutive of a genuine type of surveillance'

(pp. 128–129). Green initially illustrates this notion of the popular ‘gaze’ through a provocative contrast between two of Shakespeare’s historical plays: *Coriolanus*, in which the Roman governor must expose himself to public observation against his will, and *Julius Caesar*, where the ruler’s public appearances are all ‘managed and controlled by Caesar and his party’ (p. 134). Green turns to Max Weber, however, for more extensive intellectual scaffolding. Weber’s analysis of charismatic leadership helps Green define plebiscitary democracy as a form of politics in which the leader dynamically and visibly struggles with the audience to capture its attention through ‘momentous’ acts, in which ‘a high degree of spontaneity’ in such events make them worth watching, and in which leaders are continually exposed to ‘public inquiry’ and ‘intense investigation’ (pp. 164–165).

These ideas propel Green’s concluding remarks on contemporary US politics. He applauds presidential debates for subjecting candidates to conditions of publicity they do not entirely control, although his principle of candor supports strengthening these conditions by allowing candidates to cross-examine each other. Bucking the widespread concern that investigations of elected officials displace open contestation over public policy, Green views such events as the Clinton trial as ‘valuable’ occasions for staging ‘plebiscitary democracy in action’ (p. 193). Presidential press conferences, too, can invigorate a brand of democracy oriented toward vision rather than voice, at least when presidents rather than press secretaries speak to the media.

Green’s central proposition that the gazing plebiscite can exercise a genuinely empowered form of vision in contemporary mass society, however, needs further support. Green enlists Foucault to elaborate this notion, but it is unclear how the ruler’s submission to the supposedly ‘disciplinary’ situation of being watched by the people modifies that ruler’s conduct in any meaningful way, apart from the mere fact of participating in the ocular event (pp. 133, 154). The idea that the people’s gaze involves a substantial form of popular power also seems dubious because Green does not theorize the capitalist and technological conditions that fundamentally constitute late modern cultural–political experiences. He never engages cultural theorists (for example, Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, Douglas Kellner, Jodi Dean) who have pondered how a mass audience can interact with visual culture in a way that is at once minutely formatted by technology, structured by the imperatives of capital, and conducive to some kind of critical response. Green speaks to varied audiences within political science, yet his analysis falters because he does not engage readers outside this discipline, even though his central subject matter readily lends itself to such encounters.

I also question whether Green’s resolute stoicism about modern society, in the sense of its unresponsiveness to popular voices and desires for self-rule, is warranted. Aspirations to make the people’s cries heard and its will



actual have fortified countless organized efforts to enlarge women's freedom, improve labor conditions, end racial segregation and promote sexual equality. Conversely, critical attention to the everyday political experiences of participants in such endeavors, including but not limited to their ocular habits *vis-à-vis* those who hold elite power, remains a rich source of innovation for democratic theory. Perhaps, then, the time has not yet come to jettison the vocal model of democracy along with its values of popular action and autonomy, Green's judgments notwithstanding.

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