

VOLUME XVII, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2016/17

# CLAREMONT

## REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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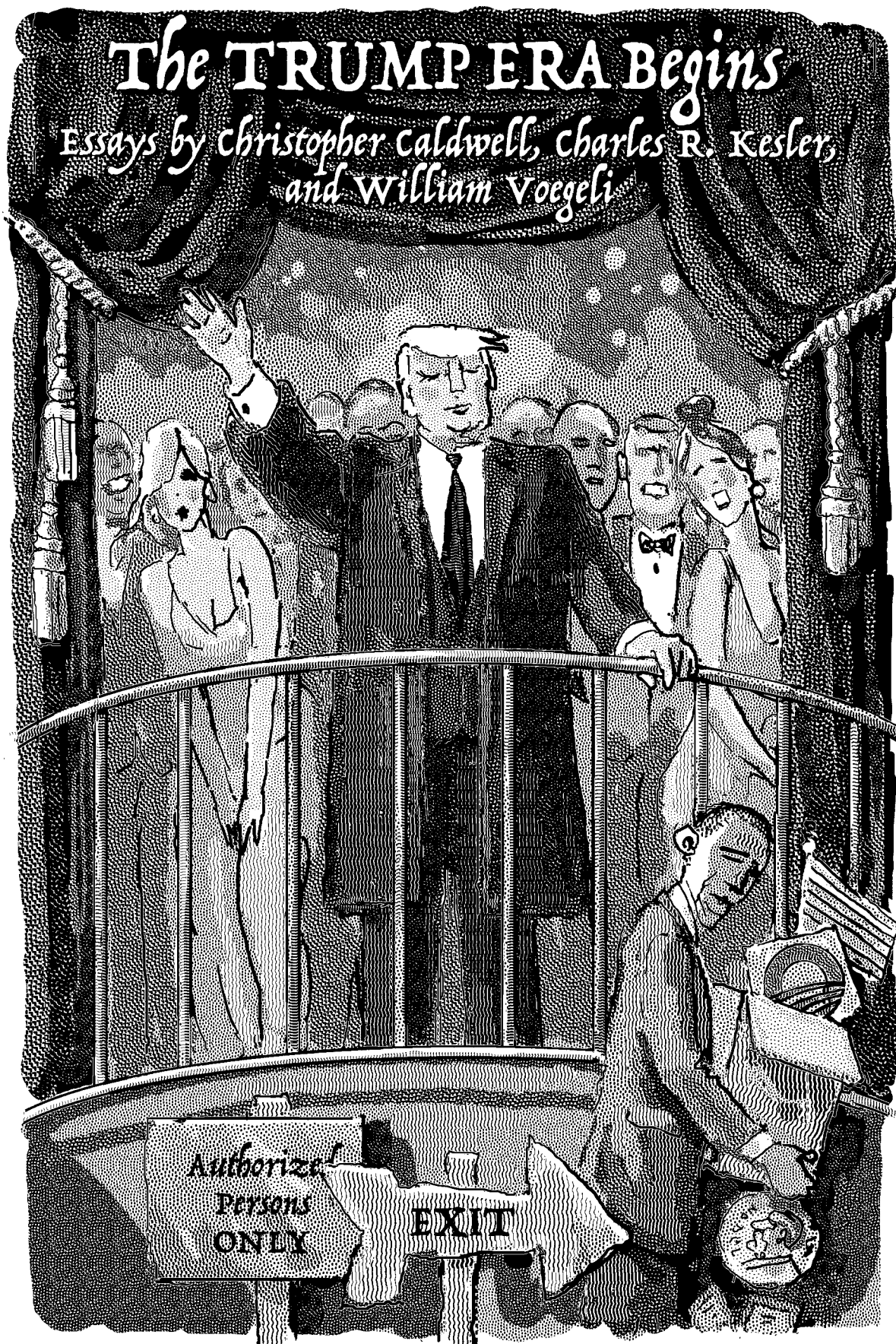
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Book Review by Daniel J. Mahoney

## HERE THE PEOPLE RULE

*Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought*, by James T. Kloppenberg.  
Oxford University Press, 912 pages, \$34.95



WESTERN LIBERAL DEMOCRACY HAS become attenuated by a culture of unlimited self-expression. Personal “autonomy” has eroded the moral foundations of the free society. Few people still identify self-government with governance of the self, with self-restraint and self-command. Democracy is now understood as unlimited freedom, the unconstrained human will. We are living with all the consequences of what Roger Scruton has called the “culture of repudiation.” And ordinary citizens, “mad as hell” at increasingly unaccountable elites, are drawn to a more volatile populism. We are a long way from dreams of the “end of History.”

In these circumstances, James T. Kloppenberg’s thoughtful and ambitious intellectual history of democracy is most welcome. *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* is learned, well-written, and jargon-free. Its scope is immense—covering democratic theory and practice from the Greek *polis* and the birth of Christianity to Michel de Montaigne and modern humanism, the English Civil War and Glorious Revolution, Puritan self-government and communal life, the moderate and radical Enlightenments, the full range of American political thought, the excesses of the French Revolution, and the struggles against slavery and for women’s rights. The book culminates in fine treatments of the efforts by Alexis de Tocqueville, Abraham Lincoln, and John Stuart Mill to temper unfettered majoritarianism

and moral nihilism with depth, elevation, and self-restraint. This is the most thoughtful part of the book, and the most free from progressive assumptions.

A HARVARD PROFESSOR OF AMERICAN history, Kloppenberg’s emphasis is clearly on the need for ever more democracy and not on the republicanism and constitutionalism that prevent democracy from becoming a new kind of tyranny. For him, “inclusiveness” is an end in itself. There is nothing wrong with a book having a point of view and Kloppenberg’s becomes clear from nearly the beginning. He is committed to three great “values,” as he calls them: popular sovereignty; an ethic of reciprocity that he identifies as a democratic application of Christian love; and autonomy, which he identifies with individuals “internalizing limits on the freedom that democracy gives them.” (Kloppenberg is quite emphatic: “That is the meaning of autonomy.”) It is refreshing to see a liberal intellectual historian take religion and self-restraint seriously.

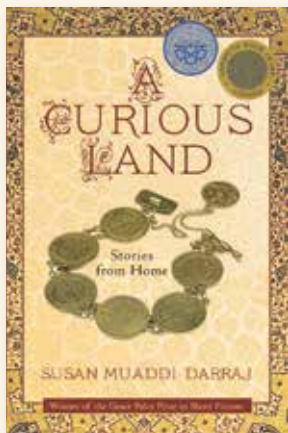
Kloppenberg’s idiosyncratic approach to autonomy never comes to terms with the emancipation of the human will from all natural and divine limits, which has become the norm in Western life over the past half-century, although its roots run much deeper than that. And so, the Puritans, who subordinated political and communal or “congregational” life to the ultimate sovereignty of

God, are said to have helped establish autonomy and popular sovereignty as supreme democratic values. In many ways, the Puritans were democrats who kept the “spirit of liberty” and “the spirit of religion” together, as Tocqueville famously insisted. But the greatest Puritan thinkers and writers never spoke of autonomy. And popular sovereignty for them was never self-sovereignty, a sovereignty that usurped divine law or natural justice. Neither did Tocqueville or Lincoln speak of autonomy. Both insisted that liberty was always liberty “under God.” Kloppenberg’s definition of autonomy is simply assumed and is attributed to a wide range of thinkers (the American Founders included) who never used the word. He at least owes his readers an explanation of how his peculiar understanding (clearly indebted to Immanuel Kant’s austere morality) relates to its corrupt contemporary use. Absent such an explanation, his promiscuous attribution of autonomy distorts more than it clarifies the intellectual and moral foundations of democracy.

KLOPPENBERG IS OCCASIONALLY UNfair to thinkers who were not democrats but who loved liberty and human dignity, and who opposed tyranny in all its forms. Edmund Burke defended persecuted Catholics in Ireland, pleaded for conciliation with America, prosecuted Warren Hastings for his crimes against the people of



# massachusetts

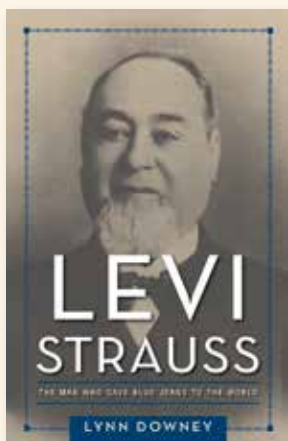


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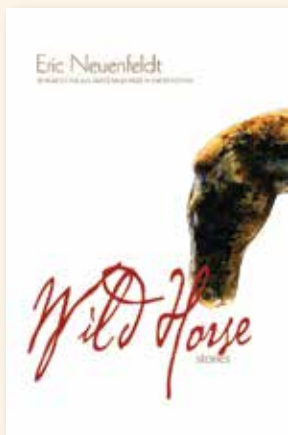


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India, and was the first to discern an incipient totalitarianism in revolutionary France. He is worthy of admiration by all friends of human liberty and human excellence. Yet Kloppenberg can only see an anti-democrat. He is clearly more sympathetic to partisans of the French Revolution such as Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft (whose feminist views he also applauds). Though he acknowledges that Burke admired certain ancient republics for balancing democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, Kloppenberg presents him as a determined enemy of the very idea of a republic. Burke certainly supported constitutional monarchy as the best regime for England—and for a reformed France. But Kloppenberg misses his deeper point. Burke is less against democracy than he is opposed to any political order that valorizes the unlimited sovereignty of the one, the few, or the many. He is opposed to grounding legitimacy in the principle of the human will rather than transcendent justice. As he wrote in *An Appeal From the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), “neither the few nor the many have a right to act merely by their will, in any matter connected with duty, trust, engagement, or obligation.”

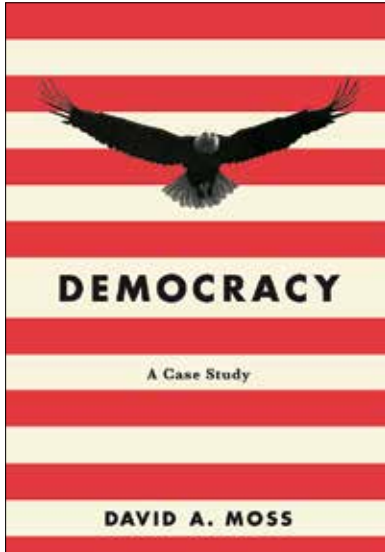
**K**LOPPENBERG DOES SAY MORE THAN a few good things about the Puritans, crediting them for establishing local self-government in the colonies and for never forgetting the moral and religious preconditions of democratic self-government. At the same time, he follows Jürgen Habermas in arguing that Christian charity, the idea of selfless love and self-sacrifice, paves the way for a more secular and democratic version of “the ethic of reciprocity,” or doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. Kloppenberg exaggerates Christianity’s “revolutionary” implications and ignores the fact that at its core it is a transpolitical and not a “democratic” religion. He has little time for the institutional Church which, in his view, betrayed the democratic promise of selfless love. He fails to appreciate that Augustine’s distinction between the “city of God” and the “city of Man,” and his emphasis on human sinfulness, provide powerful obstacles to totalitarian aspirations. Augustine did not betray primitive Christianity, but showed Christians how they could give decent and lawful politics their due without forgetting man’s ultimate supernatural destiny. In the end, Kloppenberg tends to conflate Christianity with democratic humanitarianism, which in our age has all the hallmarks of a secular religion dedicated almost exclusively to the amelioration of worldly ills.

Many of the architects of modern liberalism (and, indirectly, of democracy), one will recall, were either ambivalent or hostile to religion. Kloppenberg sidesteps Hobbes’s materialism and barely concealed atheism by exaggerating John Locke’s piety. Although Locke does say in his *Second Treatise* that human beings are the product of God’s “workmanship,” nevertheless he almost immediately claims that 9/10ths of what human beings have—nay, 999/1000ths, he adds—is a result of human labor. In Locke’s view, nature and God are improvident, at best. Men must rely on their reason (one’s “only star and compass,” he calls it) and their industry. Kloppenberg terribly overstates when he argues that Locke’s “reasonable” Christianity is “an only slightly modified version of his father’s strict Puritan faith.” Locke, after all, had an immense influence on the French encyclopedists whose materialism and moral relativism helped pave the way for the French Revolution.

Christianity did help shape modern democracy in decisive respects, but modern democracy was also shaped by important thinkers who were no friends of the Christian religion. Tocqueville beautifully addresses this conundrum in his “Author’s Preface” to *Democracy in America*: some of the loudest proponents of democracy, especially in Europe, hated the faith. These fanatical enemies of religion may have been “democrats,” but they were not true friends of democracy. Kloppenberg doesn’t recognize either that his “ethic of reciprocity,” freed from its transcendent foundation, leads to relativism in which we are obliged to respect every lifestyle, every choice, every “culture” no matter how estranged it is from common sense and the moral law. Humanitarianism perverts more than it perfects or actualizes Christian love. I would go further. Secular *agape* easily becomes an invitation to tyranny—coerced “benevolence”—based in moral indifference.

**O**NE OF THE STRENGTHS OF KLOPPENBERG’S new book is its repeated emphasis on the deep impact of Scottish “common sense” philosophy on 18th-century American political thought. The founding generation was not driven by a narrow, reductive individualism, or by pernicious materialism. The founders knew that human beings were passionate and self-interested but almost all believed that benevolence, public-spiritedness, and a faculty called the “moral sense” were important components of human nature. The most traditional of the Scottish moral sense philosophers, Frances Hutcheson, had an im-

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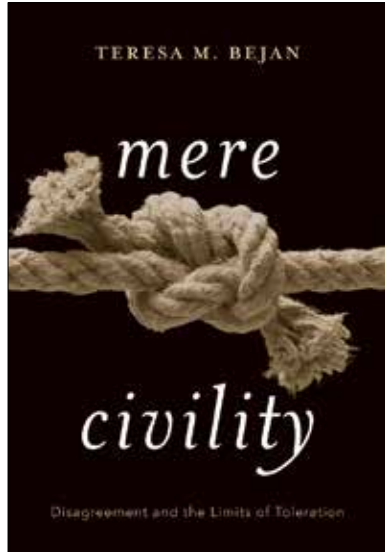


*Democracy*  
A Case Study  
**David A. Moss**

"This set of well-documented, accessible essays presents the prickly challenges facing the rapidly changing American democracy, for lawmakers and citizens alike ... A sterling educational tool that offers a fresh presentation of how 'democracy in America has always been a contact sport."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

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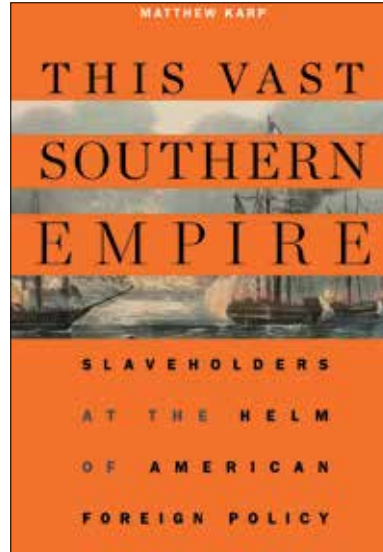
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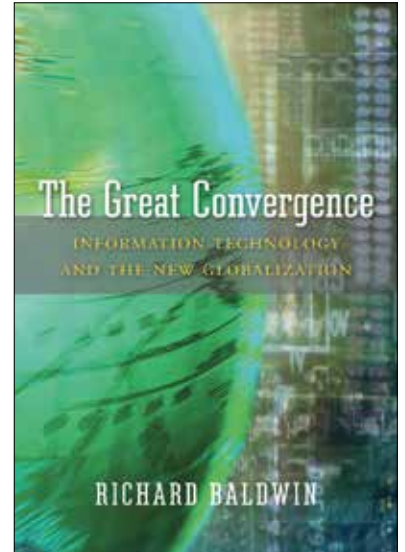


*This Vast Southern Empire*  
*Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy*  
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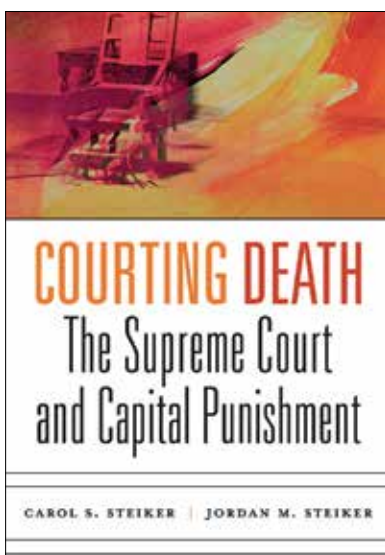
—Diane Coyle, *Enlightened Economist*  
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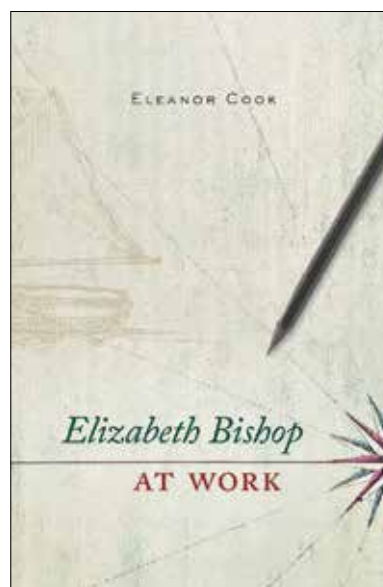


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*Los Angeles Review of Books*

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*Elizabeth Bishop at Work*  
**Eleanor Cook**

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—*Times Higher Education*

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mense influence on John Witherspoon and, thus, on James Madison, his student at the College of New Jersey. But Kloppenberg goes too far: Scottish common-sense philosophy was not the “deepest influence on Madison.” More generally, the author has a tendency to overstate “benevolence” as a human motive. He ignores fallen human nature, and leans toward a utopian, unreflective social gospel.

Nonetheless, Kloppenberg is very clear that during the French Revolution the Jacobins, led by Robespierre, “misunderstood the meaning and mechanics of self-government... identifying democracy with unanimity and enforcing it through violence.” But Kloppenberg wrongly claims that, faced by opposition at home and abroad, “the Jacobins had no choice,” and needed to resort to violence, even terror, to maintain control. As the great historian of the French Revolution François Furet has shown in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (1989) and elsewhere, revolutionary violence predated significant internal opposition, and the intensification of revolutionary terror had little to do with opposition from abroad. Kloppenberg’s emphasis on the “tragedy” of the Revolution risks justifying the unjustifiable.

He does helpfully show how the French Revolution divided Americans in the 1790s. Federalists feared the importation of Jacobin radicalism, and many Democratic-Republicans cheered the Revolution, even during its most extreme phases. The *Philadelphia Aurora* even published a translation of Robespierre’s “Report upon the Principles of Political Morality,” an incendiary pamphlet, Kloppenberg admits, identifying “virtue and justice with terror.”

Yet in the end, he insists, Federalists and Republicans alike belonged to the “moderate Enlightenment,” and did not imitate the French Revolution’s increasingly savage attacks on Christianity.

ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE BOOK, as mentioned, is Kloppenberg’s generally fine treatments of Lincoln, Tocqueville, and Mill. He writes with grace and eloquence about Lincoln’s defense of true democracy against false appeals to “popular sovereignty.” Everything stood or fell with the recognition of the Negro’s humanity. His Lincoln shows the limits of mere majoritarianism shorn of a deeper principle. Kloppenberg’s treatment of the great 1854 Peoria speech is particularly impressive, and, to his credit, he does full justice to his hero. Kloppenberg’s treatment of Tocqueville is both admirably comprehensive and generally sympathetic. He notes that Tocqueville, like Lincoln, “detested slavery.” But he faults him for not favoring immediate abolition in the French territories and falsely claims that Tocqueville’s passionate denunciation of American slavery appeared only after his death in 1859 (in fact, it was published in the abolitionist *Liberty Bell* in 1856). Kloppenberg admires Mill as a critic of democratic majoritarianism in the name of a more elevated conception of human nature and of representative democracy. He also approves of Mill and his wife Harriet Taylor for their struggles against “the subjugation of women” and for their feminism in general. Kloppenberg could have said more about the differences between Mill and Tocqueville, not only on feminism but on the essential role of

religion in safeguarding democratic mores (Tocqueville was a friend of the Christian religion, while Mill applauded Auguste Comte’s positivism). In some important respects, these two great men do not belong to the same intellectual family.

With *Toward Democracy*, James Kloppenberg has written a strikingly thoughtful work on the democratic experiment. He is an eloquent partisan who writes seriously about self-limitation and the moral foundations of democracy. As Notre Dame historian John McGreevy pointed out in a generally sympathetic review of the book in *Commonweal*, Kloppenberg is also an admirer of John Dewey who places too much emphasis on the role of “experimentation” in democracy. In a footnote, Kloppenberg claims that “in the natural sciences as well as the human sciences everything we know is perspectival, provisional, and subject to revision in light of new evidence.” McGreevy is right: it’s hard to believe that Madison or Lincoln (or Tocqueville for that matter) would agree with this radical, and finally untenable, relativism. What, after all, is the grounding of the “ethic of reciprocity” and the democratic ethic of self-restraint that Kloppenberg so admirably insists are at the heart of a democracy worthy of the name? His book, alas, provides no answers to that all-important question.

*Daniel J. Mahoney holds the Augustine Chair in Distinguished Scholarship at Assumption College, and is the author, most recently, of The Other Solzhenitsyn: Telling the Truth About a Misunderstood Writer and Thinker (St. Augustine’s Press).*



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