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[Book Review] On War and Democracy, Christopher Kutz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)

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Reviews

On War and Democracy, Christopher Kutz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 344 pp., \$39.95 cloth.

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Among the most challenging questions in the field of political ethics is why democracies harbor and perpetrate violence, and whether they are duty-bound to protect others—for instance, through military intervention in support of people in faraway lands victimized by insufferable bullying or life-threatening violence. Matters are not made easier by the inner confusions of democratic ethics, or by the not unrelated fact that the subject of democracy only entered the disciplinary field of international relations belatedly, principally during the past several decades.

Yet things are changing. In disciplines such as international relations, peace studies, and classics, good literature is being produced on the subject of war, peace, terrorism, and democracy promotion. Prime emphasis is given to a fundamental ethical dilemma confronting all democratic states: if they intervene in violence-ridden contexts (for example, as India did in Bangladesh in 1971, and as the United States first did in Mexico, the Philippines, and Cuba, and has repeatedly done around the world in recent decades), then those democracies are readily accused of double standards, of violating the territorial “sovereignty” and autonomy of peoples entitled to

govern themselves. Democracies and their democrats are called meddlers, autocrats, colonizers, and imperialists. On the other hand, if democratic states fiddle while people’s lives are ruined, and choose by design or default not to intervene (recent cases include Rwanda, Timor-Leste, Ukraine, and Syria), then democracies are easily accused of hypocrisy: ignoring cruelty that flouts the democratic principle that all people should be treated as dignified equals.

On War and Democracy avoids this ethical and political dilemma by beating what could be called a double retreat. In the first retreat, Kutz opts for a trimmed-down understanding of democracy. For him, it is not a whole way of life, as it was for Tocqueville and today remains for many citizens and thinkers. He speaks of “agentic democracy,” a rather unattractive neologism, by which he means a set of liberal republican norms centered on free and fair elections protected by law and the “public working out of shared values, in a process of dialogue and accommodation” (p. 173). Democracy in this sense is for him not a universal value; it is precious, but it is just one political norm among many possible others.

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Kutz wields this pared-down definition of democracy to beat a second retreat. He argues against efforts to draw the democratic ethic into the dirty business of geopolitics, military intervention, and killing people. His point draws upon the work of Thomas Nagel and others: the real challenge of a theory of democratic ethics, says Kutz, is to put pressure on all theories and practices of war by calling into question their claimed permissibility. Although Kutz says little about the great global discussion of a generation ago concerning the ethics of the atomic bomb, he says convincingly that the democracy ethic contradicts the old state-centric principles of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. It equally stands in tension with the UN Charter and its restriction of war to self-defense, and with muscular human rights norms used to justify military intervention.

The ethic of democracy is obviously opposed to ISIS- and al-Qaeda-like forms of violence that render obsolete the “regular war constellation” centered on uniformed, hierarchically ordered, state-directed combatants. The overarching point made by Kutz is that the nonviolent ethic of democracy is telic. It should be seen as “relentlessly critical,” as a restraint on “collective violence, not as a new source of war’s legitimacy” (p. 8). This is the “operating conceit” of the book, says Kutz: “The respect for our personhood that animates democracy demands a humility in the face of conflict, rather than the imperial assertiveness that has characterized so much democratic rhetoric, from the French Revolution to the Second Iraq War” (p. 12).

On War and Democracy is thoughtful, erudite, and provocative. That said, some readers will point out that Kutz says practically nothing about violence inside democracies (consider the Second Amendment)

or the rise of *condottieri* unhindered by the “laws of war” (around half of the U.S. forces that invaded Afghanistan and Iraq were comprised of contractors employed by for-profit companies, such as Blackwater). Other readers will note how Kutz unwisely presumes (with Fukuyama) that the normative ideal of “democracy remains unchallenged, even unchallengeable” (p. 2). His presumption underestimates the resilience of its competitors/enemies, including the new phantom democracies of Russia and China, which are not simply species of “managerial capitalism.” Still others will observe that Kutz’s pared-down definition of democracy ignores efforts (*The Life and Death of Democracy* is my own contribution) to redescribe democracy as monitory democracy, as a universal norm that stands for the postfoundational ethics of humility and equality against all forms of arbitrary power.

Classicists will suggest that had Kutz given attention to scholarship (by David Pritchard and others) on the ancient Greek democracies, he would have been forced to deal with the discomfiting fact that the norm of *dēmokratia* originally harbored connotations of military rule, usually translated as “to rule” or “to govern.” For instance, the verb *kratein* [κρατεῖν] meant mastery, military conquest, getting the upper hand over somebody or something. And if philosophical reasoning (as Kutz rightly notes) is indebted to the power contexts in which it is born, other readers will ask why a book in defense of democracy often seems so charged with the old anti-democratic presumption that philosophy brings enlightenment to people incapable of thinking through the messy realities in which they live.

The double retreat recommended by Kutz nevertheless has important merits. *On War and Democracy* is a cut well

above the old discredited consequentialism of “democratic peace” theorems. The book, actually a set of essays, brings illumination to subjects as varied as torture, assassination, drones, secrecy, and the dilemmas posed by revolutionary transitions to democracy. The greatest strength of *On War and Democracy* is surely that it speaks to our troubled times. It is a philosophical abreaction against the fact that the American democratic empire—like its two predecessors, classical Athens and revolutionary France—is today permanently at war.

We live in an age of “belligerent democracy,” says Kutz. He well understands that the ethic of democracy is victimized by

imperial interventions in the name of democracy. Against talk of realism, humanitarian intervention, and the responsibility to protect, his fundamental point is that the ethic of democratic politics is irenic. It is a precautionary principle that speaks against the beasts of war, their propensity to violate “the voice and integrity of others” and to destroy their “standing as equals in a shared dialogue about common causes and meanings” (p. 5).

—JOHN KEANE

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