
Critical Exchange

Benjamin Barber and the Practice of Political Theory

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Benjamin R. Barber: The Headstrong Democrat

One question has come up repeatedly about my graduate training at Rutgers University: how did you manage to work with Ben Barber? The way that question is asked is meant to imply that Ben could be difficult, which is true. Dissertation students like me were required to schedule appointments weeks in advance and on the much-anticipated day, Ben would often be delayed, sometimes for hours. Rescheduling was not an option and so we students needed to remain there, outside of his offices, at the ready, because it was never clear when exactly he would be able to see us. Slumping in the gray corridors of Hickman Hall, we waited and waited, finding out eventually that the delay was because Bill Bradley, Howard Dean, or President Bill Clinton had needed to talk to Ben immediately.

In meetings Ben could be brusque. I suppose some people might say he did not suffer fools gladly, but the truth is Ben demolished fools gladly. Verbal argumentation was his natural medium and he was a devastating interlocutor. Ben grasped an argument quick as lightning and, streaking through its structure, found the weak points, and strained them until they collapsed from their own internal failures. If the whole argument was knocked to the ground as a result, Ben



did not care. In fact, he may have been glad of it. There was no tolerance on his part for weakness, either in intellectuals or in their arguments. He was unrelenting, exacting, and without pity when it came to intellectual endeavors.

And, so the persistent question: why work with such a man? I have already given you part of the answer: Ben was unrelenting, exacting, and without pity when it came to intellectual endeavors. If you wanted your ideas and arguments to get a rigorous examination, you needed to work with Ben. For me, though, the greatest gift that Ben offered was his fearless intellectual nature. He was a freethinking social critic – a daring risk-taker – who positioned himself against conventional thinking time and time again. Ben would fasten onto an orthodox political view and, interrogating it fully, show that it was not as true or as beneficial as one first supposed.

Think western liberal democracy is a great political system? Read *Strong Democracy* and think again. This ambitious and passionate book, re-issued by University of California Press on its 20th anniversary in 2004, opens with some preliminary, throat-clearing praise for its target. Liberal democracy, Barber notes, is one of the sturdiest political systems, and its capacity to stolidly endure political turmoil, especially in America, has made it the modern model of democracy throughout the world. What most readers might expect at this point – a paean to James Madison, the wisdom of Federalist Number 10, or the prescience of the framers of the United States Constitution – never arrives. Instead *Strong Democracy* insists that we focus on the source of liberal democracy's dependability. Where does it come from? Knowing as we do, from Polybius forward, that political regimes are naturally unstable and carry the seeds of their own destruction within them, it is not obvious how liberal democracy avoids this fate. What had to be sacrificed – what had to die – in order to give liberal democracy its enduring life?

Barber's answer was that strong democracy itself was sacrificed. Real self-governance and an engaged, participatory citizenry had been given over to create a fake or "thin" kind of liberal, representative democracy that was a pallid and uninspired substitute. Liberal democracy had many undemocratic impulses according to Barber, but they all stemmed from a central problem of prioritizing individual liberty above all else. Liberal democracy crowned a new sovereign, the individual, who reigned supreme over her own discrete and solitary sphere. Thus, this political system "is capable of fiercely resisting every assault on the individual – his privacy, his property, his interests, and his rights – but it is far less effective in resisting assaults on community or justice or citizenship or participation" (Barber, 1984, p. 4). He insisted that liberal democracy, with its radical individualism and its stolid, boring sort of stability, never outweighed the benefits of genuine self-governance, collective action, and civic participation. *Strong Democracy* confronted readers with an uncomfortable demand: the necessity of dethroning themselves as sovereign individuals. Instituting strong democracy, a genuinely



participatory form of self-governance, would require its own kind of sacrifice. Each and every one of us must voluntarily abdicate individual sovereign power and let go of the dream of isolated control and self-reliance.

As appealing as Barber's vision of participatory democracy was (and remains), the book raised legitimate concerns that the portrayal of strong democracy was too rosy, too optimistic. As Alan Wolfe (1986, p. 89) put it, the "possibility that strong democracy might unleash the worst in man as well as the best has to be acknowledged." These sorts of concerns – and others – led to the book being read, re-read, praised, castigated, and debated, as the more than 8500 citations of *Strong Democracy* in scholarly books and articles well attest.

In *Jihad vs. McWorld*, published in 1995, Barber responded to a new wave of exultant praise for liberal democracy prompted by Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama, seeing the collapse of state communism as a monumental historical moment, argued that liberal democracy marked the end point of humanity's ideological evolution, and thus it was the final form of human government. While Fukuyama imagined a future of liberal democratic dominance and the peace that would likely flow from it, Barber saw conflict and strife. The contemporary world, he argued, was caught between two inverse trends: McWorld, the universalizing and homogenizing influence of global economic markets and popular culture, and Jihad, the parochial and fragmenting influence of racial, ethnic, and religious allegiances. These two forces were antithetical; antipathy, for one fed and reinforced the other. Jihad (or elsewhere Babel) "threatened the balkanization of nation-states in which culture is pitted against culture" and it was "against technology, against pop culture, against integrated markets; against modernity itself as well as the future in which modernity issues" (Barber, 1995a, p. 4). One result of this dynamic, Barber argued, was that the planet was melding together while at the very same moment it was pulling apart. This epic conflict, bad enough on its own, was made worse because both trends undermined the genuine, participatory democracy of the sort outlined in *Strong Democracy*. Each trend renounced civil society, subverted democratic citizenship, and compromised civil liberty and democratic institutions. As one critic pointed out, the title of the book really should have been *Jihad vs. McWorld vs. Democratic Ideals* (Juergensmeyer, 1996, p. 588). In opposition to Fukuyama's transcendent vision of democracy, Barber argued democracy was under threat by the warfare between homogenizing and fragmenting forces. In his view, history was far from over. Indeed, it threatened to go backwards "in an atavistic return to medieval politics where local tribes and ambitious emperors together ruled the world entire" and democracy was nowhere to be found (Barber, 1995a, p. 7).

The uncanny prescience of *Jihad vs. McWorld* won it many admirers. It was re-issued after 9/11 with a new subtitle, "Terrorism's Challenge to Democracy," and a new introduction, in which Barber connected the arguments he made in 1996 to the events of 9/11. The book vexed others. Proponents of liberal, free-market



institutions objected to the denunciation of the capitalistic global economy. Fukuyama (1995, p. 117) disliked the book's "snobbish distaste for capitalism." Readers like Mark Juergensmeyer and Fareed Zakaria raised a reasonable concern about the use of jihad, a term which also signifies a sacred struggle within a devout Muslim, to symbolize every centrifugal, tribal, and violent force in the world (Juergensmeyer, 1996; Zakaria, 1996). Juergensmeyer rightly pointed out that some of these centrifugal movements were founded in the name of democracy, not in opposition to it. Seemingly impervious to attack, Barber defended his argument in unequivocal terms. Responding to a critic who offered a full-throated defense of free-market enterprise, he noted that his opponent's "penchant for pink baiting assures me that history and ideological conflict are not really over after all" (Brus, 1992).

Barber's contrarian streak is present in some of the earliest of his writings. In 1974, when much focus was on the tumults of American democracy, Barber looked to Switzerland in *The Death of Communal Liberty*, a monograph that began as his dissertation. If you want to understand democracy, he argued, do not look to big, brash America, but rather to some of the oldest and most participatory cantons in Switzerland. Questioning received wisdom from the start, Barber pulled the ultimate anti-Tocquevillian move: he turned to Europe, not America, to understand democracy. Along the way, he noted the "stunning parochialism" of most of the political theory of the day, which relied too heavily on the Anglo-American tradition. Giving a sense of what was to come in the book and, as it turned out, in his career, Barber chafed against the confines of Anglo-American political tradition, noting "that it is as insular as it is fertile, as narrow as it is long, as dogmatic as it is convincing" (Barber, 1974, p. 3). Dislodging the dominant theoretical approach also required examining actual political alternatives, the Swiss cantons, and understanding their history and the development of their political institutions. This was precisely what Barber's book, which really should have the Tocquevillian title "Democracy in Switzerland," set out to do.

Benjamin R. Barber will be remembered for his many contributions to American intellectual life, to international organizations, and to political science. He wrote eighteen books of political theory. In *Cool Cities*, published by Yale University Press right before he died, Barber argued that the existential threat of climate change and the inability of nation-states to deal with it demanded a new set of political institutions and arrangements. He urged cities to the fore. Cities, he argued, should form an *interdependent* global network designed to address the common problem of climate change and citizens should explicitly empower urban leadership to speak on their behalf. Right until the end, Barber was prodding us to think about pressing problems differently and goading us to be better, more engaged citizens.

Benjamin R. Barber will be remembered for editing the journal *Political Theory* for ten years. He will rightly be commemorated, too, for his wide-ranging



intellectual interests in art, theater, dance, and food, as well as for authoring plays and novels, writing for television, penning song lyrics, and even composing a libretto. He will be venerated for a lifetime of awards and honors: he was knighted by the French government; he received the Berlin Prize from the American Academy; and he was honored with the John Dewey Award in 2013.

Along with these many accomplishments, I will remember Ben Barber as a lionhearted, even fearless critic. Early on in writing my dissertation, there was one meeting with Ben that I was quite nervous and tense about. On this occasion I dreaded talking with Ben, so much so that I welcomed the wait in Hickman Hall because it deferred what I expected to be a painful and embarrassing discussion. I had been to the American Political Science Association's annual meeting and presented a chapter of my dissertation. The panelists and the discussant were far more distinguished and learned than I, and, not surprisingly, they found all sorts of flaws with the argument. I was not embarrassed – or at least not too much – about this. As I have said, Ben revered armed intellectual battles and, though he looked coldly on defeat, he also understood that victories came through practice and engagement. I was nervous about telling Ben that the discussant, the panelists, and even the audience seemed to genuinely dislike the argument. My paper aroused a great deal of unaffected antipathy and opposition, so much so that I was convinced that the whole dissertation needed to be rethought. How would I ever get a job? When the time came to talk to Ben, I explained the situation. Trying not to let the crashing waves of disappointment inside me show, I suggested that the framing needed to change. The whole dissertation needed to be rethought. After I had made my speech, I braced for his reaction. Ben was ecstatic. Instead of the criticism I was expecting, there was a barrage of praise. The work, Ben said, was forcing readers to question their assumptions about democracy, and it was getting them to think without banisters. Ben assured me there was no greater sign that the dissertation was on the right track. I should proceed without hesitation.

To me, Benjamin R. Barber was a true heir of Socrates. He was a gadfly on the steed of orthodox political life who was not afraid to arouse ire. He never bemoaned the swats that came his way because he perceived these reactions differently from most of us. He understood that swats were good; slings and arrows were even better. These reactions told him he was on to something promising. He was doing the work that he had been given to do as a political theorist. Though I wish that he were here now to continue his work as a whip-smart irritator and pest, he has left it to us: his students, his colleagues, his admirers, his friends, those who knew him personally and those who knew him through his writing. We, who are indebted to Ben Barber for reasons too many to count, owe him this: a commitment to continue his work as an intellectual risk-taker, a firebrand, and the very best kind of political pest.

Jennet Kirkpatrick



or by the stubbornness with which foreign science is spurned (1974, pp. 200–201).

This question figures into *Strong Democracy* nowhere that I remember. That book edits out this dark side of Alpine democracy to carry forward only its best features. I do not mean to suggest that Barber willfully repressed the one feature of his archive that belies his life's commitments. I mean, rather, to take up the gesture of his inscription – to allow theory its fictitious aspects and grant fiction its truths.

Lisa Disch

Notes

- 1 Some of what appears in this paragraph and the next two is taken from Mansbridge (1987), review of *Strong Democracy*; other paragraphs in this essay draw from Mansbridge and Latura (2017).
- 2 In a detail that Ben undoubtedly refused consciously to crop from the photograph, the citizen's hands, clasped behind his back, hold a rosary. The photograph is taken from Bichhler (1969), opposite p. 265, with permission of the publisher. The photograph of "Representative Government" is taken from Tobler (1971, p. 27), with permission of the publisher.
- 3 For a parsing of this sentence that criticizes its focus on commonality, see Bickford (1996).

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