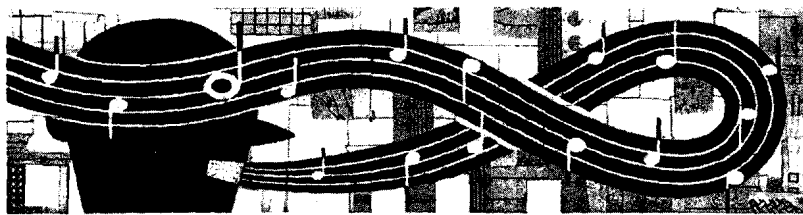


THE CRITICS



BOOKS

PEOPLE POWER

Revisiting the origins of American democracy.

BY JILL LEPORE

In 1938, if you had a dollar and seventy-two cents, you could buy a copy of "The Rise of American Democracy," a seven-hundred-page hardcover about the size of a biggish Bible or a Boy Scout handbook. While a Bible's worth is hard to measure, the Scout guide, at fifty cents, was an awfully good bargain, and was, in any case, the book you'd most like to have if you were shipwrecked somewhere, not least because it included the chapter "How to Make Fire Without Matches." But "The Rise of American Democracy" promised, invaluable, "to make clear how Americans have come to live and to believe as they do." It was also a quick read. "A Simple Book," its ad copy boasted. "Paragraphs average three to a page. Sentences are short." Better yet: "A Democracy Theme runs through the whole text."

The book's authors, Mabel B. Casner, a Connecticut schoolteacher, and Ralph Henry Gabriel, a Yale professor, set out to make history matter. In a foreword written in the dark days of 1937, when Fascism, not democracy, was on the rise, they offered a sober historian's creed: "We live today in perilous times; so did many of our forefathers. They sometimes made mistakes; let us strive to learn not to repeat these errors. The generations which lived before us left us a heritage of noble ideals; let us hold fast to these." Above all, they wanted American schoolchildren to understand the *idea* of democracy. Gabriel, who went on to write "The Course of American Democratic Thought" and

to help found the American Studies Association, was an intellectual historian. But the book is also full of practical teaching tips and "Real life Activities" (tested by Casner in her classroom in West Haven, Connecticut) that were supplied at the end of every chapter, and included instructions for an end-of-year finale—a class play to be performed some cool June afternoon—"The Rise of American Democracy: A Dramatization in Four Scenes." It begins in front of a closed curtain:

Enter COLUMBIA from one side and BOY from Europe from the opposite side.

BOY: I am looking for Columbia. Do you know where I could find her?

COLUMBIA: I am she.

BOY (*bowing*): I am happy and honored to make your acquaintance. I come from Europe. I have heard much of your democracy. I have come to you to find out what it is like...

COLUMBIA: I shall be glad to show you. Perhaps the best way is to go on a journey through American history. (*Exit both together.*)

The curtain rises on the Constitutional Convention, where Columbia and the earnest young European watch the delegates conclude their deliberations. But Scene 3, in which Columbia takes her awestruck European student of democracy to "the Western plains in the 1840's" to witness a shambles of bedraggled pioneers scuffling across the stage, is undoubtedly the play's climax, since it combines singing, cowboy costumes, and parts not only for every student but for pets, too, as per the sociable stage direction "*dogs may be added.*" While the pio-

neers hum the tune to "Oh! Susanna," the boy, puzzled, turns to Columbia: "I understand that they are settling your great continent, but I do not understand what they have to do with democracy." To which Columbia replies, "Look at these men and women. They have only a few belongings and simple tools. Yet they are braving the dangers of the wilderness. They are building a democratic nation. Men do not have to have possessions to do great things." No matter if the scenery toppled, if the pioneers tripped in their boots, if the dogs barked and bayed; the audience had been treated to a concise restatement of what was then a dominant interpretation of the rise of American democracy—that it was fuelled by the settling of the frontier and that it chiefly involved the hardscrabble striving of poor white men.

All of which is taken up, and much of it disputed, in Sean Wilentz's new book, also called "The Rise of American Democracy" (Norton), just over a thousand pages, and, while no steal, reasonably priced at thirty-five dollars. Its paragraphs do not average three to a page. Its sentences are not short. But a Democracy Theme does run through the whole text.

In many ways, democracy's rise is baffling. Within the lifetime of, say, Noah Webster, an American born in 1758 and dead by 1843, the proportion of white men who were eligible to vote grew from less than half to nearly all. This sweeping extension of suffrage did not come all at once, with American independence or the ratification of the Constitution. It happened over decades, as new states entering the union adopted new and more democratic constitutions and old states revised theirs to eliminate property requirements for voting and to call for more direct and frequent elections. Meanwhile, the reputation of democracy as a form of government went from unutterably bad to unassailably good.

Well, maybe not quite unassailably. In 1837, Noah Webster vented his disgust at democracy's rise. "It has been a prevailing opinion, even with many of our greatest men, that the *people* can govern themselves, and that a *democracy* is of course a *free government*," he accurately observed. "Such language as this has been in the mouths of our patriots,



To the Federalist Noah Webster, the principle of equal suffrage was "a monstrous inversion of the natural order of society."

and in the columns of newspapers for thirty or forty years, until it is considered as expressing political axioms of unquestionable truth." As a young man, Webster had made his name writing spelling books and editing staunchly Federalist newspapers. In 1828, he published his magnum opus, "An American Dictionary of the English Language." He was a born definer, not to say a mincer, of words. About the rise of democracy, he complained, "The men who have preached these doctrines have never defined what they mean by the *people*, or what they mean by *democracy*,

nor how the *people* are to govern themselves." As Webster saw it, democracy is rule by the people and the people are, generally, insufferable idiots.

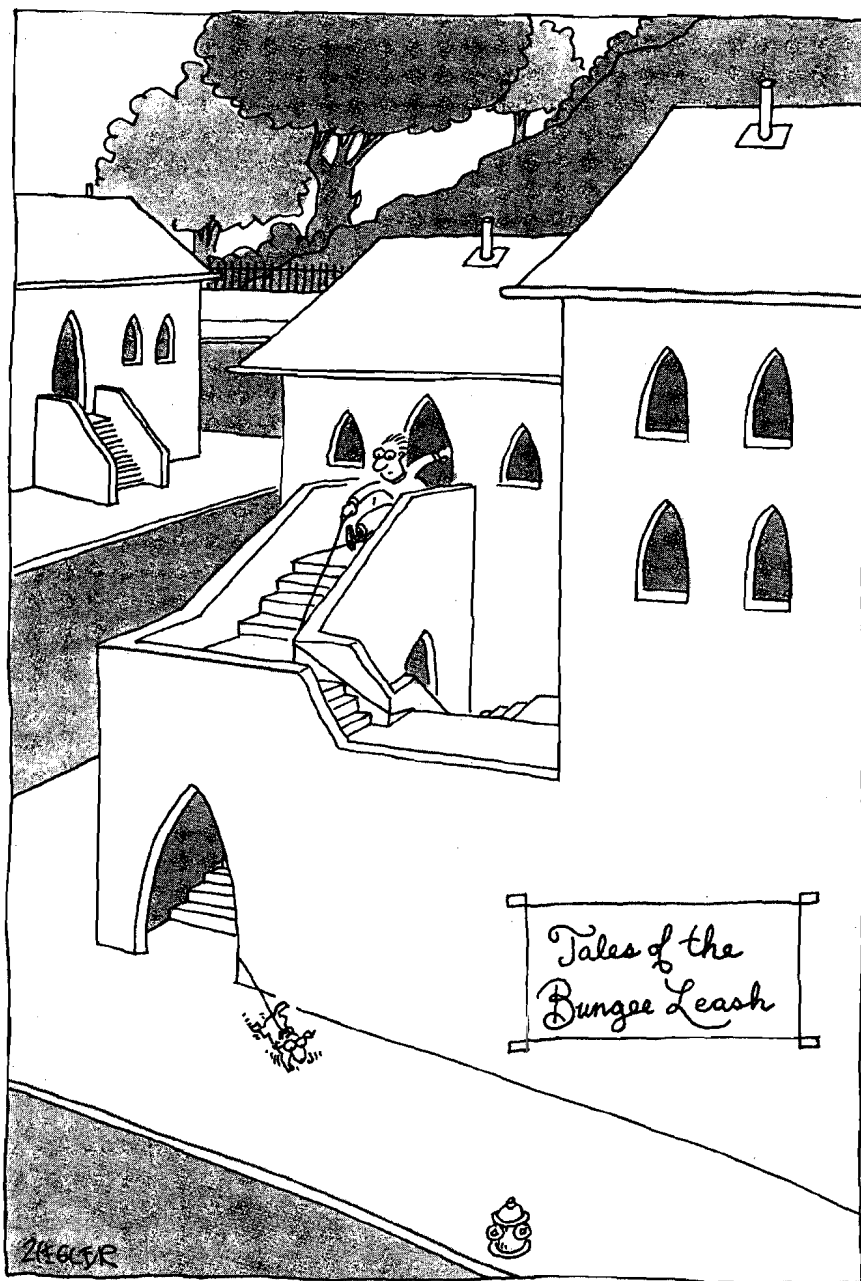
PEOPLE, *n.* ...
2. The vulgar; the mass of illiterate persons.

The knowing artist may judge better than the *people*. Waller.

"Give the people the *power*, and they are *all tyrants* as much as Kings," he wrote. "They are even more tyrannical; as they are less restrained by a sense of propriety or by principles of honor; more under the control of violent passions,

exasperated by envy and hatred of the rich; stimulated to action by numbers; and subject to no responsibility."

As much as Noah Webster professed to loathe the people, so much did Thomas Jefferson profess to love them. Jefferson considered the mass of the American people—farmers—to be the great repository of republican virtue. "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people," he wrote. In the seventeen-nineties, Jefferson's followers, fiercely fighting Federalist rule, redefined democracy as the Revolution's



legacy, a logic that made Federalism appear inconsistent with the spirit of the Revolution. "He that is not a Democrat is an aristocrat or a monocrat," one Jeffersonian declared. When Jefferson was elected President, in 1800, the Federalists, those rank monocrats, lost control of the government.

Always eager to serve his country, Webster wrote to Jefferson in 1801 offering an exegesis of his inaugural address (on the ground that "surely every sentence of the philosophical Jefferson must carry with it *meaning*"). In his address, Jefferson had declared,

"Sometimes it is said that man can not be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others? Or have we found angels in the form of kings to govern him? Let history answer this question." As for history, Webster had this answer: "If there ever was a government, which under the *name* of a republic or democracy, was generally guided by eminent wisdom, virtue and talents, it was a government of a mixed kind, in which an *aristocratic* branch existed independent of popular suffrage." After all, Webster asked, "what do men gain

by elective governments, if fools and knaves have the same chance to obtain the highest offices, as honest men?"

Jefferson, who considered Webster "a mere pedagogue, of very limited understanding," never replied to his letter, and Webster added the slight to his list of grievances. The list was getting pretty long. As a Connecticut legislator from 1800 to 1807, Webster helped block bills eliminating the property qualification for voting. He himself had earned the right to vote, he was keen to point out, by writing his spelling books and dictionaries: "I am a farmer's son and have collected all the small portion of property which I possess by untiring efforts and labors to promote the literary improvement of my fellow citizens." And he would not have political decisions made for him by men who had no similar stake in the world. "If all men have an equal right of suffrage, those who have *little* and those who have *no* property, have the power of making regulations respecting the property of others," he reasoned. "In truth, this principle of *equal suffrage* operates to produce extreme *inequality of rights*; a monstrous inversion of the natural order of society." If voting-eligibility laws had to be changed, Webster had his own ideas about how to change them. "The people... would be more free and more happy," he suggested, "if all were deprived of the right of suffrage until they were 45 years of age, and if no man was eligible to an important office until he is 50."

By the end of the War of 1812, the Federalists had effectively lost any real influence over the American electorate. In the eighteen-twenties and thirties, a new kind of democracy emerged, as the nation expanded and more and poorer white men came to the polls and were elected to office. With the election of that scrappy frontiersman Andrew Jackson, in 1828, Jeffersonianism gave way to Jacksonianism: tied to party, arrayed against moneyed privilege, and advocating economic opportunity. By then, Webster had all but given up on the United States. Had he known what would become of the Republic, he would never have lifted a finger to fight the Revolution. Even George Washington, Webster thought, "would never have opposed the British government" if he could have anticipated the spoils

system. Weary of his home state, Webster wished "to be forever delivered from the *democracy of Connecticut*." He'd even be willing to make the great sacrifice of moving to Vermont, if that state could "be freed from our *democracy*," adding, "As to the cold winters, I would, if necessary, become a troglodyte and live in a cave."

What accounts for the rise of American democracy? The field of explanation—even the phrase itself—is littered with metaphors. "American democracy did not rise like the sun at its natural hour in history," Wilentz wryly observes, dismissing the notion that democracy arrived, fully formed, in 1776 or 1787. To Noah Webster, democracy was a sickness, and the only question was "whether the United States are to suffer all the violence of the disease, or only its milder symptoms." Other early observers of American democracy determined that it had been set in motion by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, like a child's windup toy. Having heard that all men are born free and equal, all men and women, no matter what race, no matter how poor, will eventually seize that freedom. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1831, he concluded that American democracy was the unavoidable consequence of Americans' equality. "The more I advanced in the study of American society," he wrote, "the more I perceived that this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived." As he saw it, a nation of men possessed of roughly equal estates and education, and lacking aristocratic titles, must necessarily become a nation of men possessed of roughly equal political rights. "To conceive of men remaining forever unequal upon a single point, yet equal on all others, is impossible; they must come in the end to be equal upon all," he wrote.

Tocqueville's interpretation was largely put aside by later historians, including Frederick Jackson Turner, who treated the subject in a 1903 essay in the *Atlantic*, "Contributions of the West to American Democracy." Turner believed that democracy had everything to do with the land—"this vast shaggy continent of ours"—and offered his own metaphor for the rise of American de-

mocracy: "the wind of Democracy blew... from the West." From Colonial days onward, Turner argued, blustery demands for fuller political participation—for local governance, more frequent elections, and broader suffrage—came, always, from frontier settlers chafing at the authority of Eastern élites. "A fool can sometimes put on his coat better than a wise man can do it for him," they told royal governors and, later, state legislators and, above all, the federal government. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution may have been drafted on the shores of the Atlantic, Turner conceded, but they were tested in the foothills of the Alleghenies and beyond. "This, at least, is clear," Turner insisted. "American democracy is fundamentally the outcome of the experiences of the American people in dealing with the West."

Turner's thesis of frontier democracy influenced generations of American historians and decades of American popular culture and more or less dictated Casner and Gabriel's story about the rise of American democracy. Like most good theories, it had a long life as an interpretation before historians began calling it a myth. But Turner's thesis does not shape Wilentz's. "In fact," Wilentz contends, "the West borrowed heavily from eastern examples."

In this, Wilentz, a professor of history at Princeton and a contributing editor of *The New Republic*, follows the elegant work of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who, in "The Age of Jackson," published in 1945, gently observed, "It has seemed that Jacksonian democracy, which has always appeared an obvious example of Western influence in American government, is not perhaps so pat a case as some have thought." Schlesinger argued that the rise of American democracy during the age of Jackson was the result of class struggle in an industrializing economy. For Schlesinger, this was a struggle of ideas—most of all, of *one* idea, that political power can be divorced from property ownership. "It is in vain to talk of Aristocracy and Democracy," a stonecutters unionist declared in 1835. "These terms are too variable and indeterminate to convey

adequate ideas of the present opposing interests; the division is between the rich and the poor—the warfare is between them." That war, as Schlesinger described it in a chapter called "Jacksonian Democracy as an Intellectual Movement," was waged as much in politics and the courts as in American letters (perhaps most notably in the *Democratic Review*, a journal founded in 1837 "for the purpose of enlisting Literature, Religion, and Philosophy on the side of Democracy," and whose contributors included Bryant, Hawthorne, Thoreau, Whittier, Whitman, Poe, and Longfellow).

Wilentz's initial foray into the story of democracy's rise came with his first book, "Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850" (1984), in which he argued that urban workers and radicals constituted the truly democratic element in Jacksonianism. Wilentz was criticized for his depiction of manly artisans fighting the good fight (in my dog-eared copy, I found a note, passed to me by a classmate: "Do Wilentz's workers have any vices other than the occasional stiff drink?"), but the book earned him considerable praise. Ironically, it also won the Frederick Jackson Turner Award of the Organization of American Historians.

"The Rise of American Democracy" is, to some degree, "Chants Democratic" writ large. It expands that story both geographically—following democracy's growth among what Wilentz labels "city democrats" and "country democrats"—and chronologically; the book's subtitle is "From Jefferson to Lincoln," a choice that Wilentz is at pains to explain. "By singling out Jefferson and Lincoln, I certainly do not mean to say that presidents and other

great men were solely responsible for the vicissitudes of American politics," he writes. That Wilentz, the loving chronicler of nineteenth-century New York workingmen's "shirtless democracy," should become a champion of Presidential history, in any form, is remarkable. But he believes that social historians have lost their way. The problem with social history, he argues, is that it has



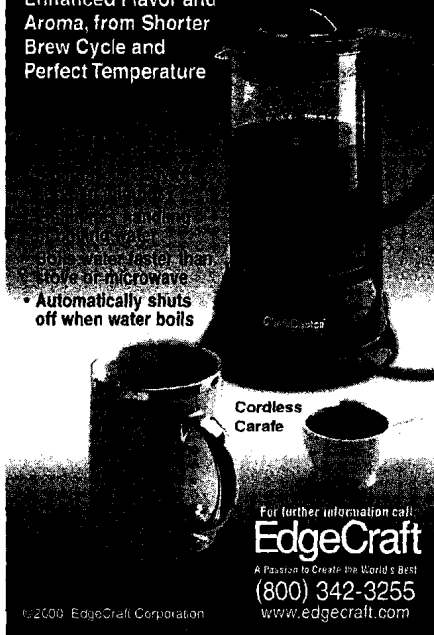
Chef'sChoice®

Electric French Press-Plus™

The Perfect Cup of Coffee
Piping Hot - Fast & Simple

New Taste Experience
Enhanced Flavor and
Aroma, from Shorter
Brew Cycle and
Perfect Temperature

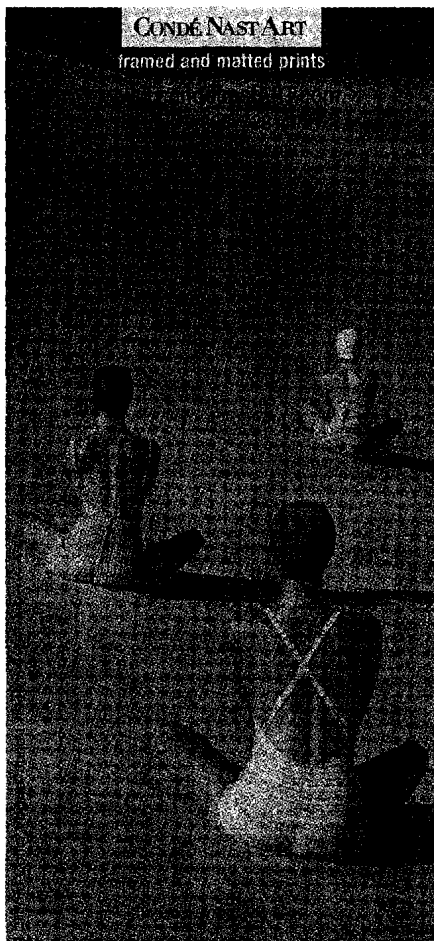
Boils water faster than
toaster or microwave
• Automatically shuts
off when water boils



For further information call:
EdgeCraft
A Passion to Create the World's Best
(800) 342-3255
www.edgecraft.com

©2000 EdgeCraft Corporation

CONDÉ NAST ART
framed and matted prints



"generally submerged the history of politics in the history of social change, reducing politics and democracy to by-products of various social forces." What he's done in "The Rise of American Democracy," and done exceedingly well, is to trace the play between politicians and political ideas, on the one hand, and the people and popular movements, on the other. More metaphors, this time Wilentz's mix: "Just as political leaders did not create American democracy out of thin air, so the masses of Americans did not simply force their way into the corridors of power."

Consider the story of an American slave named, improbably enough, Madison Washington. In the fall of 1841, Washington was serving as a cook on a ship called the *Creole*, sailing from Virginia with a hundred and thirty-five slaves aboard to be sold in New Orleans as part of the entirely legal coastal slave trade. When the ship neared the Bahamas, he left the ship's mess to lead a group of eighteen slaves in a revolt. They overwhelmed the crew and had the ship steered to Nassau. There the British authorities arrested the rebels and freed the rest of the ship's slaves. Like the *Amistad* case, two years earlier, the *Creole* uprising sparked an intense national debate. More important, it sparked a debate in Congress, where discussions of slavery had been silenced by a gag rule put in place by Southern legislators in 1836. Using the *Creole* controversy to challenge the gag rule, a young Ohio congressman named Joshua Giddings introduced a series of antislavery resolutions in the House in March, 1842, including one calling the *Creole* rebellion just. A motion to censure Giddings passed, 125 to 69, in a vote that split along sectional, not party, lines. But Giddings won back his seat just a month later, in a special election—in a vote of 7,469 to 393. Even his enemies conceded that Giddings's stunning reelection was "the greatest triumph ever achieved by a member of this House." As Wilentz writes, "Although the gag rule would not be formally voted down until December 1844, it had, as Giddings later related, 'morally ceased to operate.'"

In telling stories like this, Wilentz recovers the role played by men like Madison Washington in national poli-

tics and in democracy's rise. Washington didn't vote to end the gag rule; Giddings did. But Giddings was able to do what he did because Washington did what he did. "Giddings was on the lookout for some way to advance antislavery agitation beyond organizing yet again against the gag rule," Wilentz writes, "but he found it only after the *Creole* rebellion." Together, black rebels, white abolitionists, and antislavery politicians like Giddings forced the discussion of slavery onto the floor of Congress.

Readers may weary at the length of Wilentz's book, but, as a model for integrating social and political history, it's hard to dispute. That it will be disputed is, however, certain, if only because Wilentz has been such a vigorous critic of his colleagues. He has had little use for historians who defend Federalists like Noah Webster. To those who celebrate Federalists for their opposition to slavery, Wilentz counters, "Rarely has any group of Americans done so little to deserve such praise." In his *New Republic* reviews, Wilentz has been particularly indignant about historians who place Federalists in a better light than Republicans or who dismiss Jefferson's entire career because he owned slaves (including some who were almost certainly his own children). David McCullough's "John Adams" was, in his view, "popular history as passive nostalgic spectacle." Garry Wills's book about Jefferson's election, "Negro President," he deemed "misadventurous." In another essay, Wilentz concluded, "Were he alive today, Jefferson would probably regard modern American historians as a rascally bunch."

But one thing that Federalists understood—for all their failings, for all their unmitigated snobbery—was the fragility of democracy. I'd be willing to consider *you* an angel, Webster told Jefferson, if you could show me a democracy that isn't corrupt, or if you could protect the United States from "the instruments with which vicious and unqualified men destroy the freedom of elections, and exalt themselves into power, trampling first on the great and good, and afterwards on the very people to whom they owe their elevation." Webster may have been a prig, but he wasn't a duffer. ♦