



CAPSULE REVIEW



The Civic Bargain: How Democracy Survives

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In This Review

Manville and Ober urge defenders of liberal democracy to take the long view. The book provides fascinating portraits of four great breakthroughs in citizen self-rule: classical Athens, republican Rome, parliamentary Great Britain, and the United States. Each was a world-historical experiment in building collective self-government; politics, that is, without a boss. What allowed these democratic experiments to endure for centuries? Manville and Ober argue that despite their manifold differences, they shared a core set of features. They built institutions that divided and dispersed political authority, creating procedures for collective decision-making. They fostered trust and a spirit of compromise. They conceived of themselves as organic, evolving entities rather than as sets of static players. They understood the importance of civic education, which reinforced the norms of citizenship rights and responsibilities. Most important, Manville and Ober argue, the great democracies survived because they forged and maintained a “civic bargain,” a political pact about who is a citizen, how decisions are made, and the distribution of responsibilities and entitlements. As a result, these democracies were able to persevere through recurring crises and face down existential threats.