Counting myself as a liberal democrat, albeit one with reservations, I feel comfortable in assuming that “immanence” and “aporia” have a tendency to make the eyes of many in my camp glaze over. The works under review here provide an important corrective to the temptation on the part of many of us to sequester politics from uncertainty and conflict. The power of these recent works by Diken, Rosanvallon, Arditi, and Kirkpatrick lies in their insistence that the reality (and promise) of democracy involve not some enshrined and sanitized ideal but the playing out of the very forces that threaten to derail it. In various ways, these authors point to liberal democracy’s simultaneous and often contradictory impulses to moralize or idealize politics, to simplify and purify the expression of the popular will, and to render politics unthreatening and peaceful. Concerned about the negation, violence, and/or authoritarianism that such forces can in turn produce, each implicitly or explicitly seeks to anchor democratic politics in a kind of “immanent” ideal—embracing democracy’s antagonism and uncertainty as the potential means toward, rather than obstacles against, its ideals of freedom and equality.

Accounts that seem to take so seriously what I might call the “live current” of democracy raise a particular bar for themselves. Namely, they raise the question of whether it is possible to frame a political theory around “undecidability” that moves beyond the doubt and perplexity that they present...
as endemic to more idealized or teleological approaches to politics. In other words, does this approach to democratic politics become immanent in the sense of moving toward a subjective understanding that has no external effect?

In *Nihilism*, Bülent Diken presents a helpful framing of the forces in play and the issues at stake. He views contemporary politics as “post-political” and passively nihilistic: Everything can be discussed and negotiated—in a non-committal, unantagonistic way—by recognized interest groups, but radical questioning and reimagining of power relations remains impossible. This politics offers only a mask of tranquility, however. In the name of putting an end to the *idea* of violence, it must neutralize dissent and radicalism, a move that can only, according to Diken, be met by a hatred that takes on the form of ultra-antagonistic terrorism, a radical nihilism directed against the life valued so dearly by capitalists (pp. 85-89). Presenting nihilism not as an anomaly but as constitutive of the “social,” Diken suggests that it offers the possibility of creating new values even as it negates the given order. He therefore seeks to “reactivate the concept of nihilism in our own time” in the name of antinihilism (p. 7).

Offering a genealogy of nihilism that draws upon the Nietzschean-Deleuzean tradition, Diken outlines three forms of nihilism—religious/negative, radical, and passive. In doing so, he emphasizes the “disjunctive synthesis” of hedonistic passivity and destructive passions as binary poles that nonetheless presuppose and feed off one another, setting in motion an oscillation between the disorienting skepticism of passive nihilism (a world without values) and the despair of radical nihilism (values that cannot be realized in this world). The two share an alienation from the immanent world. Reforging that link to the immanent is, according to Diken, the key to antinihilism. “Perfect nihilism” represents both the disease and the cure, as the overman affirms life as it is and engages in a self-overcoming that does not separate reason, affect, and will from one another. “Perfect nihilism” thus “seeks its own limits, turns against itself, and destroys itself to create immanent values” (pp. 36-37).

On the one hand, Diken leads the reader through an accessible account of the nihilistic crisis and its Deleuzian resolution. On the other, it remains highly—and understandably—abstract. Diken thus seeks to dramatize these arguments through an exegesis of the Turkish film *Climates* that he believes not only captures the disjunctive synthesis between radical and passive nihilism but also offers an opportunity to reflect on Deleuze’s notion of “time-images” that allow viewers to distance themselves from the immediate and to move from perception to thought (forcing us to think the impossible), then from thought to affect (which gives reason an emotional intelligence). The convergence of concept and image becomes for Deleuze “action-thought,” a
sensory-motor unity that reestablishes the link between man and nature and thus, for Diken, offers the potential for finding subjective meaning and value through interpretation.

While the interplay of time, idealization, and affect deserves more attention in democratic theory, political theorists may begin to feel more at home as Diken turns from the genealogy of nihilism to its social aspects, outlining Deleuze and Guattari’s typology that links cruelty, terror, and cynicism to, respectively, primitive, despotic, and capitalist societies. He then offers his own consideration of the relation between the social affect of spite and the “impossible” social formation, or “really the threat of deformation,” that he labels “fire” or radical nihilism and sees captured in Michel Houellebecq’s fiction and perhaps most poignantly in contemporary politics’ twinning of terrorism and the politics of security.

According to Diken, terror and the war against it hold in common their rejection of immanence in favor of transcendence. Each recasts political differences as an absolute moral antagonism, a depoliticized clash between good and evil that seeks obliteration of the other, plays into a politics of fear, and allows the Schmittian “exception” to dominate politics. Diken posits instead an ontological stance of “immanent transcendence” that in his view holds antinihilist potential. Following Simmel, he depicts life as both requiring and resisting boundaries. While life can only express itself and find meaning through forms, the latter also ossify and constrain. Thus life also demands that these be overcome. The continuous oscillation results in disjunctive synthesis. As a result, rather than existing in juxtaposition with immanence, “transcendence is immanent in life” (pp. 81-82).

Diken suggests that this “immanent transcendence” allows humans to create moral or political values without a need for religion or fixed codex. In the absence of fixed law, moral individuals and political powers navigate perpetual critique, justification, and uncertainty while establishing transcendental stances with contextualized roots. The potential for violence always lurks here. Antinihilism, imposing form on chaos, requires cruelty: “Even thinking, in Foucault’s words, involves an instinctive violence, ‘something of the murderous’” (p. 71). The critical difference between the necessary cruelty of antinihilism and the violence of radical nihilism is, of course, that the latter creates value while the former denies the possibility of such value.

Antagonism also plays a central role in Diken’s antinihilistic politics. While Houellebecq fails to distinguish between spite and anger, Diken sees the difference between the two as crucial. Anger has a chance (not guaranteed) to become a social relation and to communicate its disagreement, whereas spite has no interest in political expression. The rest of the book is dedicated largely
to the possibility of (re)developing a culture of agonism that recognizes the inevitability of conflict and builds into itself a shared process of contestation. After rejecting Connolly’s “agonistic respect” because he thinks it carries within it a normative dimension that is neither present nor necessarily likely to be created through politics, Diken explores Negri’s distillation of agonism into the single fundamental antagonism of transcendence (nihilist negation) and immanence (antinihilist affirmation) and its manifestation in the “event.” Embedded within the Nietzschean-Deleuzian “eternal return” of difference, the event “forces us to think of the present as a passing moment, as becoming. . . . What exists, the present, is not only linked to the past but also to what is to come, to future”—and in this sense being is becoming (p. 141). Thus the event requires the actual for its expression but makes it possible to touch the virtual in a nonteleological fashion.

The “tangible intangibility” of democracy functions as an example of such an event. Imagined as a unity of multiplicities, it represents a virtual “problem” that can be actualized through different conceptions or solutions. The mediation of the latter “points towards future as yet unrealized forms of democracy, but also reminds us that there is no definitive form that will ever arrive” (p. 155). Thus democracy keeps alive the tension between the virtual and the actual, not through a belief in the progress or corruption of some fixed ideal, but through its very undecidability. Neither optimistic nor pessimistic, antinihilism roots itself in the possibility of social change itself.

Diken’s focus on nihilism might be viewed as providing an ethical and ontological frame or supplement to the works of Rosanvallon, Kirkpatrick, and Arditi. As such, it also includes some of the ellipses and abstractions that may be inevitable in this kind of effort. Antinihilism may rest upon the restoration of immanence, but his own engagement of the actual is limited, ranging from fleeting references and dubious diagnostics (e.g., Zizek’s claim that Diet Coke signifies the nothingness of the will) to provocative broadsides against the U.S. war against terror. His most extensive explorations of “the actual” involve contemporary film and literature, but interestingly he offers no “excursus” to exemplify and supplement his description of the agonistic “event” that he claims provides the foundation for antinihilism. Is it so far removed that it cannot even be imagined? In what way is that “immanent transcendence”?

Rosanvallon, Arditi, and Kirkpatrick take on historical and contemporary political institutions and movements more directly as they make their cases for a kind of “immanent” politics that engages the tensions and failures of democracy. In Counter-Democracy: Politics in the Age of Distrust, Rosanvallon emphasizes the durability of distrust even in legitimate democracies and explores
the ways by which it can be organized to allow people to impose greater control over political processes through such mechanisms as oversight, prevention, and judgment. “Counterdemocracy,” the constitutional and extraconstitutional devices distributed throughout society by which people attempt to limit and correct political officials, both complements the episodic democracy of the electoral-representative system and holds the potential to build trust. The challenge in contemporary politics, according to Rosanvallon, is that an overemphasis on the electoral-representative dimension of democracy has come at the expense of trust and the structures that might promote it, feeding a negative politics that taxes democratic institutions.

In exploring distrust and counterdemocracy, Rosanvallon seeks to bring together political theory and history, using the latter not to enshrine the linear development of an ideal type but to treat history as a “laboratory of the present,” available to test attempts to meet democracy’s dual demand of equality and autonomy through, for example, the institutional expression of popular will and/or addressing economic and social inequalities (pp. 25-26).

The French Revolution’s image of the “people’s watchful eye” plays a central role in the first section of the book. While surveillance came to be identified with the Terror and later Foucault’s panopticon, Rosanvallon believes the “surveillance of power by society”—and its three principal modalities of vigilance, denunciation and evaluation—should not be underestimated for making public opinion manifest as an “active and permanent presence” and rendering “distrust into an active democratic virtue” (pp. 29-30). Vigilance sets the general field of democratic politics and perhaps helps determine government priorities. Rosanvallon calls this “diffuse democracy, in which change occurs not so much through broad political participation but “through the advent of new forms of social attentiveness” (p. 40).

Offering a history that demonstrates the ways in which attempts to institutionalize direct forms of social oversight, such as Pennsylvania’s Council of Censors and France’s “Tribunate” in its Year VIII Constitution, faded quickly, Rosanvallon suggests that the modern trend has been toward treating elections as “total democratic institutions,” able not just to choose leaders but also to regulate public action and establish trust. That said, he also points toward the role that the symbolic capital of reputation plays in inspiring trust and notes that this means that in contemporary politics social norms may “effectively acquire attributes of sovereignty” (p. 52). Moreover, the broader dissemination of technical information and the general rise in education of citizens have led toward constant evaluation through public agencies, independent monitoring agencies, and political activities. The competence of public officials is thus open to evaluation, with an obvious impact on reputation—and trust and distrust.
Although he says it most pointedly in his discussion of denunciation, Rosanvallon seems aware that vigilance in general holds simultaneously both a faith in transparency, “the possibility of using publicity to administer a direct corrective” on public officials, and the potential for the “nihilistic stigmatization of authorities” always suspected of corruption (pp. 42-43). This same tension between positive participation and negation is evident in the second part of his work on “prevention.” “Critical sovereignty” structures the power of negation into the government itself, not just as a way of challenging its own power in the name of liberalism but also as a way of extending the legitimacy of the government by promoting the good management of public affairs and of ameliorating class conflict by offering democratic expression to the opposition. The ability to resist and obstruct have grown in importance since the eighteenth century but have also evolved into a sharper form of “negative sovereignty,” according to Rosanvallon.

He traces some of this effect to the advent of the postcommunist era. “The idea of politics as a choice between radically different social models faded away,” and a political philosophy with “a cautious and circumscribed view of politics” has come to dominate (p. 181). “Negative sovereignty” should not be confused with political apathy, however. The negative citizen is not necessarily passive; if he is skeptical about politics, he nonetheless strongly asserts his presence in that realm, usually through rejecting the past rather than affirming a positive mandate for the future. Reactive coalitions are easy to organize and can generate potent social power, even if they have little in common with “action majorities” (p. 184). Power alternates among these coalitions without alleviating dissatisfaction with politics itself, and many simply withdraw from politics altogether, thus reducing counterdemocracy to “a banal form of opposition to democracy itself” (p. 190).

The third part of Counter-Democracy focuses on judgment, a “general grammar of democratic action,” by which society acts upon itself. After offering a history of ancient political trials, Rosanvallon discusses what he calls “the judicialization of politics,” the application of criminal law to public life. Rosanvallon suggests the latter is symptomatic of an unresponsive political system and citizens’ impulse toward accountability. While such trials shouldn’t be idealized, Rosanvallon points toward their democratic appeal: Parties’ intentions and actions are subject to scrutiny according to strict procedural rules that require (at least nominally) equal representation of opposing viewpoints, and courts must render definitive resolutions (pp. 231-33).

The judicialization of politics is a symptom of, more than a solution to, the dynamics of contemporary democracy. As electoral-representative democracy has overstated its claims for generating legitimacy and trust, counterdemocratic
forces have also become overdeveloped: people seek to render the exercise of power so transparent and to control it so strictly that they render it impotent, unable to deliver on their high expectations for it and thus further delegitimated (pp. 255-59). Populism radicalizes oversight, negative sovereignty, and judgment. Its “pure politics of the unpolitical” posits a false image of a unified, homogeneous people and demonstrates a “failure to develop a comprehensive understanding of the problems associated with the organization of a shared world” (p. 22).

The tendency toward the unpolitical is heightened by the potential that all forms of counter-democracy carry with them, namely the fragmentation and complexity that make it difficult to perceive and interpret what is actually happening. This dynamic works against the “visibility and legibility” essential to shaping a shared political narrative (pp. 22-23). Nonetheless the “modern mixed regime” of history and political theory that Rosanvallon seeks must build upon these counterdemocratic forces—and somehow render them legible. Elections cannot serve as the sole source of legitimacy; room must be made at different organizational levels for criticism and monitoring as pluralistic political (not unpolitical) functions. Authorities wielding preventive power must be required to explain and justify their decisions. Finally (and most abstractly), the political must be “resymbolized” through a permanent questioning of social differences, “a clear and sober narrative of the failures and hopes” of seeking to institute a society of equals, despite all the obstacles (p. 312).

Particularly in this last respect, Rosanvallon’s democratic vision takes on some of Diken’s “immanent transcendence.” Through acknowledgement of the dissatisfactions and disagreements of politics, we are supposed to come to be able to believe in one another and in democracy’s potential, regaining “critical sovereignty.” Like Diken, however, this immanent politics still seems highly abstract despite the attention to institutional requisites.

In pursuing an account of emancipatory politics, Benjamin Arditi is more explicit than Rosanvallon about the interplay of transcendent and immanent, writing that the politics of emancipation occurs in the play between “the promise that entices us to demand the impossible and the continually deconstructible figures of possibility aiming to flesh out the promise” (p. 124). He shares Rosanvallon’s concerns about populism and the impulse to realize a transcendent vision of the popular will at the expense of law and ordinary politics, but he also seeks “an interruption of the given.” Arditi presents democracy as alternating between the redemptive and pragmatic: it simultaneously represents “the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people” and engages in “the grubby business of politics” through a set of institutions
and practices intended to resolve conflicts in nonrepressive ways; it promises power to the people but also experiences performance gaps in participation and responsiveness; it mediates between romantic notions of the spontaneous expression of popular will and the institutions and expertise required to realize (and temper) that will (p. 45).

Arditi suggests that populism is a part of democracy’s “internal periphery” and a “spectre” that both accompanies and haunts it. With regard to the former, he explores three possibilities: populism as a mode of representation that closely resembles contemporary democratic modes of representation; populism as a “symptom” of democratic politics that uncovers its rougher edges and brash demands; and populism as an “underside” of democracy, where the very functioning of the latter exacerbates a conflict that “cannot be resolved symbolically in the political sphere,” feeding a sense of social fragmentation that enlivens the fantasy of “the People-as-One” (pp. 82-83).

Using Manin’s Concept of Representative Government, Arditi suggests that populists are not alone in forging a close linkage between the representative and the represented, for contemporary democracy is also marked by the personalization of political opinions. Television and radio bring a virtual immediacy to the relation of governor and governed. Moreover, the expansion of government functions means that officials must make decisions on a variety of issues that cannot be encompassed or anticipated in a party platform. As a result, they enjoy something analogous to Locke’s prerogative. Thus populists and contemporary democrats converge on at least two points: an emphasis on personal trust and the risk of abusing legal norms or institutional procedures in the name of serving the people (pp. 68-72). (Arditi uses presidential signing statements as his example of the latter.)

Like democracy, populism endorses public debate, participation, and informal expression of the popular will, but in doing so it also takes the gloves off, so to speak, and as a result functions as a “symptom” of democracy. In other words, populists resist the “gentrification” of the political and lay bare the asymmetries and conflicts that have been domesticated by the operation of checks and balances and the tempered negotiations of political elites. In doing so, populists simultaneously reflect an “internal moment” of liberal democracy and disrupt the political performance that brings its closure (pp. 77-78).

In describing the underside of democracy, Arditi relies upon Lefort’s depiction of the “the undecidable nature” of democracy, the “process of questioning implicit in social practice and by a representation of unity dependent upon political discourse bound up with ideological debate” (p. 82). By its antifoundational nature, democracy invites the reestablishment of foundations. Thus democracy may invite populist reaction, “the beginnings of a quest for
a substantial identity, . . . for any embodying power,” precisely through its purest functioning (p. 83).

In his closing chapters, Arditi seeks a radical politics that avoids the authoritarian pitfalls of populism and moves beyond the contemporary identity politics that he sees as essentializing difference and conceiving of citizens merely as bearers of rights instead of participants in collective undertakings. His emancipatory politics disturbs the given and redefines the possible in pursuit of a less unequal and oppressive world, “whether at a macrolevel or in the local regions of a microphysics of power” (pp. 100-1). Arditi quite consciously leaves equality and freedom undefined, arguing that they have no relevant political existence outside efforts to substantiate them in specific contexts. The agitation he describes (e.g., a black woman, when asked her race in court, replying, “the human race”) acts as an “unveiling” or “translation,” simultaneously individual and exemplary. By presenting inequality so pointedly, such actions educate us “of a seemingly impossible equality to come, while not falling into claims of human essence, teleo-eschatology or promise of final redemption (pp. 95-97). These translations feed and reflect our dedication to the ideal, with enthusiasm not lodged in some simple and distant future but in what is happening here and now. Like Diken, Arditi sees democracy as involving simultaneously subjection and subjectivization, the activity of becoming free. Moreover, his description of the “event” specifies Diken’s more general description of democracy and perhaps surprisingly captures a kind of “resymbolization” of politics, even as these events may also call into question the possibility of a “clear and sober narrative” of democracy that Rosanvallon seeks.

Arditi is explicit in acknowledging that whoever invokes emancipation must be willing to identify those who damage equality or freedom and be prepared to engage them in some kind of contest (p. 101). In considering the possibilities of revolution, he cites Derrida’s “aporia of undecidability,” defined as “the moment when the decision between just and unjust cannot be guaranteed by a rule and yet cannot disregard the rule either” (p. 124). The delineation of the just from the unjust, emancipatory contests from less laudatory violence is the focus of Jennet Kirkpatrick’s Uncivil Disobedience, which considers how “commendable” democratic desires have nonetheless been “distorted to justify recourse to brute force” (pp. 3-6).

Kirkpatrick detects within “America’s long history of homegrown version of terrorism”—a history that includes the modern militia movement, vigilantes, lynch mobs, and radical abolitionists—several patterns: (1) these groups moralize democracy as an “unassailable force of good” (cf. Diken); (2) they conceive of democracy as a series of “perfect” identity relationships: the
governed with government, the people with law, and the law with justice, with any discord among these provoking a “crisis mentality”; (3) they tend to simplify popular will and morality, assuming that each matches their own; (4) they adhere to a steadfast belief that institutional problems are best solved by shifting power toward the people (again, envisioned as a homogenous entity that adopts their worldview); (5) they view the government as an enemy; and (6) they are reckless about their tactics and engage in “indiscriminate violence” (pp. 4-9).

Kirkpatrick maintains that uncivil disobedience reveals in a pointed fashion the constant temptation to escape from the rule of law in the name of unmediated popular will. Vigilantes dislike legal procedures that appear to obfuscate the will of the people, but there are two fundamental problems associated with this position. First, “pure” popular will is itself a problematic and elusive concept. The constraints of law are valuable precisely because they allow conflict and dissent to surface: “So doing, legal procedures amount to a world marked by clashes between citizens and government and by disagreement between and among citizens. The political community may be stronger for it” (p. 60).

Second, vigilantes fail to recognize that there are instances when law and sovereignty must be separated; the mutuality of autonomy and subjection requires that particular interests be alienated from (and dominated by) law (pp. 53-54). This is necessary not just for the preservation of democratic freedom but for the sake of stability. The laws that uncivil disobedients tend to shirk are “second-order rules governing who is empowered to interpret, adjudicate, and enforce the law.” By this same logic they tend also to reject punishment for breaking the law, because to punish the people for asserting their sovereign will seems illegitimate (pp. 14-15). If the people can rightfully take on the legal duties of officials to interpret the law, it seems to follow that they may also legitimately use those officials’ predominant means of enforcement—namely, violence. Kirkpatrick is skeptical that the ends justify those means.

Kirkpatrick views disobedience as problematic when people imagine being able to escape fully the limitations of law (p. 118), but it is also clear that she does not want them simply to submit categorically to the law, either. She criticizes Lincoln’s Lyceum speech because she takes his exhortation to obey the law as encouraging quietism and, potentially, a virulent reaction against the rule of law altogether. Earlier she advances this point through an account of immediatist abolitionists who rendered themselves into “politically inert lumps” by positing an immediate and unadulterated moral identification between voters and government and presenting citizens as wholly bound to a pro-slavery Constitution. As a result, they live in a political dystopia with no middle ground: law-abiding politicians must contradict the moral prohibition
against slavery and in doing so make every voter complicit. The immedi-
atatists choose to resist moral culpability by withdrawing from politics, but
this leaves the playing field open to unrepentant slaveholders and the likes of
John Brown, who reject compliance with an unjust regime and pursue vio-
lent change in its stead.

Radical abolitionists pose an alternative approach in that they presented the
Constitution as malleable to their own values, making it possible for them to
both condemn slavery and participate in politics. If this gets them closer to the
kind of politics of autonomy Kirkpatrick seeks, it only gets them so far, for it
does not, in her view, “fully articulate a complete approach to law that encom-
passed resistance and obligation, sovereignty and domination” (p. 109).

Does Kirkpatrick herself provide such a complete approach? She closes the
book by broadly suggesting that democracy should accept rather than seek to
solve the tension between the rule of law and popular will, seeking neither com-
plete obedience nor sheer escape from the law. However, her fuller account of
disobedience that acknowledges both resistance and obligation to the law occurs
in her description of the civil rights movement earlier in the book. In her view,
Martin Luther King, Jr. and his followers adopted a flexible, modest and plural-
istic view of law and citizenship. They accepted the punishment meted for their
disobedience, even while calling into question the laws undergirding it. While
lynch mobs (and probably vigilantes) tended to see a tight, perhaps seamless
relationship between morality and law, the civil rights movement posited a
looser one. In violating what H.L.A. Hart would call duty-imposing laws but
respecting power-conferring ones, they both asserted their will and accepted that
parts of the law will not and should not submit to that will (pp. 86-87). Kirkpat-
rick suggests that King’s adherence to power-conferring rules reflected “a nor-
mative view of lawmaking as encompassing disagreement and conflict” (pp.
88-89). Laws reflect and accommodate moral differences rather than seeking to
eliminate them. In light of those inevitable divisions, power-conferring rules help
prescribe how to work out disagreements about legitimate duty.

While this is a promising argument, King’s own approach to civil disobe-
dience seems to have been driven more by what Arditi might call “unveiling”
or “translation”—nonviolent submission to power-conferring laws as a means
to draw dramatic attention to inequality—than by a normative approach to
lawmaking, per se. The latter seems driven more by Kirkpatrick’s own inter-
est in constructing an approach to law that gives voice to democratic desires
without falling into populist violence, and the argument might be better served
if she developed it more explicitly and fully on her own terms.

By focusing largely on American episodes of disobedience and violence,
Kirkpatrick reminds readers of some of the stakes in the political game. While
it may be easy enough to nod when Diken somewhat abstractly talks about the public potential for democratic anger and Arditi addresses the inevitable contest with those who threaten freedom, Kirkpatrick asks how democratic disobedience might avoid falling too easily onto the slope of indiscriminate (and hence, in her view, unjustifiable) violence. Her account of the civil rights movement gives some hint of a framework in which law might simultaneously challenge, be challenged by, and channel a pluralistic democratic will.

The development of that kind of argument matters because each of these works runs a risk that its implicit or explicit approach to democratic “immanence” or “aporia” becomes as abstract and unpolitical as the nihilistic, reactionary, populist, eschatological and/or transcendent forces that it has critiqued. It is both perhaps understandable and frustrating that Diken uses politics to sharpen his descriptions of nihilism but retreats into descriptions of the eternal return and democracy’s “tangible intangibility” as he imagines nihilism’s counterpoint. Rosanvallon provides a rich and provocative history of counterdemocratic institutions and ways in which distrust might be used to promote trust, but his account seems to fall apart around the fragmentation and complexity that is endemic to the political mechanics of the democracy he describes and yet also works against the visibility and legibility that is essential to a shared political narrative that he also sees as essential for democracy. It is difficult to imagine democratic citizens that are not alienated, confused, or paralyzed, despite the “mixed modern” regime that Rosanvallon envisions. Kirkpatrick offers the beginnings, possibly, of a legal navigational guide for the active democratic citizen, but its scope is circumscribed, for it downplays the affective or subjective component of politics. Arditi’s discussion of “translative” acts and the polemic of revolution offers a possible supplement to her approach. Yet he also calls attention to the sisyphian dimension of the emancipatory project and its possibly episodic nature. In the face of that, why wouldn’t people retreat into passivity or the simplistic fiction of a unified will that should be directly reflected in law? These authors envision a democratic politics that is more immediate, that recognizes and attempts to capitalize upon its frustrations, uncertainties, and tensions rather than transcend them. Their acute diagnoses, however, prompt somewhat vague remedies that simultaneously raise the question of whether democratic citizens can actually deliver what their democratic politics demand.

About the Author

Ann Davies is the Edwin F. Wilde, Jr. Distinguished Service Professor at Beloit College, where she also serves as provost. Her most recent research focuses on the meanings assigned to silence in secular politics.