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Richard D. Brown. *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650-1870.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xvii + 252 pp. $27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4663-6; $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2261-6.

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In his 1996 *The Strength of a People: The Idea of an Informed Citizenry in America, 1650-1870*, Richard D. Brown examines two centuries of the evolving Anglo-American debate about exactly who citizens are; whether, why, how, and about what they should be informed; and what power, if any, that informing should bring. Beginning in the seventeenth century with the first notions that certain elite white male citizens needed to be informed on some issues of public affairs, Brown traces the very slow, hesitant progress with which others in America came to be seen as having the right to be informed of and to speak upon such issues–and eventually even to vote upon them. Brown deftly weaves together the disparate concerns, opinions, and goals of all levels of society, from the ruling classes of elite white males, through other white propertied men and workingmen, to under- and unrepresented groups such as women, blacks, and Native Americans.

As Brown asserts, "An uncensored, competitive press, a nationally subsidized postal service and transportation networks, and a wide spectrum of public and private educational agencies, particularly schools, colleges, libraries, lecture series, and museums, all are founded on the belief that America must have an informed citizenry" (p. xvi). Thus, "even more basic than the freedoms of speech and press which we consider so fundamental is the concept of an informed citizenry, for it actually support[s] them" (p. xiii).

Brown opens his discussion in Tudor and Stuart England, where in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries gentlemen first defined and asserted "quasi-republican principles of citizenship" (p. xiv). The idea that nobles and gentry were suited to citizenship because of the leisure their wealth provided goes as far back as Aristotle, of course, but Brown also links it with the growth of printing in Europe and the gradual spread of education. Because of Renaissance culture and influential books such as Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, "The ruling classes joined learning to military prowess in defining the new concept of citizenship as they deliberately and emphatically made themselves the educated classes" (p. 3). With such education might come expectations of some increased input into, and eventually responsibility for, governing.

Brown reminds readers that, though the Protestant Reformation helped the spread of literacy, the division between elite citizen subjects and mere subjects remained powerful in Tudor England. Under Henry VIII, Parliament passed laws abolishing diversity in opinions, prohibiting the reading of the Bible in English in churches, and forbidding all artificers, apprentices, journeymen, yeomen, lesser serving men, laborers, husbandmen, and women from reading the New Testament in English (p. 3). Reading seemed to lead to opinions, which led to contentiousness, which was considered essentially sedition; advocating freedom of speech or the press could be considered treason (p. 18).

Yet the very existence of such laws, along with the pamphlet controversy which after Henry's death in 1547 aired arguments about who should be informed, show that interest in matters of governance must have been widespread. No one advocated that the average person had a right to be informed more than cursorily–at best–about such matters, of course. Nevertheless, by the coronation of James I in 1603, the idea that the educated, informed, and sometimes conflicting voices of gentlemen, merchants, lawyers, and clergymen should be expressed had been sanctioned by decades of experience (p. 5).

James, however, inadvertently helped alienate many citizen-subjects with his efforts against dissent. James son Charles I went further, reasserting censorship with a vigor and comprehensiveness that had not been seen before in England (pp. 6-7). After the English Civil War, it was not because of the enlightened ideology of Milton's *Areopagitica* but because of a Hobbesian pragmatism that "the need to inform the general public, if only in a prim-

itive way,...became an accepted fact of English politics" (p. 15).

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 helped destroy British censorship–yet, again, mainly for practical rather than ideological reasons. Brown reminds us that the new Bill of Rights still had no guarantees of freedom of speech or freedom of the press and that the publication licensing law of 1692 was basically as restrictive as that of Charles II. But the Glorious Revolution had also led to the realization that it was impossible to achieve uniformity of opinion in religion and politics and that it was destructive even to pursue complete uniformity (p. 16). When the licensing law came up for renewal in 1695, it was "blocked by a multitude of self-interested complaints, from printers and booksellers as well as authors and bishops, concerning the aggravations, inequities, and corruption of licensing...; without fanfare, England's monopolistic censorship system finally lapsed, never to be restored" (p. 17). Though eight bills aimed at controlling the press were introduced in Parliament between 1695 and 1713 (p. 28), when sedition, blasphemy, and libel still could be prosecuted after publication–and when the spread of printing made the censors task so increasingly difficult–pre-publication censorship gradually became both impractical and unnecessary (p. 17).

This new legal freedom, along with the increase of Parliaments power after the Glorious Revolution, led to a greater need "not merely for the education of princes but [for] the education of gentlemen subjects–citizens..." (p. 18). "[C]ivic education may have been decidedly for the few" (p. 25), but the lower boundary of the gentry in English society still was more porous than that in many European absolutist societies, encouraging aspiring gentry to become informed. Moreover, religious tolerance after the Glorious Revolution permitted a freedom and breadth of inquiry that was generally forbidden elsewhere (p. 23).

In the American Colonies, the comparative weakness of the Church of England and the great number of religious dissenters, along with the relatively leveled nature of the Colonial socioeconomic structure, meant that "colonists often embraced an outsiders interpretation of politics...tinged with the assumptions of radical Whigs... While the British mainstream believed that only independent gentlemen should be participating citizens, colonists developed a more expansive notion of simple freeholder or taxpayer citizenship and, at least from the Carolinas northward, participated in politics more than did subjects in the British Isles" (p. 26).

In America, therefore, when in colonies such as New England yeomen and tradesmen constituted the majority of the voters, more than just the self-styled gentry needed to be informed (p. 30). The free press, naturally, contributed to this informing, but there was still a need for formal education for ones ordained social role (p. 30). Though Massachusetts had publicly funded schools as a legacy of the Puritans, most colonies did not. More representative in America was the English Dissenters ideology of voluntary choice, which would leave "responsibility for an informed citizenry...to the marketplace" (p. 31); parents who could afford schooling for their children would do so, while the poor would rely on charity schools (pp. 31-32).

By the middle of the 1700s the idea of a politically informed citizenry "was part of the Anglo-American discussion, even turning up occasionally in such respected British periodicals as Addison and Steele's often-reprinted *Spectator* and Bolingbroke's *Craftsman*" (p. 38). Whereas according to Tory political thought, the commoners should receive only as much education as was consistent with due subordination, Whig philosophy suggested that some further education was needed–not necessarily for the private good of the individual, of course, but to keep the populace from being swayed against the existing order by despots (p. 39). America thus was growing, at least in theory, more promotive of social mobility and political inclusion.

Brown is careful, however, to note the implicit assumption that women, blacks, and Native Americans were excluded from all political consideration. Any education for women was to prepare pious, genteel, apolitical wives and mothers (p. 40), while the occasional black charity school set up by the Church of England in Philadelphia in the late 1740s and 1750s likewise aimed at making slaves more contented with their lot and hence more tractable (p. 41). What educational outreach was done by missionaries to the Native Americans was designed not to include them in politics but to eradicate their culture and subsume them as a subordinate group into Anglo-American society (pp. 41-42). The only alien group actually integrated into politics were the German settlers of Pennsylvania, who owned property and hence could vote; in their case schooling in English was given to help make them informed and responsible citizens (pp. 42-43).

According to Brown, despite some interesting discussions, early in the eighteenth century the idea of an informed citizenry remained inconsequential in the American colonies as well as in Britain (p. 49). It was not until the period of 1763 to 1775, with the escalating im-

perial crisis, that the concept really became important. When elite Colonials began to protest the British measures, "They seized and elevated to prominence a concept that had hitherto lain inert in the background of Whig thought. What had been merely a last resort of political liberty in Radical Whig doctrine was suddenly of central practical as well as theoretical importance" (pp. 52-53).

Colonial protests as first were limited to discussions in legislatures or the occasional printed essay, aimed at a limited audience of gentlemen only. Beginning in May 1764, however, with the Boston town meeting which met to discuss the Revenue Act of that year, elite protesters came to utilize a broad array of citizens in rendering a judgment on imperial policy. This tactical move illustrated the model of political action that would soon dominate the resistance movement and, according to Brown, convinced revolutionary leaders, who had not previously devoted much attention to the subject, that an informed citizenry was a vital matter of practical politics (pp. 53-54). The idea of informing the citizenry also was advocated by such writers as John Adams in his 1765 Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law, the slightly more elitist and conservative John Dickinson in his 1767-68 fictional *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, and the more inflammatory Thomas Paine in his 1776 *Common Sense*.

To insure that the populace was adequately informed for responsible participation in political affairs, the American revolutionaries agreed on the necessity for a free press and a national post office (p. 67). Just as important, however, was the establishment of some type of formal education. Brown notes that in socially stratified Britain schools were run by the Church of England, and their mixed objectives of learning–ornament, public service, gentility, and practical utility–never seemed to fit satisfactorily the new American society; American thinkers now struggled to find the proper combination of moral and academic training (p. 69). Education began at home, and because the family was considered the incubator of the virtuous, informed republican citizen, in a wealthy household even women might receive some training in history. Of course, this would not lead to participation in public affairs; moreover, leaders perceived no need to improve the education of African Americans and Native Americans, who were seen as being outside the political community (p. 73).

Formal education came to receive public funding only slowly. Brown finds that "while the belief in extensive government-supported education, whether at the national or state level…was rarely challenged in public manifestos, real gains were more limited. States may have accepted federal monies for education easily enough, but taxation was resisted" (p. 98). Even advocates of tax-supported education could not agree on a desirable common curriculum balancing the secular and religious, the theoretical and the practical (pp. 105-8). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, "Tax support for public secondary schools was rare, but private academies and social libraries flourished" (p. 109); even by the 1840s, when public schools were securely established, attendance was still voluntary (p. 148).

Whereas during the Revolutionary period those who championed the idea of an informed citizenry did so out of a belief that politically knowledgeable citizens were necessary to prevent a lapse into tyranny, early in the nineteenth century this notion was being overshadowed by attention to private virtue and personal advancement (p. 122). Some critics advocated government support of education, but many more–and, clearly, much of the populace in general–believed in using marketplace and volunteer organizations to attain economic and social mobility and often entertainment as well. Aside from looking to schools and to publishers of books and magazines, early nineteenth-century Americans also gained education and entertainment from political parties and the inexpensive tracts of various evangelical or philanthropic societies, lectures at lyceums and other locations, commercial libraries and also public ones by the 1840s and 1850s, and museums and circuses (pp. 123-32).

If the question of what citizens' sources of education should be was a difficult one, the question of precisely who those citizens were and what exactly their citizenship meant was most controversial of all (p. 120). As Brown notes, "Ironically, the rhetorical triumph of the informed citizenry ideal and its expanding institutional foundations in public culture were accompanied by a polyphony of criticism directed at the remnants of the freeholder concept of citizenship, which continued to exclude substantial numbers–indeed, a majority of American-born adults–from the civil rights that were routinely proclaimed as quintessentially American" (p. 154). The process of extending the franchise to less wealthy white men, African-American and Native American men, and, eventually, women was at best halting.

Early in the republic, franchise was withheld from white men without land and substantial property, for the elite felt that such workingmen would not be responsible because they essentially had no stake in society. Moreover, public schooling for them and their offspring was considered unnecessary because it was believed that families that valued education would take responsibility for

it–which, of course, often simply was not economically possible. Yet while public education may not have been truly available until the 1840s or so, property restrictions on voting were removed even earlier. Brown reports that "Landholding requirements…were erased under pressure from common revolutionary soldiers and their sons, so that by the 1820s few state constitutions still incorporated them" (p. 154). Thus, the right to vote, which was routinely proclaimed as being quintessentially American (p. 154), was extended even though the capability of being politically informed, which previously had been the requirement for voting, often may not have existed.

Native Americans and African-Americans, of course, were excluded from political life even more sharply than were poor whites. Native Americans on the one hand were free native residents of the United States and often of particular states as well and thus were nominally qualified for full citizenship; on the other hand, however, they were historically understood to be members of foreign nations (p. 167). Native Americans were not considered part of the American political system, and any European-style education they received from missionaries emphasized Christian conversion and salvation, not political empowerment. Policy-makers sometimes opposed even these educational efforts because they helped perpetuate a missionary presence that might actively oppose removal of Native Americans to the West (p. 170).

Brown reminds us that, interestingly enough, free African-Americans at first were not always legally barred from voting. South Carolina and Delaware added racial restrictions to their state constitutions in 1778 and 1787, respectively, yet most states did not choose to follow suit. U.S. naturalization law in 1790 did proscribe foreign blacks as well as Native American and Asians from becoming citizens, but American-born free blacks often could vote–and, indeed, in Virginia could do so as late as 1850 (p. 157). As the number of free African-Americans grew, however, these rights were slowly eroded by state constitutional conventions, often with no pretense that the discussion concerned anything but color (pp. 170-73). Again, considerations of citizenship often were removed from the capability of being informed, although just as free blacks protested against this, so occasionally did influential whites (pp. 172-73).

While all African-American men at least nominally were made citizens in 1865, citizenship for women of any race was severely restricted, for it did not include the right to vote. Those who agitated for female suffrage did so based on notions of self-realization, natural rights, and established principles of American law (p. 186); when the lower class man could participate in politics while the most high-born woman could not, elitism also could contribute to the women's movement. As Brown puts it so well, "leaders in the women's movement sought to articulate…their recognition that egalitarian democracy had long since overwhelmed republican notions of a virtuous and informed citizenry. Like the emperor in the fable, the American citizen was not clothed in garments of virtue and information; he was naked after all" (p. 187).

The weaknesses of Brown's book are few, its strengths many. Certainly there are a few peripheral places where some more detail might be helpful for the novice: about the Glorious Revolution, the Zenger case, or details of the Constitution, for example. The line between occasional minor sketchiness and tedious over-explanation is a fine one in a work such as this, which is aimed at a wider audience than the specialist, but that wider audience may very well benefit from an additional sentence or two of explanation here and there. The editorial treatment of old primary sources also is a bit spotty in its annoyingly haphazard use of *sic*; with eighteenth-century writers we do not expect twentieth-century spelling, yet sometimes Brown uses *sic* in such obvious places as Samuel Adams' *dismissd* and *diffusd* (p. 67) while sensibly refraining in Robert Morris's "Stile of living and Plainess" (p. 71). The question is a minor one, but it is noticeable, and it does suggest an ever so slight lack of punctuational control.

The strengths of *The Strength of a People* far outweigh these little matters, however. First, of course, the topic is an interesting one which seems well researched and conscientiously footnoted. Just as importantly, perhaps, the text is structured very strongly, with helpful introductions that prepare readers the various strands of Brown's argument in each chapter and conclusions that then helpfully reiterate the main ideas. The book as a whole has this structure, chapters have it, and sometimes even sections of chapters have it as well; without it, readers could too easily become lost in a two-century excursion through interwoven trends illustrated with an occasional proliferation of names, dates, and ideas.

Finally, Brown's epilogue is to be admired in its contextualizing and in the conclusions it draws. The last which readers get from the book is a comparison of our own educational and political situation with that of the past, and yet it is something of an op-ed piece as well. Brown begins almost apologetically, claiming that actually finding lessons in the past and applying them to our own time demands a measure of speculation that

is normally off-limits. The expression of opinion, after all, is not what historians regard as scholarship (p. 196). That said, however, Brown goes on to express three very timely opinions.

One is that "concerns about the divisions of conscience and identity…must not be dismissed" (pp. 202-3). Brown certainly does not fault diversity or multiculturalism, and he does not advocate the socio-cultural conformity of the melting pot over the tossed salad; he notes, however, that excessive pluralism may also promote ethnocultural sectarianism (p. 202). How much is enough, of course, Brown does not attempt to say, and rightly so–but the possibility for conflict does exist if we promote our own subcultures without adequate respect for others.

Second, Brown warns us that the agency that may be emerging as the most powerful educator and molder of an informed citizenry on a national scale is not the church or the state as in past centuries but the commercial sector (p. 203). He nods to the fact that business does respond to demand rather than simply shaping it at will, but he also maintains that it encourages some tendencies and values while discouraging others. Broadly speaking, where the values of the commercial sector are "material, secular, and selfish… [C]ommon public goals, whether secular or spiritual, must be slighted" (p. 203). To Brown, the lifelong curriculum of business competes with, even as it influences, the curricula of families, churches, schools, and politics–all day, every day (p. 204). Again, Brown's forceful point should be well taken, and he implicitly seems to put responsibility for combating these tendencies less with government than with the family and the individual.

Finally, Brown writes, "The voice of the people, though it is only slightly informed, must be heard in the political process, but it must not be the only voice" (p. 206). Elected leaders, he suggests, may be experts to whom we should defer just as we do to pilots, physicians, accountants, and electricians (p. 206). Brown does not suggest blind obedience to the mendacious or hateful, but he does remind us that our judgment about elected officials should come form a more detached perspective than is currently in vogue. We should evaluate the general competence and integrity of officials, not their specific positions on a single issue. We should consider whether an official takes the time to be informed before making decisions and whether he or she encourages private citizens to be informed as well. Brown's very last sentence advises us to place the common good above our own special interests or sensational issues (p. 207). The idea seems a healthy one, and it is one which the whole history of an informed citizenry tends to support.

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