



**Brian Danoff.** *Educating Democracy: Alexis De Tocqueville and Leadership in America.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. ix + 218 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4384-2961-8.



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**Commissioned by** Jonathan Anuik (University of Alberta)

In 2003, the Carnegie Corporation published *The Civic Mission of Schools*, a clarion call for schools to engage in the development of informed and active democratic citizens. In his book, *Educating Democracy*, Brian Danoff argues that democratic leaders have an educational civic mission of their own. In fact, he contends that education about and for democracy “is the most important task of the democratic leader” (p. 3).

In seeking to make a contribution to scholarly work on the nature of democratic leaders and leadership, Danoff explores the conception of leadership in the scholarly work of nineteenth-century French writer Alexis de Tocqueville. Danoff begins with an analysis of Tocqueville’s writing, particularly his reflections on U.S. democracy, then moves on to examine the congruency of Tocqueville’s views with those of several U.S. theorists and practitioners spanning the history of the United States as an independent nation. He writes, “In this book, I put Tocqueville into dialogue with key American thinkers on the subject of how leaders can best ‘educate democracy’” (p.

4). And those included in the dialogue are the Anti-Federalists, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and such contemporary public intellectuals as Robert Putnam and Robert N. Bellah.

Danoff uses the work of the above thinkers to examine the tensions between the liberal and republican strains of U.S. civic life and explores a number of interesting dichotomies that form part of those tensions. These include: freedom as the pursuit of self-interest and freedom as the right (and obligation) to contribute to the common good; freedom from restraint and self-discipline as key components of democratic citizenship; the roots of authority resting in a widely accepted moral order or a set of principles open to various interpretations; the value or threat of strong leadership vis-à-vis widespread and strong public engagement; and the relative strengths and weaknesses of centralized or local governance for democracy.

In many ways this is an important and even a courageous book. In exploring the tensions men-

tioned above, Danoff resists the urge to resolve them by simplistically choosing one pole in the debate but, rather, tries to show how democracy often works best when some sense of balance is achieved between and among what seem contesting forces. For example, he argues that Tocqueville and Lincoln, in particular, acknowledge the potential of the pursuit of “self-interest properly understood” to contribute positively to the development of U.S. democracy but that both also saw the limitations of this doctrine and strove, through their respective scholarly works, to move democratic citizens beyond it and toward more altruistic and principled reasons to act democratically (p. 11). In an age when political talk often extols dead certainties, this recognition of the complexity inherent in democratic life is refreshing.

Danoff’s focus on the educative function of both democratic leaders and institutions is also very important. As concern grows about the perceived disengagement of citizens, particularly young ones, from even the most basic functions of civic life, civic education is often seen as the key mechanism for reversing this trend. This civic education, however, is often narrowly construed as belonging only or at least primarily in schooling, and that is a significant mistake. As Danoff rightly points out, both the words and actions of democratic leaders and public engagement in the institutions of democratic governance and civil society are important teachers of democracy. Contemporary democratic leaders would do well to consider the pedagogic implications of their work, and Danoff highlights this well.

Finally, Danoff takes on the very tough and potentially dangerous topic of the role of morality and virtue in democracy and, in particular, the potential of religion to contribute to discussions of those. He shows that important thinkers about U.S. democracy from Tocqueville through the Anti-Federalists and on to Bellah and his colleagues thought of religion, in particular, as playing an important role both in moderating the

trend toward radical individualism and in providing a moral basis for civic engagement beyond self-interest. As Jean Bethke Elshtain points out in *Sovereignty: God, State and Self* (2008), the canon of Western political thought has largely been cleansed of even obvious religious influences, and Danoff’s willingness to bring religion back into the discussion is a strength of this book.

Ultimately, however, the book fails to live up to its potential. In the last chapter, Danoff examines the contribution of the work of Putnam and Bellah and his colleagues to deliberations about democratic leadership and engagement. Danoff argues that these writers are akin to what Tocqueville called democratic moralists, what contemporaries call public intellectuals. Following Tocqueville, Danoff argues that these people have a vocation “to educate the citizenry on moral and political matters” (p. 143). While both Putnam and Bellah have largely lived up to this vocation producing a significant body of work that is detailed and accessible, Danoff falls short of this vocation in several ways.

First, the book fails to move beyond philosophical musing to explore how these contradictory ideas are often worked out “on the ground” in “real” circumstances. For example, Danoff argues that Tocqueville, the Anti-Federalists, and Lincoln were deeply suspicious of the coercive power of government and equally deeply committed to the principle “that persuasion rather than force was the morally appropriate means for leaders to try to bring about change in a free society” (p. 83). There are times, however, when circumstances seem to mandate moving beyond talk to coercive action. As Danoff writes about Lincoln’s support for a draft during the American Civil War, “Lincoln believed that during a great crisis, people can legitimately be forced to act justly—that is, they should be compelled to sacrifice their private interest for the common good” (p. 71).

Unfortunately, in this case and others, Danoff does not explore, in detail, how democratic lead-

ers have and do work out where the lines of demarcation are in regard to any of the dichotomies he discusses. This would be helpful not in the prescriptive sense that Lincoln's (or anyone else's) answer would be definitive but, rather, that the process of working through the issues and the substantive arguments encountered during that process would be instructive for those facing similar dilemmas. This is a pedagogical task that Danoff largely fails to take up.

Similarly, he leaves the reader hanging on a number of questions that call out for further exploration. In the final chapter, for example, he writes, "I have suggested that Tocqueville and Bellah et al. are likely correct that religion is valuable as an antidote to individualism. However, it should again be emphasized that in Tocqueville's view, *political* leaders should generally avoid trying to promote religion" (p. 156, emphasis in the original). Danoff fails to take this up and provide some sense then of the proper place of religion in civic life and how that might be nurtured, if not by political leaders. Given the current debates in the United States and across Europe about the place of religion in the public square, leaving the discussion at this level of generality is unsatisfying.

In the acknowledgements to the book, Danoff makes it clear that this work began as a doctoral dissertation, which provides some context for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the work. As an exercise in political philosophy, it succeeds quite well, but if the purpose was to take up "the vocation of the democratic moralist," outlined in the last chapter, there is still some way to go (p. 142). As Bellah and his colleagues Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton make clear in their essay "Social Science as Public Philosophy" (published in their book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* [1986]), it is the latter of those projects that is the more important.

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[2]. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).

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