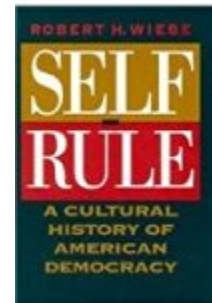




Robert H. Wiebe. *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995. x + 321 pp. \$21.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-89563-5; \$29.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-89562-8.

Reviewed by Brian D. Stokes (Rowan University)
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Flight of the Democrats

If America has come close to the Puritan ideal of a “city on a hill,” many would credit democracy. Yet, as we tout democracy as one of our greatest achievements, we rarely seem willing to define it. Robert H. Wiebe in his work *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy*, attempts to examine, and possibly define, American democracy through its cultural elements.

In his introduction and conclusion, the author examines the current debates on democracy and possible solutions to what he and others deem as problems with the system. The debate on democracy rages between three separate types of commentators—philosophers, publicists, and social scientists—each bringing their own ideas on how to view democracy. Where they tend to converge is at their dissatisfaction with democracy’s outcomes. To correct what they deem as poor outcomes, they diverge again with each group suggesting different changes in what goes into democracy (better inputs should lead to better outputs according to Wiebe). In his conclusion, Wiebe hopes to use the history he will construct to correct some of those inputs.

The history is broken down into three chronological sections. The first of these deals with the period of the 1820s to the 1890s. It is during this period that democracy first developed, according to the author. Essential to that development was the breakdown of the old hierarchy of the Revolutionary era. The process took years, as Americans toppled hierarchies in areas such as religion and medicine. Furthermore, the traditional

link between property and citizenship also ended during this period. Moreover, and most important as far as Wiebe is concerned, is what he calls an “astonishing proposition”—the notion of self-directed work. Men became free from the control of labor thanks to many factors, including an abundance of cheap land, the collapse of indentured servitude, and accessible credit for farmers. Wiebe concludes his first section by showing that these new democrats formed together in fraternal lodges to exercise democracy in the political realm. As a group these individuals reaffirmed their own democracy—just as ones own religious beliefs are reaffirmed at a revival, according to Wiebe.

In his second section, Wiebe argues that between the 1890s and 1920s America’s original democracy broke down and was replaced by a distinctively new form. These years saw the end of cheap abundant land and the full implementation of industrialization. The period was also driven by the need for favorable credit conditions. As these conditions did not materialize, more and more workers on the fringe of the middle class were sucked down into the lower class. Furthermore, unskilled workers found it more difficult to work their way into the skilled ranks.

As economic forces cleared any blur between the middle and lower classes, so too did views on differentiating cultures. The middle class began to see their culture as distinctive from the lower class. Lower class “slums” were seen as geographically definable regions, unsafe to

both mind and body. Social scientists also helped to drive the cultural wedge by making the term “unskilled” part of everyday terminology. The term stripped the former laborers of “any dignity by defining them as a nullity, a nothing,” according to Wiebe (p. 128). It is no wonder then, the author argues, that many of the reform movements could never be complete successes since the groups used to unite as a single democratic voice were now being driven apart.

As the gap between the middle and lower class became more profound, so did a split in the middle class. The non-working “gentlemen” class, which had long been a part of European society, simply did not exist in America during the 1890s-1920s. America’s elite were “working elites,” and middle class values never allowed them to establish the same social authority that was held by the elite of the Revolutionary era (p. 138). Instead, Wiebe argues, what evolved during this period was a national class. The new national class quickly separated itself, especially when it came to science and education, from what Wiebe refers to as the local middle class. Professional occupations led this separation along class lines. Doctors began to identify either with laboratory medicine and professional hospitals of the national class, or with the loosely regulated family practice of the local middle class. Academics began to identify themselves as members of local colleges, or as professionals with peers throughout the nation. This new system of hierarchies would be the basis for modern democracy, according to Wiebe.

In the final chapter of section two, Wiebe examines how the new hierarchies separated democracy based on class. The white male fraternity, which had been so important in the 1820s-1890s, dissolves under the pressure of the new hierarchies. It was simply easier to let the lower class, already “distant and suspect,” fall away rather than include them in the electorate.

In the final section of the book, Wiebe examines what he considers the period of modern American democracy, the 1920s-1990s. Occurring simultaneously with the “dissolving of the people” (the fall of the lower class and the splitting of the middle class into the national and local middle classes) was an increased focus on the individual. A logical result, argues Wiebe, as “popular energy” was draining from collective democracy it was flowing into its individual side (p. 185). As a result of this increased focus on the individual, majoritarian and individual democracy took separate paths after the 1920s. Characteristic of the new individual was a growing reliance on the state. The

result would have “momentous consequences,” according to Wiebe: “The state now replaced the people as democracy’s last resort” (p. 202). A new national bureaucracy shielded the government from popular influence and the power of the state “thrived” after the 1920s (p. 203). The people now organized not to shape the government but to see where they would fit into it or what they could take from it. Moreover, the individual’s vote, once seen as the ultimate expression of democracy, now seemed insignificant, so much so that almost a third of the population did not vote. Democracy no longer shaped the state; the state shaped democracy (p. 215).

Wiebe concludes his final section by examining what he considers the reconnection of individual and majoritarian politics around the 1960s. What ensued he argues was “democracy at war with itself” (p. 223). Modern individualism was characterized by the search for universalized rights. The search for these rights, part of personal fulfillment, changed the meaning that rights had in American democracy. Rights now became internalized, something to be protected, even created. The drive for rights weakened the power of the individual, according to Wiebe. These weaker individuals “invited a stronger government to assert itself in securing more rights.” The national class, the traditional wielders of national political power, began to infringe on the normal domain of the local middle class, local values, and politics in order to secure and protect more rights. The two groups, once existing in harmony, turned on each other and on the lower class. The local middle class insisted on “supervising” the lower class and the national class insisted on “deciding what rights were best for them.”

Two strengths of *Self-Rule* stand out above the others. The first is Wiebe’s treatment of women. Before women obtained the vote, they relied upon the art of petitioning to enact any change in the political system. As we know, this petitioning played very important roles in many of the reform movements. However, as Wiebe shows convincingly, the petitioning process helped to alienate women from America’s democracy. Wiebe argues that women not only “reenacted their public inferiority” but also reaffirmed their “private subordination in public” by using the petition (p. 109). Furthermore, once women obtained the vote they did not gain equality but only a right. In fact, women lost some of their power when they gained the vote because once in the “system” they were forced to take their place at the bottom of the power structure, according to Wiebe. It was not until individual and majoritarian politics (as well as the national and local middle class) began to battle each other in the

1960s did women make significant gains when it came to their place in democracy. Wiebe argues strongly that women used the upheaval as a chance to improve their standing in private, which translated into an improved standing in the public sphere. Women needed acceptance as individuals to gain their place in democracy.

The second real strength of the work is Wiebe's treatment of African-Americans. All blacks, not just those in bondage, were defined by slavery until the Civil War. Free blacks were not defined by how close they came to equality with whites, but how far they were away from actual slavery. Blacks were disenfranchised in most states and had to revert to the petition; and as with women, the petition also reasserted blacks inferior position in American democracy. Gaining the franchise had dramatic results but only for the short period of radical reconstruction. Instead, just as with women, the vote became a right and by no means equality. Most blacks after the Civil War, oppressed by white racism, joined the ranks of the lower class and sank to the bottom of American democracy. Their position, much like women's, would not improve much until the 1960s, according to Wiebe. Martin Luther King would then have the insight, and some good fortune, to take perfect advantage of the conflict between the national and local middle class. King and his colleagues, through the use of boycotts, marches, vigils and sit-ins, were able to raise the normally politically degrading petition into the "art of political protest" (p. 233). Through political protest, the civil rights movement was able to gain several important pieces of legislation from the national class before there came a backlash from the local middle class, argues Wiebe. Blacks, unlike women, needed acceptance as a group to try to gain their proper place in American democracy.

Unfortunately, there are several weaknesses with Wiebe's work, including his writing style. Wiebe's general format is fine—three general sections organized on a chronological basis. However, the book's style falls apart after this general format. Wiebe too quickly moves between subjects. Furthermore, many of the examples he uses come from different time periods. Both problems make a complex subject even more difficult to understand. Wiebe also devotes a whole chapter (as well as shorter mentions throughout the book) on how Euro-

peans viewed American democracy. Though this time is well spent showing how American hierarchies differed from European hierarchies, it does little else except to confuse the reader with too many examples and details.

Wiebe also fails to thoroughly examine possible differences in his study due to different geographical regions. He does show how stronger hierarchies in Massachusetts held off democracy in the state in the early 1800s and how the west opened new options for his notion of "self-directed work"; however, he does not extend this analysis further in his work. Did the availability of credit, so important in many of Wiebe's early arguments, differ from region to region? Was the influence of the local middle class stronger in some areas and weaker in others, and if so, why? Finally, did the fate of the lower class, a major concern of the author, vary from region to region?

The work's final shortfall is in its treatment of the lower class. Wiebe focuses on the subject throughout the book, but does it mainly from the perspective of the hierarchies in American society. He does follow the lower class when he deals with political lodges in the early 1800s, but then allows the group to fall from view. For example, in Wiebe's final chapter, "Internal Wars," the reader does not get a clear picture of the lower class until he has constructed a detailed analysis of the conflict between the national and local middle class. Although Wiebe shows how forces drove them from the system, he could have spent more time examining what the lower class did or did not do for themselves.

Robert Wiebe's *Self-Rule*, despite its shortcomings, is an excellent work. A cultural history of democracy is a refreshing change from politicians and court decisions. Wiebe shows convincingly how democracy changes and evolves with the society and not just the decisions of politicians and judges. Moreover, and perhaps most thought provoking, Wiebe shows in detail the exclusionary effects of democracy. Withrop's dream of a "city on a hill" may rest on how our society continues to shape democracy.

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