

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Roderick P. Hart. *Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive.* Communication, Society and Politics Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Figures, tables. xvii + 356 pp. \$99.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-108-42264-2; \$29.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-108-43562-8.

Reviewed by Rebecca Adelman (University of Maryland, Baltimore County)

Published on H-Emotions (December, 2019)

Commissioned by Sara Hidalgo García de Orellán

“Democracy in the United States,” writes Roderick P. Hart, “is an impossible thing” (p. 10). In *Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive*, Hart asks how this impossibility plays out in an unlikely format: letters to the editor. Working from the premise that a “democracy is at its best when it becomes a culture of complaint,” Hart identifies letter writers as exemplars of this quarrelsome spirit (p. 12). Yet he also notes that they are often overlooked, both by irritated newspaper readers, who simply turn the page on their blowhard neighbors, and by scholars, who have traditionally favored surveys to measure public opinion. As if speaking to both audiences at once, Hart offers an apologia for the writers and their frequent turns toward stridency, as well as an exacting methodology for studying their letters and their motivations for writing them.

The book takes as its archive a collection of ten thousand letters to the editor—penned from 1948 to 2012, with predictable upticks in presidential election years—that Hart collected. He augments these with surveys of letter writers themselves, non-writers, and letter readers. He also includes information gathered from interviews with a sample of writers. Some of his research questions are descriptive, as he asks about the demographics of letter writers and their patterns of thought and behavior. Others are more interpretive, as he queries what inspires them to write, or analytical, as he weighs the impact of their modest publications. Ultimately, these spiral outward to broader reflections about the practice of citizenship and the nature of democracy, and he wonders whether there is any reason to be sanguine about either.

As he regards this corpus of letters, Hart surmises that there is.

He begins the book with a brief comment on the 2016 presidential election, noting that it was “quiet Americans” who likely led to Donald Trump’s unexpected victory. He implies that this group of people—who “drove pollsters crazy” (p. 4)—might not have been so mystifying if we knew how to listen to them. *Civic Hope* is thus an exercise in attending to voices that might otherwise go unheard or uncounted, left to languish in the commentary sections of small-market local newspapers. For this reason, the book might be a valuable resource for people attempting to make sense of the rise of populism in the United States, though Hart does not directly address this issue. Hart contends that letter writers are far more civically engaged, both on the page and off, than their non-writing fellow citizens. In a period increasingly defined by cynicism, ambivalence, and political bystanding, Hart looks to these writers as embodiments of civic hope. For Hart, civic hope is active but also understated, notwithstanding the rhetorical grandiosity toward which letter writers are inclined. The “quiet” and often thankless activity of letter writing, in Hart’s estimation, requires a deep political commitment (p. 78).

The book is divided into three parts. The first, “The Need for Civic Hope,” lays out the book’s theoretical foundation. The three chapters are titled as questions: “Can Politics Be Fixed?,” “Can Citizenship Be Revived?,” and “Is Civic Hope the Answer?” Hart, drawing inspiration from his letter writers, answers all of them in the

affirmative. The second section, “The Search for Civic Hope,” focuses largely on profiling the people who write and read letters, examining both structural issues like the economics of the “third-tier” cities from which Hart drew his sample of letters and the personality traits and political convictions that inspire people to write and read. The third, and longest, section, “The Texture of Civic Hope,” focuses more directly on the content of the letters themselves. One chapter asks why they are “compelling” and another wonders why they are “irritating.” Hart also tracks changes in the content of letters over time, and makes a case for their uniqueness among other public forums for sharing opinion and information. The book’s final section, “The Future of Civic Hope,” is condensed in one chapter, in which Hart reflects on the importance of “sustaining a culture of argument” (the title of the lone chapter) in the way that letter writers do. In his model, a culture of argument and civic hope are essentially intertwined.

Hart defines civic hope as follows: “a set of expectations (1) that enlightened leadership is possible despite human foibles; (2) that productive forms of citizenship will result from cultural pluralism; (3) that democratic traditions will yield prudent governance; (4) but that none of this will happen without constant struggle” (p. 275). Indeed, he appreciates the agonism in many of the letters he analyzes, owing to his belief that “*creating and sustaining a culture of argument at the grassroots level make democracy flourish*” (p. 10, emphasis in original). Hart avers that letter writers are authentic in part because they are rooted so deeply in their communities. Although he acknowledges the role of newspaper editors in refining and curating the letters that actually appear in print, he generally approaches the letters themselves as unmediated expressions of their authors’ true thoughts. He also places writers in a long genealogy of important complainers like Benjamin Franklin, arguing that “founders’ irritation built the nation, and that is reason enough to give letter writers their due” (p. 189).

Near the end of the book, Hart confesses his affection for these self-styled experts: “I have fallen in love with letter writers. I love their persnickiness and their love of dialectic. I love their off-the-shoulder solutions to complex problems ... the darkness of their imaginations ... [their] care for their communities and how they expose local villains ... their respect for newspapers and their distrust of newspaper editors. I love their willingness to step into the curveball” (p. 258). Hart’s own investment in the subject comes through clearly in his animated prose, even as he foregrounds the voices of the

writers themselves. He excerpts them generously, and reads their words with the same care and credulousness he extends to research by other scholars.

Writers, according to Hart’s demographical research, are mostly older Anglo men who are more educated than average and among the dwindling ranks of newspaper subscribers. Describing their epistemologies, Hart contends that they are “haunted by information and are hermeneutical to the core.... For some writers, there is never enough information available. For others, the information they most desire ... is never available to them in sufficient quantities and so they actively imagine such information, often over-actively imagining it” (p. 87). Hart’s appreciation for their persistence in the face of such limitations enables him to overlook a multitude of sins—both writerly and analytical—in the letters they produce. Notwithstanding the questionable logic, awkward syntax, and often spluttering quality of their writing, Hart likens them to William Shakespeare. He bases this comparison on their abilities to observe the minutiae of political life and transform these observations into illuminating, if untrained, commentary.

As both a study in quotidian forms of political communication and a meditation on the importance of criticism and dissent for civic life, *Civic Hope* is grounded primarily in scholarship from political science and political theory, along with rhetoric and political communication. Hart offers sociologically minded insights about the cities where his writers live, as well as some reflections on the role of media in civic life, particularly as he distinguishes letters to the editor from other forums for talking back, like the comments section for online news stories. His engagement with scholarship on emotion is primarily routed through those disciplinary frameworks. Readers, presumably like those on H-Emotions, who are looking for a sustained consideration of the cultural, political, or social work that emotions do will not find much of that here, perhaps because Hart sees hope more as a disposition or an action than a feeling. Arguing that hope is “deeper [and] more enigmatic” than optimism, Hart further distinguishes them: “optimism is an emotional state, whereas hope is an emotional state gone behavioral” (pp. 6, 48).

Because Hart sees hope manifest in action, he endeavors to study it directly. He approaches his collection of letters through a “scientific procedure” rooted in “content analysis” and “expert coding” (p. 7). He acknowledges that the sixteen “probes” he uses to elucidate the forms of civic hope operative in the letters might seem

like “overkill.” But he argues that such meticulousness is necessary because hope can be “elusive,” and Hart also provides the “codebook” that he and his assistants used to parse the letters (p. 67). *Civic Hope* might serve as a model for scholars inclined to this type of research, but those who imagine emotion as something more amorphous or ineffable might not find much to emulate in Hart’s approach.

The elaborate methodological apparatus—to say nothing of the alacrity and obvious relish—with which Hart approaches his archive makes it difficult to quibble with his interpretation of the evidence. For me, however, the book raises a number of conceptual and theoretical questions that remained unanswered at the end of my reading. From the vantage of affect studies, the most obvious rejoinder to Hart’s enthusiastic embrace of hope is Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011). For Berlant, “cruel optimism” describes the pursuit of an impossible vision of the “good life” that is detrimental to one’s immediate circumstances. While Hart pointedly distinguishes hope from optimism, I would have appreciated a slightly more critical consideration of hope itself, and the potential costs of such an orientation.[1]

Relatedly, I wonder about who might have access (or not) to the type of civic hope that Hart extols. He de-

scribes his writers as “irredeemably ordinary” but notes that this does not make them average or representative of Americans as a whole (p. 98). Despite this caveat, however, Hart leaves the notion of the “ordinary” largely unquestioned. He does not query whether the writers’ vision of civic hope is inclusive of or translatable to other groups. Consequently, I want to ask: to what extent does the very capacity to have or retain civic hope depend on a history of privilege? If civic hope is essentially a certainty that the basic principles of American democracy are sound, where does that leave groups—like immigrants, people of color, and indigenous populations, for example—who have been systematically disenfranchised by its practice? Early in the text, Hart notes a downward trend in references to hope in political speeches and other forms of cultural transmission and intimates that hope has been replaced by cynicism. His framing suggests that hope has merely dissipated over the years; a different approach might ask what types of structural forces have conspired to erode it.

Note

[1]. For example, Susan McManus, “Hope, Fear, and the Politics of Affective Agency,” *Theory & Event* 14, no. 4 (2011), doi:10.1353/tae.2011.0060.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-emotions>

Citation: Rebecca Adelman. Review of Hart, Roderick P., *Civic Hope: How Ordinary Americans Keep Democracy Alive*. H-Emotions, H-Net Reviews. December, 2019.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54064>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.