DEMOCRACY BETRAYED AND REDEEMED: 
POPULIST TRADITIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

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The study of political culture in the United States begins with the concept of democracy – the still revolutionary notion that the people ought to govern themselves. The very idea of what it means to be an American is often equated with the right of self-rule, of majority control, and of the superiority of such a system over other ways of arranging the civic order. The great historian Richard Hofstadter once wrote about the United States, “it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one.” It is impossible to imagine the American ideology without its democratic core – unruly, litigious, but remarkably optimistic.

Yet it is also impossible – or, at least, terribly inaccurate – to talk about America’s democratic political culture without recognizing its limits, its silences, and its brutalities. For a start, the U.S. Constitution is not really a democratic document; its drafters perceived democracy as mob rule and sought to prevent the people from ruling directly in their own name. Thus, only members of the House of Representatives were directly elected – and that at a time when only white men with some property had the right to vote. Of course, the franchise was gradually broadened, and the electoral college became a virtual rubber stamp of the popular vote for president by each state. But voters could not elect U.S. senators directly until 1913. And the Senate, with two members from each state, continues to be an institution far more responsive to the democratic wishes of the people of Wyoming – which has fewer than a million residents – than to the desires of the people of California – where some thirty million people live. And, of course, the federal judiciary is even less democratic – federal judges are appointed for life, if they insist on staying around that long.

But an opposite type of deficiency also runs through American democracy, one that stems from its very nature. This is what commentators from Tocqueville onward have called “the tyranny of the majority.” Democracy, understood as the majority’s right to have its way, has had bloody consequences for a nation settled on the lands of native peoples and where slave labor dominated the most prosperous sector of the economy. In the 1830s, when Andrew Jackson supported the removal of the Cherokees from their lands in Georgia, he cited the right of the majority. Later in the 19th century, the powerful anti-Asian movement on the West Coast argued that the majority of the people, that is whites, had the right to...
protect their interests – even if it meant barring Japanese children from public school and, later, placing American citizens of Japanese ancestry in prison camps. Americans of color often needed protection from a democracy that was unofficially for whites only. Without the help of the undemocratic Supreme Court, for example, it is doubtful whether the black freedom movement of the 1950s and ‘60s would have achieved so much so quickly.

Yet, the tawdriness of democracy in practice has seldom tarnished the glory of democracy in principle. Native Americans, Asian-Americans, and African-Americans have traditionally embraced the idea that the people should rule – claiming that they are the true upholders of the democratic faith and accusing European-Americans of hypocrisy. “We are the people, just as much as you are,” they proclaim, “we will not allow you to exclude us, to make us an exception from your ideals.”

In recent years, the racial limits of democracy – both as politics and as culture – have occupied some of the best minds in American Studies in the United States. A focus on constructions of racial difference – particularly of whiteness and of blackness – has been of enormous value in explaining what is a pivotal and ongoing conflict in the U.S. history.

But that focus often minimizes, when it does not entirely ignore, the long history of discontent voiced and acted upon by members of the white majority itself. These European-Americans, both citizens and immigrants with aspirations to citizenship, inhabited a realm of society that the novelist E. L. Doctorow has called “the large middle world, neither destitute nor privileged . . . that of the ordinary working man.” That sizeable sector included – at different historical junctures – small farmers and shopkeepers, craftspeople and factory workers, home owners struggling to pay their taxes and home-makers struggling to feed and clothe their children. All voiced their unhappiness with the gap between the American dream – of abundance and opportunity – and the more limited, burdensome, even brutal reality. And they tended to blame this discrepancy on a tiny elite they perceived as self-serving, undemocratic, and, to fire their mightiest gun, unAmerican. At times, they also blamed non-whites for colluding with the elite in a conspiracy between the top and bottom of society against the middle. This form of discursive politics I would call “populist.”

There is some peril in using that term. Recently, at least in the United States, “populism” has become a confusing, often frustrating label. It has been appropriated by merchandisers, lazy journalists, and public relations specialists who have affixed it to anything that seems authentic and unadorned – and can be purchased at a price most Americans can afford. This has included everything from politicians, to bargain bookstores, to advertising slogans, to Bruce Springsteen disks, to cotton trousers which, according to their manufacturer, are “steeped in grassroots sensibility and the simple good sense of solid workmanship . . . No-nonsense pants for the individual in everyman.”

But promiscuity should not devalue the term itself. If we were to stop using any
contested concept in the language of politics, we would have to avoid topics of
great and lasting significance that occasion such contests in the first place.
Imagine writing about American history and culture without writing about
concepts like “freedom,” “race,” “republicanism,” or, for that matter, “democ-

cracy” itself.

So I prefer to offer my own definition of “populism.” In the context of U.S.
political history, it has three different meanings which sometimes intersect: it has
been a movement, a critique, and a discourse. In each mode of populism, the same
assumption is made: the principles of American democracy are fine but those in
power are betraying them. The only solution is to mount an insurgency by the
common people – whose precise identity is open for debate and change – to
redeem the democratic promise. I want to discuss these three modes in turn and
then conclude with some thoughts about how intellectuals of the left might
approach this tradition, one which shows little sign of losing force.

The populist movement arose in the latter third of the 19th century. It was an
insurgency of small agrarian proprietors and skilled workers – and was strongest
in the cotton states of the Deep South, the wheat-growing states of the Great
Plains, and the silver-mining states of the Rocky Mountains. The movement’s
demands were primarily economic: small farmers wanted, above all, equal treat-
ment in a marketplace increasingly dominated by industrial corporations and
large landowners. Craft workers wanted to stop the process of proletarianization.
A variety of solutions were proposed and attempted – including strict regulation
of railroad rates, democratic control of the nation’s finances, a cooperative
marketing system, and more powerful trade unions. Railing at private bankers in
the United States and abroad who favored tight money and high interest rates,
Populists argued that inflating the money supply – particularly through basing the
currency on reserves of gold and more plentiful supplies of silver – would spur
investment and help rescue small producers from a mountain of debt.

In 1892, most activists inside the movement got together to organize a new
political party. Their best orator, Ignatius Donnelly of Minnesota, gave the rallying
cry at founding conventions of the People’s Party that were held, amid great
great patriotic pageantry, on Washington’s Birthday and on the Fourth of July. “We
meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and mater-

dial ruin,” charged Donnelly. “Corruption dominates the ballot-box . . . The people
are demoralized . . . The urban workmen are denied the right of organization for
self-protection . . . A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two
continents and is rapidly taking possession of the world.” The Populists, promised
Donnelly, would bring the nation back to its democratic roots, to a time when
social differences were slight and did not disrupt the essential harmony of the
nation. “We seek to restore the Government of the Republic to the hands of the
‘plain people’ with whom it originated,” he proclaimed. Of course, the racial
silence in such a concept is deafening.

During the first half of the 1890s the People’s Party had close to majority
support from white voters in a swath of largely rural states stretching from Georgia west to Texas and Kansas and north into Colorado and Idaho. In 1892, the Populist presidential ticket won 8.5 percent of the popular vote and twenty-two electoral votes; this, when added to the hundreds of Populists elected to local and state offices and the growing number in Congress, was enough to throw a brief but profound scare into the major parties. But, in 1896, the Democrats emerged from an internecine battle with a nominee from Nebraska, William Jennings Bryan, who talked a lot like a populist and was a well-known champion of the third party’s demand to inflate the money supply through monetizing silver. The Populists then met in their own convention and fragmented bitterly over the dilemma of whether to endorse Bryan or run their own presidential candidate – which would have guaranteed Bryan’s defeat. Most Populists did support Bryan, but when he lost after all, the party and the movement it led swiftly declined into the status of a sect. After halfheartedly contesting two of the next three presidential elections, the remaining Populists gave up the ghost entirely in 1908.

The ideological character of the Populist movement was once a subject of ferocious dualistic debate among American historians and social scientists. Such well-known scholars as Richard Hofstadter, C. Vann Woodward, Daniel Bell, Oscar Handlin, and Lawrence Goodwyn manned the ramparts. Their major dispute: Was Populism conservative, defensive, and bigoted or the last, best chance for a true smallholders democracy? One side marshalled quotes from Populists that reeked of anti-Semitism, bucolic nostalgia, and conspiracy theorizing; while the other side stressed that Populists focused upon and tried to remedy the economic grievances of industrious “producers” and had quite specific ideas of how the system could be reformed to further their interests.5

By now, the battle’s fierce dichotomies seem rather foolish. Why did anyone expect the Populists to be so crude and simple-minded? Like almost every popular movement that arises from an aggrieved middling group, the Populists drew inspiration from their vision of a more prosperous, more egalitarian past. To be self-consciously in the middle, after all, is to perceive oneself being squeezed or at least being perched insecurely between two social extremes – and to fear falling below. It would be unusual if romantic thoughts of a more placid social order did not come to mind, an order that is easier to imagine recreating than initiating from materials fresh and new. Throughout history, visions of a grand progressive future tend to emerge from the minds of intellectuals – whether their faith is spiritual or secular – and not from the tribunes of the hard-working and the hard-pressed.

On the other hand, the Populist movement was also full of practical thinkers. They put forth concrete, rational remedies to what they believed was America’s gravest ill: the concentration of wealth and ownership in fewer and fewer corporate hands. Their proposals – like state ownership of the railroads and a progressive income tax – gestured towards social-democratic programs then popular in much of industrializing Europe. But the People’s Party did not embrace the

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Marxian analysis of “class struggle” nor did it warm up the largely immigrant working class living and toiling in the big cities of the East and Midwest.

This estrangement from what was a growing segment of the American people was due, in part, to the movement’s political culture. Most rank-and-file Populists were white evangelical Protestants at a time when American Protestantism was in the throes of one of its Great Awakenings – and generating enthusiasm for secular reform as well as for saving souls. This meant that most Populists were supporters, though not always officially, of the prohibition of alcohol. It also meant they were suspicious of people who insisted on retaining their Catholic or Jewish beliefs or who simply wanted to be left alone. As the political scientist Michael Rogin has observed, “The party was known as the party of righteousness, and such groups as the Germans feared for their Sunday cards and beer.” The Populists were a moralist, as well as an economic, movement; in a nation where pietism and pragmatism were traditions of equal strength, the movement could not have grown large by choosing one road or the other. Bryan himself was an exemplar of that two-headed tradition. For him, a good Christian had to be a fierce opponent of “monopoly” and “plutocracy”; in some 5000 formal addresses over his thirty-year career, he strove to apply the lessons of the Sermon on the Mount.

After the debacle of 1896, most Populists migrated back to their old parties; a minority became socialists. But as a critique, populism predated the movement and had a longer and more potent history – one in which plebeian activists and activist intellectuals have both played a part.

Central to the populist critique was the antagonism between the large majority of “producers” and a tiny minority of elite “parasites.” The precise terms changed over the years – but the terms of the critique did not. The producers were always the creators of wealth and the purveyors of vital services: their ranks included manual workers, small farmers, small shopkeepers, and professionals who served an unstylish, less-than-wealthy clientele. In 1834, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, a stalwart of the Jacksonian Democrats, hailed “the productive and burden-bearing classes” as one grand historic bloc. In the 1870s and 80s, the Knights of Labor, the first national labor organization, welcomed Americans of all occupations, including female homemakers, to join – save five: gamblers, liquor dealers, bankers, stockbrokers, and lawyers. Everyone else was considered to belong to “the people” because they did the necessary work of society – unlike that noxious, parasitic quintet which merely preyed on human weaknesses or used other people’s money to make themselves rich. In contrast, the elite produced nothing other Americans needed; it was therefore the embodiment of sinful impulses and urgently needed to reform itself or be quickly forced out of business.

This mode of populism offers a vigorous attack on class inequality – but it is an attack that denies that such equality has any structural causes, whether in patterns of income, property-holding, or education. It is, in fact, a critique which denies that classes themselves are permanent fixtures of American life. Populists
rail at the injuries of class society but insist that classes are “artificial” and doomed to vanish with the next great insurgency of the plain people.

Populism as a critique is perpetually hostile to large, centralized institutions that stand above and outside communities of virtuous “producers.” Big corporations, big banks, big government, and even big unions are perceived as impervious to democratic control, of serving their own interests and not those of ordinary people. There is a romantic attachment in populism to local power bases, to small businesses, to family farms, to picturesque little churches, and, of course, to self-sustaining voluntary associations of the kind Tocqueville so memorably described. In *The Rise of Silas Latham*, William Dean Howells had a character lament, “The day of small things was past, and I don’t suppose it will ever come again in this country.” Populist critics mistrust all forms of centralized power – even though they occasionally cherish one of its fruits, such as the Social Security System or a victorious military machine.

The populist critique also includes an explicit element of “Americanism.” This has a meaning larger than democracy itself – it encompasses the creed for which independence had supposedly been won and that all patriotic citizens should fight to preserve. It is breathtakingly idealistic: in this unique nation, all men and women were created equal and deserved the same chance to improve their lot. But “Americanism,” of the populist variety, is also defensive: America is viewed as an isolated land of civic virtue whose people have to be constantly on guard against the depredations of aristocrats, empire builders, and totalitarians both within and outside its borders.

Dissenters, both left and right, have always had to wrestle with that conception. One does not need to offer an alternative conception of the political good: it is enough to accuse the elite of betraying the consensual creed and to marshal enough details to prove it. On the other hand, radical change seems unnecessary, dangerous, even close to treason: we have already had a revolution, we already have a Constitution. Intellectuals and activists on the left who voiced this critique, hoping it would bring them legitimacy, found that it rendered moot discussion of their ultimate ends. Thus, the populist strain of “Americanism” has helped to make the United States at once the most idealistic and one of the most conservative nations on earth.

From the populist critique there flows a powerful tradition of oppositional discourse. But a distinction must be made. The critique emanates from the same social groups that, in their updated versions, filled the original populist movement: small farmers, blue-collar workers (particularly in the crafts), small businessmen – taken together, the popular core of the anti-monopoly faction in U.S. history. In contrast, the political career of populist discourse has been wildly promiscuous and sometimes dishonest. There were fervent anti-Communists like Senator Joseph McCarthy who attacked “the bright young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouth” for “selling this nation out.” And there were dedicated Communists who insisted that they were just good, loyal Americans battling
for “the plain people” in the sturdy tradition of “farmer-labor democracy.” In the presidential elections of 1992 and 1996, the billionaire Ross Perot, who made his fortune from government contracts, won millions of votes by ridiculing politicians for taking contributions from “special interests.”

There is nothing surprising about this. A populist discourse is capable of serving different masters because it transcends the ideological division between “left” and “right” – which is, after all, inherited from Europe, a continent of traditional social hierarchies based on class that give rise to sharp political divisions (but, at least until recently, far less racial conflict). As long as one believes, or pretends to believe, that mass democracy can topple any haughty foe and that the judgment of the hard-working, God-fearing people is always correct – or nearly always so – then one can claim legitimacy in the great name of The People.

And populist discourse has manifest political uses. Its clever and timely deployment has helped narrow political groups to break out of their confinement and appeal to large new constituencies. This occurred in the era of World War I when Socialists on the Great Plains remade themselves into champions of the same small farmers they had earlier seen as anachronisms in an age of monopoly capitalism. They called the resulting organization the NonPartisan League – and it grew powerful enough to capture the state government of North Dakota and hold it for five years. The League also came close to winning control in several other states in the region. The Non Partisans helped create the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota and encouraged similar formations across the border on the Canadian Plains.

And, since the 1940s, American conservatives have become the leading force in national politics with the help of their own variety of the populist idiom. This is a critical shift; previously, most activists and politicians had employed the discourse in the service of egalitarian reform, social and moral, not in opposition to it. Of course, the rise of the Right had structural and ideological roots only tangential to an analysis of discourse. These include the growth of a prosperous but still economically and culturally insecure white middle class, the revival of conservative theology and the growth of conservative churches, the shift of population to the South and Southwest, a shift aided by huge infusions of military investment – the Gunbelt, some scholars have termed it; and the identification of the Democratic Party with the demands of the black freedom movement and of the left-leaning insurgencies – anti-war, feminist, gay – that it inspired in the ’60s and ’70s.

Still, the willingness of both traditionalists and libertarians on the Right to adapt the old discourse of small farmers and union workers to their own ends is impressive. Conservatives initiated this on a national level in the 1940s when anti-Communists mounted a campaign against well-born figures in the federal government like Alger Hiss whom they accused of aiding the Soviet Union. In the 1950s, the populist offensive shifted to the local level – where its key activists belonged to white home-owners’ associations in cities like Detroit and Chicago.
These small property holders, many of whom were union members, accused wealthy and powerful liberals of wanting to force them to accept integrated housing and schools – liberals who clearly had no intention of living in such areas or sending their children to such schools. It was a new type of civil conflict with an older provenance – as in the anti-Asian movement almost a century before, the industrious white middle was pressing its case against both an elite above and a non-white minority below.

This style of conservative populism surged to prominence in the 1960s and ’70s. The emblematic figure was George Wallace, governor of Alabama. Wallace transformed his earlier defense of white supremacy into a defense of the common people (their whiteness merely implied) lauding them as “this average man on the street . . . this man in the steel mill . . . the beautician, the policeman on the beat” allegedly bossed around by unpatriotic bureaucrats on top and scruffy, violent radicals below. Wallace had a knack for articulating the creed of the moral producer in one pithy phrase: “You young people seem to know a lot of four-letter words,” he told a band of hecklers at one rally, “But I have two four-letter words you don’t know: S-O-A-P and W-O-R-K.” In 1966, Ronald Reagan, waging his first political campaign, used similar rhetoric to defeat a liberal incumbent governor of California. And, after their election to the White House in 1968, Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew praised the “Middle Americans” and “Silent Majority” they hoped would form the core of a new Republican majority.

The Watergate scandal and the resignations of both men from office prevented the completion of that project. But, by the mid-1970s, most conservative activists had already claimed the populist idiom as their own. For them, and for a growing number of ordinary white Americans, the elite was no longer made up of corporate moguls but of government bureaucrats and intellectual do-gooders, the “limousine liberals” as one politician dubbed them. A former Agnew speechwriter put it well in 1975: “If there is a role for the Republican Party,” wrote Patrick Buchanan, “it is to be the party of the working class, not the welfare class. It is to champion the cause of producers and taxpayers, of the private sector threatened by the government sector, of the millions who carry most of the cost of government and share least in its beneficence.” As Buchanan showed in 1996, this style of populist discourse remains a powerful current on the Right; it is not fading away.

By the time Ronald Reagan was elected president in the 1980s, the language of American populism had completed its voyage from left to right – although community organizers and union organizers on the left continued to claim that they were its rightful inheritors. “Producers” were now widely understood to be churchgoing, home-owning taxpayers with middling incomes, regardless of occupation; the “parasites” were state officials who took revenues from hard-working people and lavished them on avant-garde artists, lazy welfare mothers, and foreign dictators who often acted to thwart American interests.

But what had happened to populist movements? Certainly, there were a few
new insurgencies inspired and led by conservatives who spoke in populist ways. One can point to the tax revolt of the late 1970s in California and to the anti-homosexual offensives led by Christian activists in Colorado, Florida, and a few other states. But each of these groups had a brief life and was dedicated to a rather narrow purpose; they are better understood as campaigns than as social movements.

And there’s the irony: just as the discourse of “populism” has become as common as radio talk-shows, we lack a true social movement of wealth producers – although organized labor, under the leadership of John Sweeney, is trying to recover its identity as such. The unions have a difficult task. Americans now work just as hard as ever, but a dwindling number view their jobs as the wellspring of political commitment and organizing. In an age of hurried schedules and cheap electronic pleasures, few working people choose political participation over relaxation. There is little patience for learning how to convince one’s neighbors and workmates that they can understand the nature and source of their collective problems and – and, perhaps, transform the nation. We have lots of free-swinging populist talkers in the United States these days, but no durable movements that truly deserve the name.

Many on the left, particularly champions of multiculturalism, would argue that this is no tragedy. Let the spin merchants have the language of populism, they say. Why should we preserve a tradition that denies almost every social distinction and waxes sentimental about “the people” and “American ideals” without coming to grips with their racialized and gendered nature?

Such militant skepticism is endemic to the historical era through which we are passing. All the universal identities created in the West during the Reformation and the Enlightenment and renewed both by liberals and socialists in the 19th century are in retreat. It is a rare intellectual who would still dare to speak of Christians, or workers, or even the common people in the old messianic fashion, as a vision with the potential to embrace all of humanity. Assertions of cultural difference have disabled ideals like the producer ethic and the rights of man that once flowed from the inclusive visions. The old rhetoric suffers from the post-modern disenchantment with fixed concepts and universal dreams.

But what is the alternative to populism, the traditional critique of a democracy betrayed and the traditional hope that an uprising by the hard-pressed majority can redeem it? None has been forthcoming. So I am convinced that progressive intellectuals need to reclaim and revise the language of populism, to speak within it, not against it. This will require us to avoid demonization, scapegoating, paranoia, romantic myths about “the people” and all the other excesses of the idiom. But for many ordinary Americans, and not just white ones, populism of one variety or another still sounds like common sense. They continue to believe that “big men” in major corporations and/or big government run their lives and that most Americans are working harder than ever but getting too little reward.

And are they mistaken? There is, after all, a corporate elite whose global reach
makes a mockery of local democracy and robs civic institutions of a good deal of their power. Most Americans do perceive themselves as “working people,” “ordinary people,” or “average Americans.” And the producer ethic continues to speak to a version of civic morality — as some Americans make it rich by playing the stock market and the Internet while others need to work at a series of unglamorous jobs in order to keep up their mortgage payments. Meanwhile, contemporary exponents of the Social Gospel — Christian, Jewish, and Moslem — encourage the pious to be their brother’s and their sister’s keeper, as the state retreats more and more from playing that role. And, in at least one aspect, the appeal of the populist critique no longer stops at the color line. According to public opinion polls, African-Americans and Latino-Americans are more opposed to big business and more supportive of organized labor than are European-Americans. The sentiment expressed in the 1890s populist motto “Man over Money” now strikes a chord among ordinary Americans of both genders and all racial groups.

In the end, to speak in populist ways is to practice what the political theorist Michael Walzer has called “connected criticism.” It is to argue about issues and propose solutions with an empathetic mind and heart, staying within well-grooved national traditions. The only alternative I can imagine is a philosophy of politics that ruthlessly questions those traditions in the hope of delegitimating and, someday, transcending them. But such a leap away from history has no real chance of informing, much less inspiring, a mass movement. So like the American dream itself — ever present and never consummated — populism lives too deeply in the hopes and fears of U.S. citizens to be trivialized or replaced. We should never confine our politics or our history within its terms. But without it, we are lost.

NOTES
1. This is the revised version of a keynote address given at the 1997 Kyoto American Studies Seminar. For their assistance, I would like to thank Prof. Jun Furuya, Prof. Masahiro Nakano, Prof. Toyo Omi Nagata, and Prof. Daizaburo Yui. I have lifted a few sentences from my book, The Populist Persuasion: An American History (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
4. From Banana Republic’s Fall 1986 catalog, no page.
5. For a crisp summary of the debate, see Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
9. Quoted in ibid., 245.
Democracy is not Coca-Cola, which, with the syrup produced by the United States, tastes the same across the world. The world will be lifeless and dull if there is only one single model and one single civilization, the senior Chinese diplomat noted. For China, US interference in its internal affairs has become a regular topic of protest. Last month, the Chinese Foreign Ministry questioned the legitimacy of the US, Canada, the EU and the UK proclaiming themselves human rights judges after the Western states sanctioned Beijing officials over alleged rights abuses against the country’s Uighur Muslim population. Earlier this month, the US intelligence community identified China as a top competitor to Washington which aimed to promote the authoritarian Chinese system around the world. The history of direct democracy amongst non-Native Americans in the United States dates from the 1630s in the New England Colonies. Many New England towns still carry on that tradition in the form of open town meetings. Ballot questions became an outlet for solving the difficult questions of the Mid-19th century, including temperance. Except for the states that passed total prohibition of alcohol every state created a version of the local option, which allowed citizens to vote on whether to allow the Democracy Betrayed and Redeemed: Populist Traditions in the United States. Michael Kazin. Constellations 5 (1):75-84 (1998). Interior States: Institutional Consciousness and the Inner Life of Democracy in the Antebellum United States. Christopher Castiglia - 2008 - Duke University Press. The Media and the Crisis of Democracy in the Age of Bush-. Douglas Kellner - unknown. Democracy's Equality, Freedom, and Help.