

Celestial Democracies

Sándor Kiss

Tamás, Nyirkos. *The Tyranny of the Majority*. New York: Routledge, 2018. vi + 154 pages. ISBN 978-1-351-21142-0. E-book. \$56.20

James Madison once said: “[i]f men were angels, no government would be necessary.” Since Antiquity numerous governmental methods have tried to give a political frame to its non-celestial people. At the end of the twentieth century it seemed unambiguous that from these systems liberal democracy has emerged as the most successful one, not just in terms of mediating interests, but bringing economic development to its people. Today’s liberal democracies are liberal in the classical, nineteenth-century sense: they are characterized by the rule of law, the separation of powers between the branches of government, and elections between multiple, non-identical parties. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the new populist and authoritarian politics openly questioned the status quo of liberal democracies, often referring to them as elitist systems without a “real” majority behind them.

To gain a deeper insight into the evolution of today’s democracies and its relation to majorities, readers can turn to Tamás Nyirkos’s *The Tyranny of the Majority*, which explores the current state, methods, and institutions of the most prominent form of democratic governance, liberal democracy, from a historical perspective. Nyirkos examines the issue of majoritarianism in decision-making processes, concentrating on the philosophical and political approaches to history from Antiquity to the present. The will of the majority, and the necessity to restrain its power in order to protect ever-emerging minorities against its potentially tyrannical will has been a core issue since the dawn of popular institutions. What makes Nyirkos’s study particularly appealing to contemporary readers, however, is that he also highlights the recent past, looking at the numerous challenges liberal democracies have had to face in an age of renewed authoritarian and populist tendencies in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Political theorists and professionals in the field of history and law will certainly find Nyirkos’s book useful, as it is a well-researched, comprehensive study on the contemporary issue of populism and its intrinsic relation to democracy. Nevertheless, I would also recommend it to intellectuals with an interest in politics, as the author also explores the emergence of the infamous term “illiberal democracy,” and the implications its origins can reveal about the political climate we live in.

Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies 24.2. 2018. Copyright © 2018 by HJEAS. All rights to reproduction in any form are reserved.

Nyirkos examines the most important political thinkers since Antiquity, with a strong emphasis on conservative intellectuals, as well as contemporary perspectives, to assess how the modern representative form of liberal democracy has emerged, and what kind of criticism it has received throughout its slow but steady formation. Nyirkos analyzes philosophical and political commentaries on and concepts related to the role of the majority, and its relations to minority will. The book's main concern is how democracies handle debates and discourses, and how the will of the majority is restrained through the separation of powers, representational legislation, and other legal and political instruments.

Nyirkos's book, however, is not solely a theoretical work on legal and political technicalities. It also addresses current developments, like the rise of illiberalism and modern populist movements, which have become widely discussed recently on account of Hungary, Turkey, and the Russian Federation. Although Hungarian himself, Nyirkos's discussion of the case of Hungary remains objective and unbiased. The same applies to his analyses of the emergence of "popular" movements in the early twenty-first century, such as Occupy, or the Anonymous group.

The book is divided into three major parts; the first deals with the "prehistory" of the tyranny of the majority by invoking philosophers from Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Plato's works and views are well known, and have been thoroughly researched, but Nyirkos's analysis through the lenses of populism and majoritarianism approaches the familiar material from a new angle. He shows how the possibility of a populist governing system gave inspiration to intellectuals for centuries, and demonstrates that the problem of the masses versus the elite, majority opinion versus an oppressed minority is considerably older than the idea of liberal democracy itself.

The discussion of the medieval period is the most engaging part of the book, as it studies the role of medieval Christian churches in forming majoritarian decision-making processes. The author broadens the perspective to map how democratic and majoritarian processes appeared in church institutions. As he convincingly argues, the strictly hierarchical organization of the medieval Catholic Church did contain some elements of democracy, such as the decision-making processes of certain enclosed religious orders, or the succession of the papacy, which required a definitive majority among the cardinals. He shows that this is the era when the structures to handle and maintain majority were laid down, and that the ideas of ancient philosophers became the foundations on which modernity will draw. As medieval political philosophy has been a sadly overlooked branch in the disciplines of history

and political science, Nyirkos's thorough engagement with this particular period is commendable.

The next part focuses on the Modern Era, iconically marked by the French Revolution. The author elegantly balances between the major political streams of the time, discussing not only the *encyclopédistes* and their concerns, but the views of those later to be called conservatives. This section gives proper weight to the age that created the ideologies and triggered discussions that still dominate our political landscape today. The reader is gradually introduced to the various meanings of "the tyranny of the majority," and how Rousseau and the revolutionary philosophers saw the relationship of the government and the governed. Nyirkos also scrutinizes the criticism of the *encyclopédistes'* views and the philosophy of popular sovereignty through the writings of Burke, Chateaubriand, and de Maistre, highlighting how the founders of European and American conservatism saw the central political issues of the age, most importantly, the amount of power to be vested in the people and popular institutions. Nyirkos's explorations in political philosophy make it clear that there is an endemic difference between the classical liberals of the revolution and those who would become the conservatives. The next part concentrates on the problem of the apotheosis of the popular will, which can lead to tyranny, to be prevented by limiting the majority's power. Nyirkos's writing is so fast paced that the reader can experience being involved in the polemic which sculpted the modern political landscape.

Chapter 10, "Ontological Detour," deals with mathematical problems, such as Condorcet's dilemma (or Condorcet's paradox) and Arrow's theorem. These social choice theories suggest that the will of the majority can be perceived as fictitious, as with the manipulation of the number of voting rounds and the number of alternative choices of voters any result can be formed with the backing of the "majority." Despite its engaging qualities, the chapter, indeed, makes a detour from the chronological order organizing the study on the whole, as it reads more like an individual essay than an integral element of the book. Its positioning in the argument would require further clarification.

The final section of the book focuses on contemporary discussions on majorities, minorities, power, elites, and masses, discussing in a separate chapter the writings of Fareed Zakaria, the father of the term "illiberal democracy," embraced by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2014. The chapter on Zakaria's criticism of current liberal democracies is highly original and informative, its detailed account of the negative aspects of liberal democratic systems can be traced back to Zakaria's writing rather than reflecting Nyirkos's own views.

In the closing chapter, Nyirkos discusses the neo-populist Occupy movement, which rose and fell rather quickly in the early 2010s, as well as the online pseudo-populist hacker group, Anonymous. Neither of these groups is satisfied with the current system, and both want “real” democracy and representation; yet, the Occupy movement is the child of the economic crisis of 2008, and has very strong anti-capitalistic ties, while Anonymous began its career much earlier, in the depths of *4chan*, as a decentralized hacktivist group responsible for actions against the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the Church of Scientology, to name a few. Nyirkos, however, mentions and studies these groups without alluding to the anti-capitalist ties of Occupy and relations of Anonymous to the deep internet culture, which are fundamental to understanding these groups’ narratives on democracy. This leaves room for further research and analysis.

The Conclusion and the book’s final statements are quite grim, one might say; they do not offer an optimistic view on the future of our political systems. *The Tyranny of the Majority* is a timely and essential study, as traditional forms of representational democracy have recently come under repeated attack, not only from the extreme fringes of the political landscape, but more and more from the actors of established political parties and institutions as well. Understanding the evolution of liberal democracies and the interlocking problem of majoritarianism gives us deeper knowledge to base participation in public discourse during these politically tumultuous times.

University of Debrecen