

# Book Review: The State We're In: Reflecting on Democracy's Troubles by Joanna Cook, Nicholas J. Long, and Henrietta L. Moore

Kwame Badu Antwi-Boasiako

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### Recommended Citation

Badu Antwi-Boasiako, Kwame () "Book Review: The State We're In: Reflecting on Democracy's Troubles by Joanna Cook, Nicholas J. Long, and Henrietta L. Moore," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 93 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol93/iss1/11>

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**Cook, Joanna, Nicholas J. Long, and Henrietta L. Moore, eds. *The State We're In: Reflecting on Democracy's Troubles*. New York: Berghahn, 2016. viii + 220 pages. Hardcover, \$95.00.**

Societies are divided into the few who have power and the many who do not. This is true for all nations and forms of governments, including democracy. Theoretically, among the pillars of democracy are majority rule, equality before the law, government based upon consent of the governed, constitutional limits on government, and free and fair elections. In fact, democracy as a form of governance is a “system designed to respect the voices of all citizens” (p. 9). The authors of *The State We're In: Reflecting on Democracy's Troubles* portray democracy as the ideal and preferred form of government, but also present the concept as misunderstood and misused in its implementation by different nations.

In his article “Democracy in America,” Alexis de Tocqueville postulated that there is a constant democratic revolution in our midst as “everybody sees it, but by no means everybody judges it the same way.” This assertion reflects the theme of this book. Indeed, democracies as practiced in Peru, Kenya, Indonesia, and Europe illustrate how—despite the general acceptability of democratic principles—the implementation and practice varies from country to country.

The eight-chapter book is divided into two main parts: democracy in the developing world and democracy in the developed world. The introductory chapter discusses the theoretical legitimacy of democracy. It does not, however, explain in detail *what* powers must be shared and practiced, *how* the rules need to be organized, or *which* institutions must be secured. Additionally, although democracy is based on the concept of popular rule, the trouble with current democracy lies in its manifestation, that is, the ambiguities surrounding its interpretation and implementation. The introduction provides insight into the rest of the chapters noting the “multiplicity of the political forms that lay claim to being democracies” (p. 8).

Examining the breakdown of democracy in the developing world, the contributing authors use Peru, Kenya, and Indonesia to illustrate the lack of trust between politicians and electorates, which gives rise to widespread malaise among the citizens of these democratic republics. Thus, the ideal democratic concept contradicts its practice in these countries because the system tends to serve the interest of the establishments and the elites. Proponents, however, argue that “much of the subaltern population are unfit for participation in democratic life” (p. 38). The same argument could be made for other developing nations where opposition to the establishment is through violence.

Generally speaking, the citizens of Peru, Kenya, and Indonesia support Western-style democracy and reject violent and repressive forms of government. However, the problems that beset the early years of their newfound freedom led the citizens to question the promises of the democratic ideal. Citizens want true democracy where decisions are based on consensus and discussion rather than being controlled by institutions that marginalize them from the political process. In fact, the discontent and troubles with democracy are personalized through individual stories which make the benefits of democracy unconvincing.

The binary ideological war, which divided Germany into East and West, gave way to democracies in Eastern Europe. Additionally, “new media has contributed to this decline in centralised power...and attacks on all traditional authorities” (p. 116). One would have expected that citizens in the developed European world would find little or no fault with their democracies and elected officials, but the electorates are equally discontented with the snail’s pace of their democratic processes in addressing the concerns of the masses. For example, after the April 2009 earthquake that destroyed the city of L’Aquila, the author Jan-Jonathan Bock examined the state and democracy in Italy and concluded that “Italians, like most Europeans, struggle to identify a common good and to engage in the democratic process” (p. 126). This assessment is based on the lack of accountability, political ineptitude, corruption, and backwardness that characterizes the crisis in the Italian democracy.

It is difficult to let contributing authors focus on a common theme as they may have different interpretations of democracy. However, the careful selection of the various countries to portray the troubles with democracy points to a global misunderstanding of this concept of governance. The early years of the twenty-first century saw citizens around the globe—including those in Spain, Africa, and the United States—framing their grievances against the subjectivity of democracy through protests and demonstrations (occupy movements). Also, it appears that the post-democratic radicalization of citizens across the globe is the result of the neglect of the masses by the democratic establishments and elites who only serve the interest of the few. The democratic ideal is in trouble.

In *The State We’re In: Reflecting on Democracy’s Troubles*, anthropologists Cook, Long and Moore, as well as the other contributing authors, successfully demonstrate that, globally, democracy has “systematically maintained inequality” (p. 191), and that attention must be served to the current inadequacies in the execution of this theoretical concept. This book is appropriate for students and academics in the fields of political science, anthropology, and sociology.

Kwame Badu Antwi-Boasiako, Ph.D.  
Professor of Public Administration and Policy  
Stephen F. Austin State University  
Nacogdoches, Texas