

## Book Review: Democratic Equality by James Lindley Wilson

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**Wilson, James Lindley. *Democratic Equality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. ix + 397 pages. Hardcover, \$39.95; Kindle, \$39.95.**

When democracy in the world has been measurably declining, this book is globally significant and academically useful. James Lindley Wilson (political scientist) asserts that “democracy in one form or another is virtually unchallenged among both citizens and political philosophers as the best form of government” (p. 1). Our doubts are justified whether regular people routinely prioritize democratic attitudes and behaviors over other concerns and occasions. *Freedom in the World* has recorded global declines in political rights and civil liberties for consecutive years from 2005 to 2018, when Lindley would have been wrapping up this book. To date, the global numbers for democracy have been declining each year, and countries with declines have been outnumbering those countries with improvements in this regard. Democracy in practice *is* scuppered by the demos. Are we defaulting to Winston Churchill’s famous characterization (November 11, 1947) of democracy as the “worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time?” Democratic equality seems hypocritical to those who observe and experience politics of mockery, hate, lies, divisiveness, and settling scores. People ask, “equality of *what*?” Declines in democracy and rises in autocracy argue for the need for this book.

Wilson says he wrote this book “with uncertainty about the extent to which it matters” (p. 13). He is correct that “it would be a great shame if some people found they could put some answers to use...only to discover that there were no such answers available and adequate to their need” (p. 14).

*Democratic Equality* is ready for such needs. Wilson sifts and sorts myriad answers, suggests angles of analysis, and weighs alternatives in various contexts. The *Index* reveals the

answer. The *Index* is comprehensive and detailed, very useful to inquirers who wish to follow particular propositions, principles, and opinions throughout the book. The old technique applies here of counting inches and lines in newspaper coverage of current events. *Appropriate Consideration* has lengthy indexing. Only *Citizens* and *Political Equality* are lengthier, and both say to “see” or “see also” *Appropriate Consideration*—and all indicate where the gravity of the book is. As Wilson avers, “Responding appropriately to others’ claims of consideration... is possible and entirely coherent. Improving our theories and practices of democracy and equality requires it” (p. 284). Chaptering and outlining are sharp. Presenting the material necessarily requires some reiteration and recapitulation to connect interrelated and interactive discussions. An inspired, well-wrought contribution is made to synthesizing the immense topic of democratic equality, justice, and representative government. That is the concept of *Appropriate Consideration*. Experimentation goes to show that it is a more acceptable modus operandi than either respect or esteem. Trying it tends to foster just, fair, civil human relations. Consideration is transformational vis-à-vis diversity and plurality with social as well as political impacts and effects. Economic differences still rankle.

Wilson hypothesizes (p. 7) that there is strong reason to organize our common life democratically, even when this might not produce the best policy outcomes. He distinguishes, as a form of authority, appropriate consideration from command authority, which it does not entirely exclude. However, consideration of citizens’ views must not be accidental or whimsical. Rather, it must be a robust and persistent feature of political society. It considers diverse interests and claims and diverse forms of consideration. Importantly, it should optimize sustainability without degrading unto the Nth generation, assuring sufficiency of fairness, justice, respect (recalling Abraham Maslow’s higher-order values), and “good-enough” outcomes. Wilson

explains aggregative procedures must satisfy an “antidegradation” requirement that precludes rules and procedures that express or reflect a judgment that some citizen or citizens occupy an inferior political status (p.8). That would require what Cécile Fabre describes in her scholarly works on political philosophy and ethics as inclusion *excepting only those whose own activities have disqualified them by their own deliberate doing*.

If the terms and conditions for appropriate consideration as the touchstone of democratic equality seem daunting and improbable, read the book. Whether open minded, skeptical, or critical, prepare to be surprised. Flexibility and diversity inherent to appropriate equality might make it more feasible and bring democratic equality closer than we think.

In the social sciences, *Democratic Equality* spans history, philosophy, political science, sociology. It fits as recommended reading between Glenn Tinder’s *Political Thinking: The Perennial Questions* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.) and Bjorn Wittrock’s “Modernity: One, None, or Many?” *Daedalus*, Vol. 129, Iss. 1. The “promissory notes” are especially resonant with *Democratic Equality*. When the question is raised as to the equality of *what* apropos of democracy, the concept of *Appropriate Consideration* is worthy to answer. Clearly, Dr. Wilson, the book matters. It is a guideline en route to Fred Dallmayr’s *Democracy to Come: Politics as Relational Praxis*. James Lindley Wilson successfully transformed what started as a doctoral dissertation to a volume for inclusion in the social sciences’ canon and has developed *Appropriate Consideration* as a concept to operationalize democratic equality.

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