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# Dana Villa, "Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill."

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**Dana Villa.** *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill.* University of Chicago Press 2017. 376 pp. \$35.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780226467498); \$27.50 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780226637624).

Dana Villa's *Teachers of the People: Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill* highlights how conceptions of perceived capabilities, capacities, and optimal ends of the people within a state are integral to the study of political education and its practical application. Through analyzing and comparing various works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Stewart Mill, Villa identifies how each author's vision for how people should engage in political life is deeply interrelated with their respective strengths, weaknesses, and enduring contributions to political education. By deconstructing each author's understanding of the people, Villa provides political philosophers with a useful conceptual tool through which they can be cognizant of inherent biases toward rule by the few within the Western philosophical tradition so they can better ensure that their own works call for societies that are increasingly fair and democratic.

The book's primary purpose is to analyze each author's conceptions of the people to reveal their biases toward elitist forms of government, a trend which can be linked back to Plato, as well as to gauge where each thinker falls 'between virtue and enlightenment, on the one hand, and between participation and understanding on the other' (8). Villa illustrates a need for applying such an analytical framework to contemporary American politics for identifying systemic elitist obstructions to the people's democratic decision-making power and to help empower ideas on how to overcome such obstructions.

The book contains a chapter for each author analyzed, while the conclusion elaborates on the relevance to the contemporary American case. The chapters are organized in chronological order of when the authors lived. After the introduction the second chapter covers Rousseau. While Rousseau was opposed to monarchical and aristocratic rule, he incorporates Platonic elements of paternalism, including advocating for a great legislator to form a relatively uncorrupted population into politically active and just citizens (23-38). Uncorrupted people would ideally be capable of social interaction and collaboration, but free of detrimental political structures that foster inequalities, cause private interests to infringe upon public fora, and reduce communal solidarity (38-74). Creating a political system that embodies the general will of the people ideally involves preserving their fundamental social nature with gradual improvements, republican government where people regularly approve the continued existence of their form of government in its entirety, and resistance against control by the few or by external economic, political, or social forces (38-49, 70-85). Villa highlights that subsequent authors 'attempted to mediate Rousseau's strong republican opposition between public and private interest' to 'work with the material at hand, and to explore ways in which institutions and patterns of life in civil society could be used to channel, modify, and contain the rising tide of self-interested (or market-based) individualism in the modern world' (84). This observation helps place each author on a timeline of not just political thought, but also in the context of various historical events that shaped political consciousness, such as the French Revolution.

Villa analyzes Hegel in the third chapter, contrasting Rousseau's 'learning by doing' approach with Hegel's concept of *Bildung*, defined by Villa as 'the cultivation or education of humanity by means of evolving social, cultural, and political forms' (87). This process is initiated not by great legislators but through 'distinct and relatively autonomous spheres (family, civil society, and state),' starting from the family and ending with participation in politics (89). The other main contrast with

Rousseau is that instead of learning by doing, for Hegel, people learn by reasoning and understanding (89, 157-161). Hegel communicates the historical process of *Bildung* and the achievement of such reasoning through his master-slave dialectic, which involves a process through which two individuals develop consciousness, leading to a confrontation where one asserts dominance to become the master and the other becomes a slave until after many generations, the slaves develop sufficient reasoning skills learned through their labour to rise against the masters (102-111). This reasoning is integral to develop freedom, which ‘can exist only in the form of an association, but an association of a particular type: a *political* association characterized by rule of law’, due to ‘the social, cultural, and ethical *Bildung* it provides in the recognition of rights, duties, reciprocity, and a public good that includes—but is not reducible to—individual and so-called sectional interests’ (115). While Hegel maintains that economic and social integration are key aspects of this form of association, Villa argues that the Hegelian association is designed to socialize the population as opposed to foster democratic governance from the ground up, since capacity to rationalize universal interests in addition to one’s own private ones does not imply direct participation in political decision-making (121-163). For Hegel, a citizen is thus ‘consigned to the role of a more or less interested student or spectator’ (163).

Chapter 4 is dedicated to analyzing Tocqueville’s notions of political education, which take a turn back toward learning by doing (173-180). Tocqueville envisions a ‘public-political realm’ consisting of political and civil society associations, acknowledging the political aspects of associational life that can help teach citizens about politics in a practical way (197-98). However, Villa illustrates that Tocqueville’s calls for increased political participation are coupled with an emphasis on top-down approaches where upper classes would take a leading role in political instruction (181-197). Moreover, Tocqueville’s understanding of political participation involves less critical thought and more the integration of citizens into adherence to communal values with little room for deviation, a sentiment that becomes very apparent with Tocqueville’s promotion of adherence to religious dogma (204-21). While Villa tracks the evolution of ideas toward increasingly greater political participation, he reveals the limitations Tocqueville’s vision has for political life when compared to contemporary society.

The fifth chapter covers Mill’s simultaneous promotion of increasing suffrage and caution about rushing into a full democratic transition (229-230). Mill emphasizes the need for critical thinking and deliberation in political participation instead of adhering to communal values and religious dogmas, going further than Hegel and Tocqueville (234-252). However, Mill also has significant drawbacks in terms of who can participate in politics, writing off non-European races, young people, and the poor as ineligible (253-260). Furthermore, Mill relegates political education to government structures and administrations, political representatives, and educated classes of experts (261-272). By pointing out the flaws in Mill’s approach, Villa highlights the pervasiveness of Platonic paternalism as an obstacle to a full democratic transition in the authors’ political philosophies.

The book’s conclusion connects the four authors to more contemporary political thought to show how far understandings of political education have come as well as to identify current challenges to political participation and democracy. Villa contrasts the authors’ paternalistic ideas of people as being something to be molded against Arendt’s approach of not engaging in political instruction of individuals, but rather advocating that individuals get involved in collective political action (275-77). Villa outlines a number of current systemic issues in the United States that stem from the infringement of private interests upon political processes, to which he calls for decreasing their influence and ‘taking education far more seriously’ as more than ‘a vehicle to basic literacy and (thus) possible employment, but as essential to democracy itself’ (279-83). Villa leaves readers with a warning to not take contemporary notions of the people and public education as givens, since there

are forces at work that seek to bring back more elitist forms of government that infantilize citizen populations and ultimately threaten their decision-making power (283-286).

Villa's illuminating analysis of the importance of the people as a concept in the political education philosophies of the four authors communicates a narrative of the evolution of the people that is vital to the study of political education in the present. The brief comparison to Arendt's more hands-off approach to political education is a stimulating invitation for a continued study of the people in our historical timeline. I would be interested in learning more about Villa's understanding of the transition from Mill to Arendt, as well as from Arendt to the current state of affairs in the U.S. In fact, I believe completing the timeline of the people in thought and perhaps in practice would further increase the poignancy of Villa's pedagogical message, since it would help provide additional clarity on when and how the elitist biases of the four authors resurged in contemporary American society. Regardless, Villa's framing of the evolution of the people as a political concept is a useful perspective that can help empower readers to identify and challenge attempts to re-insert efforts to re-establish rule by the few in the U.S. and other contemporary societies.

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