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### Democracy's Debt: The Historical Tensions Between Political and Economic Liberty, M. Lane Bruner

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At that time we were implementing the procedures for including writing as a component of the SAT exam and were making recommendations for curriculum planning at the middle school and high school level. We recommended that high school students spend the upper-division years developing skills in rhetoric that stressed argumentation. I promoted this view because I believe that being facile in oral and written expression is essential to success in college and, correspondingly, the most wide-ranging skill for expression is argument. Clearly, my views came not only from a (Ciceronian) civic orientation of classical rhetoric but also by how well these insights were developed fifty years ago by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric*. This volume, unlike my first reading of Perelman in 1970, did not result in a headache, but it did result in the same expansive thinking that I had experienced over forty years ago. For that benefit we have John Gage and the contributors of *The Promise of Reason: Studies in The New Rhetoric* to thank.

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**M. Lane Bruner.** *Democracy's Debt: The Historical Tensions Between Political and Economic Liberty*. Amherst: Humanity Books, 2009. 394 pages. \$32.98 hardcover.

In *Democracy's Debt: The Historical Tensions Between Political and Economic Liberty*, M. Lane Bruner undertakes an enormous and timely task: to show that “the promise of republican forms of government has not been fulfilled because the power of money has time and time again overwhelmed political reason” (9). He traces this broken promise from ancient times through our contemporary age of globalization, searching for a Jamesian third way: “a more responsible form of global government that protects economic *and* political liberties with equal zeal” (11). Across seven chapters, the first of which serves as the book’s introduction, *Democracy's Debt* accomplishes its lofty goals with very few missteps, and only one of note. This book should interest scholars working in the rhetorics of economics, politics, and law; thus, the book should please a broad audience.

Bruner uses an historical approach to show how, in certain moments in Western history, when economic interests and political interests balanced, an ideal

democratic government obtained. He looks to the past for “practices” so that he can “determine if historically persistent dilemmas can be more artfully resolved” (23). Bruner’s project, then, is rhetorical in nature in that he examines the arguably intractable debate between the two opposing forces of politics and economics, and historical in that he examines this debate, and its consequences, over millennia.

The book’s introduction lays out the problem that gives the book its purpose: “There is no consensus . . . on how to manage the tensions between production and maintenance of wealth and the responsible exercise of political power” (17). The debate is one between economic liberty and political liberty. Those in favor of economic liberty argue that “the self-interested actions of individual citizens, when properly constrained by the rule of law . . . leads to the greater social good.” On the other hand, those in favor of political liberty “argue that no institutional or legal apparatus . . . can protect the common good in the absence of clearly articulated rights against the state or in the absence of widespread virtue and competent citizenship skills among political leaders and everyday citizens” (18). For Bruner those who argue on either side of this seemingly “intractable dilemma” miss the point that “economic arguments are *profoundly* political, just as political arguments have *profound* economic consequences” (22).

Chapter one, “Economics, Politics, and Rhetoric,” presents arguments for why readers should concern themselves with Bruner’s study. He argues for a notion of “active citizenship” in order to curb the erasure of individual rights under “our current age of accelerated globalization” (59). He provides two reasons: First, active citizens need a strong understanding of economics in order to understand government; second, active citizens need to understand “that a delicate balance exists between the strength of state needed to secure our freedom to pursue our individual ends and the risk that the state will be so strong that it will suppress our political and/or economic liberty” (62). Bruner then examines the two “powers” that he considers necessary for this balance: the power of the “sword” (the nation-state) versus the power of the “purse” (the globalized markets) (65). Throughout his analysis, however, he keeps in mind a third power, the power of the “word”—the arguments that shape the reality and relationships between the first two powers (47). His examination reveals that “economic liberalism conceived as state-managed market democracy based on ‘elite’ decision making, has fundamentally triumphed over political liberalism conceived as popularly managed democratic forms of constitutional government based on systems of checks and balances ensuring a healthy critical public sphere” (88).

Although Bruner’s analysis might seem pessimistic to some, for it points out time and again the ways that economic self-interest has triumphed over republican democracy, the book is not without its dose of hope. Indeed, his examination of various successful constitutional governments in which economics and politics

fell into balance confirms that such balance is possible. Bruner points to specific “moments in history where some measure of political *and* economic liberty prevailed.” He includes in this list “republican Rome,” the “city-states of the Italian Renaissance,” and “the United States after World War II,” among others (25).

Chapter two tackles the rhetoric of free markets throughout Western civilization, from classical times through the 1700s. The purpose of this history is to show the relationship between the development of free markets during the ending of divine-right monarchy, the decreasing dominance of the church, and the increasing globalization during the colonial era. Chapters three, four, and five each focuses on a particular era and locale: the Italian Renaissance city-states, postrevolutionary England, and revolutionary United States. Chapter six examines the emergence of intergovernmental organizations after World War II, the bodies that continue to govern international economic policy today.

These examples, among others that constitute the heart of his book, work toward his aspiration: “global constitutionalism” (311). For Bruner this goal will help create the ideal “political liberty,” conceived as

flourishing in the most perfect form of republicanism . . . where all of the economic interests in a given community are equally represented, where no one faction of the people is capable of using the state at the expense of other factions, and where the rule of law adequately protects the weak against the strong, while simultaneously keeping the weak from unjustly encroaching upon the just accomplishments of others. (312)

These are lofty goals. Although “the promise of republicanism has not been realized,” Bruner asserts that the unique problem of today’s globalized world is that “we have no effective form of global government, despite desperately needing one” (321, 331). Instead, we have a “mishmash of organizations” such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund, organizations that Bruner points out are distinctly undemocratic. “When elites refuse to accommodate the economic needs of poorer countries and poorer citizens, even if their refusal is based on ‘sound’ economic principles, basic republican principles suggest that a constitutional remedy needs to be put in place” (340). Bruner is not naïve; he recognizes that the “obstacles” to a global constitution are “overwhelmingly complex” (341). The “problem,” as Bruner sees it, “is getting the self-interested states, particularly the most powerful ones, to agree to make the attempt” (344).

The main problem with the book is the idealization of certain political economies across history without adequately problematizing still-invisible

workers in those economies. Bruner acknowledges in the preface that he has limited his study to Western governments such as the republican Roman and the US after World War II, so we may forgive his Western focus. But as students of post-World-War-II United States will most likely attest, political and economic liberty were in balance for only *some* of the citizens of the US: Women and racial minorities suffered from a disturbing lack of both. In reality, the economic stability of the US economy after World War II can be arguably attributed to the unpaid and underpaid labor of racial minorities and women. The same holds for arguably *all* of the historical moments Bruner mentions as times of “best practices,” indeed, perhaps all historical moments of Western civilization since Classical times (23).

Neither “African-American” nor “Black” appear in the book’s index. “Racism” receives a brief mention in the introduction when the author discusses some of the consequences of colonialism (36). He does discuss slavery, especially in terms of active citizenship, because often “citizens were an aristocracy freed from the necessity of labor” by slaves or others forced into servitude (292). For example, in Ancient Greece, he points out that “the more well-to-do citizens were freed from their labor by slaves” (292). Furthermore, “[m]any of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were slaveholders” (292). Yet, even less attention is given to the invisible labor of women. “Women,” “gender,” “female” (and its cognates), “wife”—none of these terms appear in the index of the book. Despite these shortcomings, however, Bruner does acknowledge that “the vast majority of the world’s population hardly enjoys the status and benefits of citizenship in the sense of having an informed, active, and influential voice in state policy,” and that is the problem he works toward fixing (59).

Overall, *Democracy’s Debt* is a finely written book, covering complex subject matter in a tone that is readily accessible to rhetoric scholars who are unfamiliar with political, legal, or economic theories. He converses fluently with theorists as diverse as Kant, Negri and Hardt, Guy Debord, and John Dewey. He adeptly diagnoses a growing problem with our increasingly globalized world. He provides thoughtful historical analysis of various moments in Western history that can be instructive today. And he optimistically sets forth ideas for how to solve the dearth of republican values caused by globalization with his theory of global constitutionalism.

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