McWilliams Barndt, Susan. 2023. "The Abolition of Democracy." *Journal of Religion, Culture & Democracy*, December. https://doi.org/10.54669/001c.89395.

ARTICLES

The Abolition of Democracy

Susan McWilliams Barndt[1]

[1] Pomona College

Keywords: C. S. Lewis, Democracy, United States, United Kingdom, World War II

https://doi.org/10.54669/001c.89395

Journal of Religion, Culture & Democracy

Democracy seems shaky in the contemporary United States. In recent polls, an overwhelming 70 percent of Americans say that democracy is under threat, in crisis, and at risk of failing. Conventional wisdom tends to lay the blame for those findings—and the underlying fragility of democracy in America—at the feet of discrete political actors or at growing "polarization" in the electorate. But in *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis gives us reason to look deeper—at the difficult relationship, in practice, between modern democracy and enduring values. This essay shows how Lewis helps us better understand the crisis of democracy in America (including the crisis of faith in democracy in America) today.

> Yes to the paradoxes of democracy. . . .
> Each man fated to answer for himself:
> Which of the faiths and illusions of mankind
> Must I choose for my own sustaining light
> To bring me beyond the present wilderness?
> —Carl Sandburg[1]

Democracy seems shaky in the contemporary United States.[2] In recent polls, an overwhelming 70 percent of Americans say that democracy is under threat, in crisis, and at risk of failing (Newell et al. 2022; Corisanti et al. 2022). The sentiment is shared across party lines; similar percentages of Democrats, Republicans, and independents have told pollsters that they think democracy in America is on the brink of collapse. This has led some pollsters to joke, mordantly, that at least we know Americans are able to agree on something.[3]

Similar polling data indicate not just dissatisfaction with the status quo, but a dissatisfaction with the very idea of democracy. That is, Americans aren't saying something like "I believe in democracy, but our system is really messed up and not as democratic as it should be." Increasingly they are saying something like "I'm just not sure I believe in democracy." For instance, one survey found that fewer than 30 percent of millennials—defined in the survey as Americans born since the 1980s—think that living in a democracy is

1 Sandburg 1969, 521.

2 This phenomenon is not limited to the United States. See Mounk and Foa 2020.

3 In an August 2022 Quinnipiac poll, 69 percent of Democrats, 69 percent of Republicans, and 66 percent of independents worried that the nation's democracy is nearing collapse. See Malloy and Schwartz 2022.

essential. As one pollster put it, "Americans aren't just souring on particular institutions or particular politicians. To a surprising degree, they have begun to sour on liberal democracy itself" (Foa and Mounk 2015).[4]

These data have attracted a fair amount of attention, and many smart people have ventured explanations for Americans' declining democratic faith. Those explanations include (but are not limited to): (1) a decline of trust in government after several decades marked by "controversial wars, policy blunders, mismanagement and political malfeasance"; (2) political polarization among elites and in the electorate; (3) a rise of disinformation, especially on the internet; (4) increasing economic inequality and declining economic mobility; and (5) the 2020 presidential election and its aftermath, which left many of President Trump's supporters believing that elections are rigged and other Americans believing, in the wake of the post-election storming of the US Capitol by some of those very same Trump supporters, that extremism in the electorate makes a democracy based on the rule of law untenable (Stier and Freedman 2022; Marx and Woodson 2019; Stokes 2021).

I believe all these accounts have some truth to them. But in his magisterial book *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis gives us reason to think and look deeper—at the difficult relationship, in practice, between modern liberal democracy and enduring values. Lewis was convinced that modern liberal democracies like the contemporary United States are internally at odds. They claim to be grounded in the enduring values that Lewis called "pure democracy"—the truth of human equality, the recognition of human dignity, and the submission of political power to those ends. But the actual political practice of these regimes—the set of rules and forms we call "democratic"—is a relativistic majoritarianism that often works against the realization and protection of those enduring values. This can be a tricky argument to play out, since it relies on us recognizing multiple meanings of "democracy": first, the "pure democracy," oriented around ends and values, that Lewis admires, and second, the "modern liberal democracy," defined by certain forms and processes (such as elections), that marks governance in the contemporary United States and elsewhere. This is to some degree a difference between the ideal and the actual. But unlike other commentators, Lewis does not merely think that modern liberal democracies work toward pure democracy but do so imperfectly; he thinks that modern liberal democracies actually work *against* pure democracy.

To be more specific, as Lewis saw it, some of the key features of modern liberal democracies—features that modern democratic citizens tend to view with pride—serve anti-democratic ends. Majoritarianism accustoms citizens to

4 Throughout this article I will follow Foa and Mounk in referring to the contemporary United States and similar nation-states as "modern liberal democracies." By "liberal democracy" I mean a state with some form of popular representation, in which the power of government is limited and where there is a broad emphasis on pluralism and toleration, constitutionalism and the rule of law, an independent judiciary, and the protection of individual civil rights.

rule by force, and a growing faith in scientific progress habituates citizens to the goal of human mastery over nature, which in practice leads to increasing inequality. Meanwhile, the rise of well-meaning technocrats, dismissive of objective values in the name of objectivity, undermines the moral foundations of democracy. As those forces build up steam over time, it is unsurprising that growing numbers of citizens would become cynical about the political system that generated those forces. Why should citizens who feel increasingly overwhelmed by powerful majorities, degraded by massive inequalities, rendered obsolete by technological development, and shaken in their moral commitments feel positive about their political conditions? If the upshot of modern liberal democracies is that most citizens in them come to feel degraded rather than dignified, why wouldn't those citizens look for alternatives to modern liberal democracies?

Lewis first presented the arguments of *Abolition of Man* as the fifteenth series of Riddell Memorial Lectures at the University of Durham. He journeyed with his brother north from Oxford to give three lectures across three nights, on the evenings of February 24, 25, and 26, 1943 (Ward 2008, 8). The lectures took place at an important political moment for the United Kingdom. Just a few weeks earlier, the last German troops had surrendered to the Red Army in Stalingrad, ending one of the bloodiest battles in the history of warfare. It would prove to be a turning point—what many historians have taken to be the decisive military turning point—in World War II. The Allied victory in Stalingrad was the first in a spate of major wins: In the months following Lewis's lectures, the Axis would surrender in north Africa, after which the Allied powers would take Sicily and then force the surrender of Italy. The Axis would never again have the upper hand in the war.

But even before all those things had happened, in the weeks immediately leading up to Lewis's lectures, the British were already experiencing the end of the battle of Stalingrad as the "psychological turning point of the war" (Beevor 1999, 48). For the first time in a long time, and perhaps for the first time since the war had begun, Britons could begin to envision the war's end—and turn to pragmatic questions about life in its wake. Government officials started to debate postwar policies in earnest and in public; on February 17, 1943, Prime Minister Winston Churchill suggested to his War Cabinet that the time had come "to form a Government concerned with matters other than the prosecution of the war" and specifically concerned with matters of postwar planning.[5] Throughout the month of February, leading up to the dates of Lewis's lectures, British newspapers were littered with pieces speculating about postwar life. Those pieces, with titles like "Spinsters Fear Post-War Insecurity"

5 This quotation is taken from the cabinet secretary's notes from the meeting, as reported in Todman (2020, 317).

(*Observer*, February 7, 1943, 5) and "The Future of Racing: Preparations for Post-War Sport" (*Observer*, February 14, 1943, 6) indicate that people across the country were starting to imagine, as a practical matter more than a wishful fantasy, a time after the bloodshed. As the latter article summed it up, "Post-war reconstruction is being tackled from practically every angle."[6] The copious newspaper coverage of postwar planning, development, and speculation during this period suggests that it was a major preoccupation—if not *the* major preoccupation—in the minds of the British people.[7] As then-Deputy Prime Minister Clement Atlee told the other members of the War Cabinet in mid-February, "The public are very much interested in their post-war conditions" (Todman 2020, 317).

While Britons were hopeful that the end of the war might be in sight, with their nation among the victors, the historical record makes clear that they were also highly apprehensive. Most realized it was unlikely that there would be "peace without a hangover," as Herbert Morrison, Home Secretary and Minister of Home Security, put it ("'Peace Without a Hangover': Mr. Morrison's Plans for Post-War Development," *Observer*, February 14, 1943, 5). Entire cities would need rebuilding. Industries that had transformed around the imperatives of wartime production would have to pivot to other pursuits. Soldiers who had been shaped and mangled by the war would need to be reincorporated into society; at the very least, they would need jobs in the peacetime economy. Farmers would need to reorient toward "home production" ("Post-War Farming: An All-Party Plan," *Manchester Guardian*, February 26, 1943, 8). The country would probably need to spend a great deal on defense to maintain a postwar peace while also ramping up exports to make up for lost overseas investments, but there was also substantial pressure to enact public welfare provisions after several years of wartime hardship (Todman 2020, 317). Money was sure to be tight. And it seemed increasingly clear that even though the political and military coalition of the British Empire might be able to defeat the Axis powers, it might not be able to preserve itself; postwar Britain might well be post-imperial Britain (see Stewart 2008).

In short, perhaps more than anything else, the British people were wondering, What do we need to prepare for next?

Given that historical context, one way to read *The Abolition of Man* is as C. S. Lewis's answer to that question—the question he surely knew was urgent for his listeners, and what the audience surely hoped he would address. Lewis had become famous, during the war, for both *The Screwtape Letters* and his

6 Similar articles appear in the *Manchester Guardian* during the same period; see, for instance, "Post-War Trade: The Cotton Industry's Problems," *Manchester Guardian*, February 9, 1943, 2; and "Bomb-Damaged Property: Speeding Up Plans for Post-War Rebuilding," *Manchester Guardian*, February 11, 1943, 3.

7 Between the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Observer* alone, 159 articles appear between February 1 and 26, 1943, that focus on postwar planning. That means that, on average, each newspaper published at least three stories focused on the conditions of postwar life every day in the weeks leading up to Lewis's lectures.

radio broadcasts to the nation (Marsden 2016, 49–51). They established him as a popular philosopher and theologian who, even as he spoke abstractly, was helping people to make sense of wartime and to survive its many horrors. During this period Lewis was also doing a good deal of work for the Home Service, and he clearly felt a sense of cultural mission. He thought extensively about how to inspire a broad, multiclass public to do the moral reflection that is especially necessary in a time of political crisis (Marsden 2016, 32–33).

So, whatever else Lewis is doing in *Abolition*, I am convinced he is speaking to these questions: What do we need to prepare for next? What dangers might Britain face in the future, after the war? In doing so, Lewis provides more general reflections on the dangers facing modern liberal democracies like that of Britain's great wartime ally, the United States. Those reflections are of the utmost relevance and importance today.

Though at first glance he does not seem to be talking much about politics, Lewis quite clearly announces the political dimensions to his thinking near the end of *The Abolition of Man*.[8] At this point, Lewis has just finished developing the two interlocking arguments for which the book is well known. To recap:

Lewis's first argument is that moderns are too quick to dismiss "the doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true, and others really false, to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of things we are." They do this out of an enthusiasm for innovation and for debunking the "traditional" or "sentimental" notions of the past (Lewis 1947, 18, 29). Moderns shun values in favor of "objective facts." They then regard our assessment of those facts as mere statements of biological impulse or individual opinion. Moderns thus incline toward relativistic thinking and herald it as rational.

This way of thinking, Lewis says, is self-delusive. Even or perhaps especially the most earnest relativist conveys, in her speech and in her actions, adherence to a set of values. (As so many teachers have said to so many students: The person who claims there is no absolute truth is making a statement of absolute truth.) Further, Lewis writes, "A great many of those who 'debunk' traditional or (as they would say) 'sentimental' values have in their background values of their own which they believe to be immune from the debunking process" (Lewis 1947, 29). The only way for a thinker to get around this problem is to reject the idea of value altogether, à la Friedrich Nietzsche, and claim that all supposed statements of value are merely expressions of the will to power.

8 Dyer and Watson (2016, 132) note that "C. S. Lewis was, on the surface, an apolitical man" but show in their own work that below the surface, Lewis's concerns are profoundly and consistently political.

Following that argument, in a chapter titled "The Abolition of Man," Lewis takes on the modern aspiration to master nature. The problem with this aspiration in practice, writes Lewis, is twofold. First, "what we call Man's power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men." Second, the people who have power in that scenario—the people who are likely to deny the doctrine of objective value—find themselves enslaved to their own impulses (perhaps because they have some considered philosophical commitment to the idea of will to power, but more likely because they have not given much thought to their own philosophical commitments). Thus: "At the moment, then, of Man's victory over Nature, we find the whole human race subjected to some individual men, and those individuals subjected to that in themselves which is purely 'natural'—to their irrational impulses" (Lewis 1947, 55, 67). The quintessential modern aspiration, the aspiration to master nature, turns out to be little more than a raw and unrestrained quest for power.

At that moment, in linking these two arguments in what could fairly be described as the book's philosophical climax, Lewis uses tellingly political language. This language shows up nowhere else in *Abolition* and therefore stands out. "A dogmatic belief in objective value," Lewis announces, "is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery" (Lewis 1947, 73).[9] In other words, a belief in objective value is not just generally necessary for the flourishing of the human individual or the flourishing of human civilization. It is particularly necessary for self-government and the rule of law—the political ideal and order that define liberal democracies. "The true significance of what is going on has been concealed by the use of the abstraction Man," Lewis then says, suggesting that, in practice, the "true significance" of his argument has to do with the viability of liberal democracies in the near-term future (Lewis 1947, 74).

Lewis then says that democracies themselves harbor the most profound threats to their own existence. The dangers to democracy, self-government, and the rule of law are not, as in the war, external. "I am not here thinking solely, perhaps not even chiefly, of those who are our public enemies at the moment." He writes:

> The process which, if not checked, will abolish man goes on apace among Communists and Democrats no less than Fascists. The methods may (at first) differ in brutality. But many a mild-eyed scientist in pince-nez, many a popular dramatist, many an amateur philosopher in our midst, means in the long run just the same as the Nazi rulers of Germany. (Lewis 1947, 73–74)[10]

9 This is the first and only time in the book that Lewis uses the word "tyranny." It is also the only time in the book that Lewis uses the word "slavery"—though he does include a quotation from Cicero later, in the Appendix, that "Death is to be chosen before slavery and base deeds" (99).

10 Lewis's biographer, A. N. Wilson, says that the "mild-eyed scientist in pince-nez," the "popular dramatist," and the "amateur philosopher" represent Sigmund Freud, George Bernard Shaw, and A. J. Ayer, respectively (Wilson 1990, 199).

It is hard to overstate the shock value of this claim, especially given the time and place in which Lewis made it. At the first moment in years when his countrymen had reason to hope that their nation might triumph over their fascist foes—foes who the Brits knew, by that time, were genocidal—Lewis told them that ultimately they would likely end up no different from the Nazis.[11] Just when his countrymen were beginning to spy victory, Lewis warns them of ultimate defeat. To disfigure an old saying, Lewis tells them: You might win the war but lose the battle.

At the apex of *The Abolition of Man*, then, Lewis makes clear that the Axis powers are not the only threats to human freedom and dignity worthy of his and his fellows' attention. Threats to human freedom and dignity are also to be found within modern liberal democracies (see Ward 2008, 6). If the Allied forces do win the war, Lewis suggests that the real challenge facing postwar British and American societies involves those internal threats. Against all those newspaper articles focused on questions of postwar economic production and material allocation, Lewis charges his audience to consider—with just as much urgency—questions of postwar moral education. Among other things, this helps to explain why Lewis starts *The Abolition of Man* with a focus on school textbooks; while most officials are asking what needs to be done to ensure that young British men will have enough money, Lewis asks his listeners what needs to be done to ensure that young British people will have enough soul.

Let us look at the two main claims that Lewis makes about democracy in *The Abolition of Man*: first, that democracies require a sense of objective value; and second, that democracies themselves harbor the greatest threats to their own existence. Lewis makes both claims explicitly but does not seem to expand upon them at great length, or even much at all, when he makes them. Elsewhere in *Abolition* and in some of his other writings, though, Lewis gives us the resources and direction to be able to understand more about the thinking that lies behind those claims.

First, Lewis says that democracies are particularly dependent on a belief in objective value. "A dogmatic belief in objective value," he writes, "is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery" (Lewis 1947, 73). Why does Lewis think that is so?

For one thing, Lewis argues that "only the *Tao* provides a common human law of action which can over-arch rulers and ruled alike." That is, a sense of objective value and natural law is inextricably linked to the idea of laws that apply to all. In fact, Lewis suggests that a belief in the rule of law *is* a belief

11 By 1942 the British were aware of the existence of concentration camps and had some idea of the extent of Nazi atrocities. See, for instance, "Jewish War Victims: More Than a Million Dead," *Manchester Guardian*, June 30, 1942, 2.

in objective value; twice in *Abolition* he uses the words "Law" and "*Tao*"—the term Lewis uses in this book to capture "the reality beyond all predicates" or the site of objective value—interchangeably (Lewis 1947, 73, 18, 43).

This connection is particularly important for democracies and democratic republics.[12] Such regimes depend on the ultimate idea of the rule of law, the idea that laws should exist, that they should serve the public interest, and that they should apply to everyone equally—a reflection of our status as equally dignified human beings. As John Adams most famously articulated it, the core idea of democracy (and of republican government) is rule by the public, for the public interest. But for government to function in the public interest, it must be "a government of laws, and not of men." There are other kinds of regimes predicated on rule by private interest; "where private interest governs, it is a government of men, and not of laws" (Adams 1787, 1:126). But nothing may properly be called a democracy or a republic unless it is anchored in the idea of the rule of law. Liberal democracies require that their citizens believe in the rule of law and in the essentialness of what the United States Constitution calls "equal protection of the laws." Those citizens need not—in fact, they should not—believe that the laws in practice are perfectly impartial, but they do need to believe in the rule of law as an ideal. It is that belief that, among other things, allows citizens to hold and judge existing laws and leaders against that ideal standard. Doing something as central to democratic governance as ferreting out corruption becomes impossible without some standard of objective value as embodied in the idea of the rule of law; the word "corrupt" itself, Lewis writes, "impl[ies] a doctrine of value" (Lewis 1947, 65).

If citizens do not believe in the rule of law—if they are not attached to objective value that far—all that is left is the rule of some people over others, in service to their own impulses. And those impulses are highly unlikely to point in the direction of public interest. "I am very doubtful," Lewis writes, "whether history shows us one example of a man who, having stepped outside traditional morality and attained power, has used that power benevolently" (Lewis 1947, 66). In other words, absent a public attachment to the idea of the rule of law, a democratic nation is likely to collapse into arbitrary rule. The thing that stands between democracy and that end is some idea of objective moral law. Elsewhere in his writing, Lewis states this plainly: "Subjectivism about values is eternally incompatible with democracy. We and our rulers are of one kind only so long as we are subject to one law," and "the very idea of freedom presupposes some objective moral law which applies to rulers and ruled alike" (Lewis 2000, 665).

The notion that "we and our rulers are of one kind," so obviously connected to the notion of rule of law, goes even deeper. That notion asserts the truth—or what American tradition calls the self-evidence—of human equality. Simply

12 I use the term "democracy" in this article to encompass what are more properly called democratic republics. I am following Lewis and popular language in making that choice.

put, democracy depends on a dogmatic belief in the truth of human equality, on the idea of an essential dignity or objective value to all human beings that is not up for negotiation. Human equality is a statement about, as Lewis says, "the kind of things we are" and is therefore central to what he calls the *Tao* (Lewis 1947, 18). A "pure democracy" is one in which the citizens are committed to the truth of human equality, and all practices submit to and exist in service of that truth. As G. K. Chesterton had written two decades before, citizenship requires faith in equality, in "the pure classic conception that no man must aspire to be anything more than a citizen, and that no man should endure to be anything less" (Chesterton 1923, 16). Democracy is inseparable from objective value; democracy itself is an expression of objective value.

In short, Lewis shows that there is a moral foundation to democracy. "Pure democracy," for Lewis, is predicated on certain nonnegotiable articles of faith, foremost among them a belief in the rule of law and a belief in human equality. In combination, they create and support the idea of self-governance.

But while "pure democracy" depends on, is rooted in, and cannot be separated from objective value, Lewis warns that modern liberal democracies themselves harbor the greatest threats to their own existence on those terms.

For Lewis, much of that threat lies in the majoritarianism that is a staple of modern democratic nations. Modern liberal democracies depend, as a practical matter, on voting as a basis for rule. "Majority rules" in modern democracy, so much so that, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the early 1800s, majorities come to have a kind of moral authority in the modern democratic state; citizens in large-scale democracies and republics, that is, tend to think that it is *right* for a majority to win an election (Tocqueville 1875, 1:258). The popularity of opinion polling, like all the polling that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, provides another example of the ways in which modern democratic citizens (and elected leaders) chase and seek to appeal to majorities. In the most visible ways, and in the voting that constitutes the core of modern democratic practice, majorities win—and people believe that majorities deserve to win.

But as Lewis reminds us in *Abolition*, rule by majority is a form of rule by force. The claims of majorities are not claims of right; they are claims of might, encompassed in phrases like "there are more of us than you." Lewis specifically names "the power of majorities over minorities" as one of the expressions of the modern aspiration to master nature (Lewis 1947, 56). Majoritarianism embodies the quest for power, divorced from a sense of moral values, that Lewis condemns in *Abolition*.

On its face, of course, majoritarianism seems to most of us to look different from the one-man tyranny that you might imagine in thinking about amoral, power-hungry leadership. Indeed, if you squint your eyes and look at it a certain way, majoritarianism might seem to respect the objective value at the

heart of the democratic ideal. If all human beings are equal, but all human beings do not agree, majoritarianism—the rule of the many—might be the form of rule that best respects the underlying equality of the disagreeing beings in practice. But majorities often enact laws that do not respect that underlying equality of human beings. For instance, as Lewis well knew, in the United Kingdom, majoritarianism had been taken to mean that majorities should be able to determine what individual rights like freedom of speech are, and how they should be enforced (Dworkin 2008, 95). That is, majorities in practice often behave tyrannically and not democratically; like Lewis's man in pince-nez, they might look benign but actually embody arbitrary power and dehumanizing forms of rule.

Beyond that, Lewis thought that majorities are particularly susceptible to amorality or even immorality because majorities are susceptible to propaganda. And against a majority that has been propagandized, there is no democratic recourse. (You can imagine a one-man tyrant who has been convinced of some insane idea, but who encounters resistance to it from the general population. But if a majority has been convinced of an insane idea, there is no outside general population to counter it on democratic terms.) Lewis sums up this problem in a 1953 letter by asking his friend a hypothetical question: "If the Communists in this country can persuade the country to sell into Russia, or even to set up devil-worship and human sacrifice, what is the *democratic* reply?" Lewis then suggests that majoritarianism is "the whole problem of Democracy" (Lewis 2004, 3:296, emphasis original).

This argument starts to indicate the depth of Lewis's worry about "Conditioners," a term that dominates *The Abolition of Man*. (By contrast, the words "tyrant" and "tyrants" appear not at all.)[13] The Conditioners (and their allies, the "planners") are a small class of powerful individuals—not necessarily occupying official governmental positions—focused on scientific progress and who exert control over the population through schooling, media, technology, and other cultural forms. They "*produce* conscience," writes Lewis. They are propagandists in service to the vision of human mastery over nature (Lewis 1947, 61, emphasis original). It is at best ironic that the Conditioners see "propaganda [as] their abomination" because they are the real propagandists: "Where the old initiated, the new merely 'conditions.' The old dealt with its pupils as grown birds deal with young birds when they teach them to fly; the new deals with them more as the poultry-keeper deals with young birds—making them thus or thus for purposes of which they know nothing. In a word, the old was a kind of propagation—men transmitting manhood to men; the new is merely propaganda" (Lewis 1947, 23). The Conditioners portray themselves as morally neutral or even benevolent figures, making their propaganda much less easy to recognize, and much more insidious. They are

13 The word "conditioners" appears 18 times in *The Abolition of Man.*

dogmatic in their insistence that we focus our attentions on what is "comforting, or 'inspiring,' or socially useful," rather than what is objectively true, but they do not recognize the dogmatic quality of their own commitments (Lewis 1986, 79). Lewis would elsewhere describe his fears in even starker terms: "The majority in most modern countries respect science and want to be planned. And, therefore, almost by definition, if any man or group wishes to enslave us it will describe itself as 'scientific planned democracy'" (Lewis 2017, 126–27). As Lewis sees it, modern democracies might be particularly susceptible to propaganda, anti-democratic capture, and enslavement because the enslavers bear a happy face and do not know they are enslavers. Think of how *The Abolition of Man* begins, with Lewis criticizing the authors of a "little book on English" —a thing that seems harmless enough. "I do not think the authors of this book . . . intended any harm," writes Lewis. They are "two modest practising schoolmasters who were doing the best they knew" (Lewis 1947, 1). Yet their work is, as Lewis shows us, deeply propagandistic.

At its heart, majoritarianism is an exercise in counting—not an exercise in moral reflection, debate, or persuasion. Majoritarianism suggests that my individual position is of equal value to your individual position, simply as a matter of numbers—regardless of the moral content of our respective positions. If we are having a vote on whether to murder all dark-skinned children, and I vote "yes" and you vote "no," our votes carry equal political weight despite their radically different moral value—even though my position is nothing short of evil. Over time, then, majoritarianism accustoms moderns who think of themselves as democrats to subjectivism. I have my position, and you have your position. We should leave each other alone, but if we have to duke it out when election time comes, we'll just see who has numbers on our side. One recent popular song captured this prevailing sentiment as "I Do Me ... You Do You" (IDK 2019). (Notably, that song appears on an album titled *Is He Real?*—a question that one reviewer said the album answers with "basically the shrugging emoticon" [Pearce 2019].) Majoritarianism, over time, erodes the idea that democracy has a moral basis and accustoms us to the idea that democracy has a quantitative basis.

In *The Screwtape Letters* the demon Screwtape proposes to his nephew that he use the word *democracy* "purely as an incantation" and "purely for its selling power." People like democracy, Screwtape explains, because "it is a name they venerate. And of course it relates to the political ideal that men should be equally treated." He elaborates:

> Democracy is the word with which you must lead them by the nose. . . . It will never occur to them that democracy is properly the name of a political system, even a system of voting, and that this has only the most remote and tenuous connection with what you are trying to sell them. Nor of course must they be allowed to

> raise Aristotle's question: whether "democratic behavior" means the behavior that democracies like or the behavior that will preserve a democracy. For if they did, it could hardly fail to occur to them that these need not be the same. (Lewis 2015, 197)

Screwtape masterfully explicates Lewis's deep worry that in the modern world, "perhaps *pure* democracy is really a false ideal" (2004, 3:296). That is, Lewis worries that in the modern world, the idea of democracy mostly functions to sustain and legitimate amoral, technological regimes that point toward the abolition of man. Such regimes are to be differentiated from pure democracy. They represent, as Screwtape puts it, "democracy in the diabolical sense" (Lewis 2015, 206). They are, in the deepest sense, anti-democratic.

Citizens of modern liberal democracies, then, inhabit a political condition that is confusing at best. They are caught between the ideal of pure democracy, grounded in objective value and dogmatic moral commitment, and the practice of modern democracy, centered on majoritarianism and its tendency toward power-seeking and subjectivism. Because of the ways in which pure democracy and modern democracy move quietly but decisively against each other—even as they claim affinity and common purpose—citizens of modern democracies are susceptible to becoming cynical about democracy itself.

I suspect that this susceptibility is especially pronounced in the United States, where the two key founding documents exist in a tension long recognized by scholars, but which Lewis's account allows us to see as a real problem. The Declaration of Independence makes a foundational moral claim of human equality and is thus an expression of what Lewis calls "pure democracy," while the Constitution asserts its democratic legitimacy largely in majoritarian electoral processes, which is thus an expression of the modern democratic practice that Lewis derides. (The Constitution also, of course, has its Bill of Rights. But, as mentioned above, Lewis thought that in a majoritarian system, even the nature and scope of individual rights would become subject to the preferences of majorities. And the ultimate power in the Constitution, the power of amendment, is a power that can only be exercised by a certain kind of political majority.) The "power of earlier generations over later ones," discussed by Lewis at some length in *Abolition,* manifests itself in the United States in debilitating ways—for Americans, in Lewis's account, have inherited a self-undermining political system (Lewis 1947, 56).

It is important to recognize that what Lewis is describing is more than and different from what Samuel Huntington (1981) called the "promise of disharmony" between ideals and institutions in American politics. In Lewis's account, it is not merely that modern democratic structures aspire to democratic ideals but fail to realize them perfectly in practice. It is not merely that modern democratic structures reflect human frailty, causing frustration

among citizens when those structures fail to bring about perfect justice or equality. Rather, in Lewis's account, the big-picture story is that modern democratic structures actively undermine democratic ideals.

Lewis also sees modern liberal democracies more darkly than did his predecessor, G. K. Chesterton. While visiting the United States, Chesterton said he saw "an army of actualities" opposed to the ideal of democracy, "but there is no ideal opposed to that ideal." Chesterton thought that Americans were directed, at bottom, by a true commitment to the ideal of pure democracy, to "an absolute of morals by which all men have a value invariable and indestructible and a dignity as intangible as death" (Chesterton 1923, 16–17). While Chesterton was not quite willing to say that pure democracy would triumph in the United States (or anywhere else), he was hopeful about what he saw as the absence of alternatives to it, at least at the level of ideals. By contrast, Lewis's great fear and great insight—realized in a small English textbook—was that modern democracies increasingly *are* driven by ideals opposed to the ideal of human equality. Those ideals appear first as apparently neutral commitments to scientific progress, technological development, and rationality. But as Lewis shows at length in *Abolition*, the "objectivity" of those commitments undermines the very notion of objective values. The words are almost identical, but they point toward oppositional ends.

Lewis would not be surprised, then, by the cynicism, rage, and lack of faith in democracy that increasingly mark contemporary American politics. Indeed, on the eve of what might be the greatest triumph of liberal democracies in the modern world, the Allied victory in World War II, he all but predicted the present state of things. Lewis was convinced that modern liberal democracies like the contemporary United States were internally at odds and inclined toward a path of arbitrary and dehumanizing rule. Some of the key features of modern liberal democracies—features that modern democratic citizens tend to view with pride—work together to serve anti-democratic ends. Majoritarianism—the voting that is the central political pride of modern democracies—accustoms citizens to a certain kind of rule by force and relativism. A growing faith in scientific progress and technological development habituates citizens to the goal of human mastery over nature, which in practice leads to increasing power inequalities among human beings. And in modern liberal democracies, the rise of well-meaning planners and conditioners, themselves dismissive of objective values in the name of objectivity, undermines the moral foundations necessary for democracy.

As those forces become dominant, it is unsurprising that growing numbers of citizens would become cynical about the political system that generated them. Why should citizens who feel increasingly overwhelmed by powerful majorities, degraded by massive inequalities, rendered obsolete by technological development, and shaken in their moral commitments feel positive about their

political conditions? If the upshot of modern liberal democracies is that most citizens in them come to feel degraded rather than dignified, why wouldn't those citizens look for alternatives to modern liberal democracies?

Lewis's argument in *The Abolition of Man* exposes the limitations of contemporary conventional wisdom when it comes to current explanations for the declining faith in democracy in America today. That conventional wisdom puts blame on discrete events and proximate authorities rather than on the underlying incoherence of the political system itself. In so doing, conventional wisdom mistakes symptoms for causes. Lewis would tell us that we have to look deeper, at the foundational structures of American politics—and modern democratic states more generally—if we want to begin to apprehend the true nature of the problem.

Lewis's account of the perils facing modern democracies is deeper and darker than many others. Yet the point of departure for Lewis's arguments in *The Abolition of Man* suggests where Lewis found hope, and where we might find hope today. Lewis understood that the rationalist vision of planners and conditioners is unsatisfying to most students, that students do hunger for education that engages their sentimental and moral capacities. Lewis seems to suggest that the pure democratic ideal, and the commitment to objective value of which that idea is part and parcel, still can be brought to bear in modern liberal democracies. That Lewis was an author of children's books who focuses on the education of schoolchildren in *Abolition* is telling. Lewis suggests by his own writing that paying attention to children—how they learn and what they learn—is a key act. Planners and conditioners will mostly pay attention to children for the purpose of making them socially useful (or nondisruptive). Lewis suggests that others might pay attention to children for the purpose of making them fuller human beings. And when they grow up, people who have some experience being treated as full human beings will be more likely to find the technocratic visions of the conditioners unsatisfying. They will want to bring their full humanity—the humanity that the ideal of pure democracy tries to capture—to bear in the world.

Such education need not reach all children, or even most children, immediately. But it must cast wide to catch a few children, who themselves might be agents of moral transformation. As a Christian, Lewis knew that a single human child, endowed with moral vision and committed to living in service to divine truth, could grow up to transform the moral terms of the world. That is not to say that Lewis hoped for (much less counted on) a second coming but, rather, that he had faith that the power of a morally awakened individual far exceeds, in the end, the power of a technocracy. As he wrote to one correspondent, "All depends on the quality of the individual helpers." They have a power that "no 'machinery' of committees and selection and references, however well devised," does. God, he wrote, will bring those

individuals into the world when they are needed. But to some degree it is up to us to find them and cultivate them (Lewis 2008, 220). Herein, I think, lies Lewis's faith against the forces of the modern world.

In the modern world, Lewis worried that democracy might be its own worst enemy, the "diabolical" form of democracy undermining the "pure" ideal of democracy as a matter of course. But Lewis also gives us reason to think that democracy still might save democracy. Cultivating the objective values of "pure" democracy, through careful moral attention and education, seemed to him the best chance to save modern democracies from their own worst tendencies—not just in the postwar moment but also in our own time and beyond.

Submitted: June 05, 2023 EST, Accepted: September 14, 2023 EST

REFERENCES

Adams, John. 1787. *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*. Vol. 1. London: C. Dilly.

Beevor, Antony. 1999. *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege: 1942–1943*. New York: Penguin.

Chesterton, G. K. 1923. *What I Saw in America*. New York: Dodd, Mead.

Corisanti, Nick et al. 2022. "Voters See Democracy in Peril, but Saving It Isn't a Priority." *New York Times*, October 18, 2022.

Dworkin, Ronald. 2008. "The Moral Reading and the Majoritarian Premise." In *Deliberative Democracy and Human Rights*, edited by Harold Hongju Koh and Ronald C. Slye, 81–115. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Dyer, Justin Buckley, and Micah J. Watson. 2016. *C. S. Lewis on Politics and the Natural Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781316257838.

Foa, Roberto, and Yascha Mounk. 2015. "Are Americans Losing Faith in Democracy?" *Vox*, December 18, 2015. https://www.vox.com/polyarchy/2015/12/18/9360663/is-democracy-in-trouble.

Huntington, Samuel P. 1981. *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

IDK. 2019. "I Do Me . . . You Do You." *IDK, Is He Real?* Clue/Warner.

Lewis, C.S. 1947. *The Abolition of Man*. 2nd ed. New York: HarperCollins.

———. 1986. "Modern Man and His Categories of Thought." In *Present Concerns: Journalistic Essays*, edited by Walter Hooper, 73–81. New York: HarperOne.

———. 2000. "The Poison of Subjectivism." In *Essay Collection and Other Short Pieces*, edited by Lesley Walmsley, 657–65. New York: HarperCollins.

———. 2004. *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*. Edited by Walter Hooper. Vol. 3. New York: HarperCollins.

———. 2008. *Yours, Jack: Spiritual Direction from C.S. Lewis*. Edited by Paul F. Ford. New York: HarperCollins.

———. 2015. *The Screwtape Letters*. New York: HarperCollins.

———. 2017. "A Reply to Professor Haldane." In *Of Other Worlds: Essays and Stories*, 117–34. New York: HarperOne.

Malloy, Tim, and Doug Schwartz. 2022. "Biden's Approval Rating Surges after Hitting Low Mark in July, Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; Half of Americans Say Trump Should Be Prosecuted on Criminal Charges over His Handling of Classified Documents." Press Release. Quinnipiac University Poll. August 31, 2022. https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us08312022_ufcg18.pdf.

Marsden, George M. 2016. *C. S. Lewis's Mere Christianity: A Biography*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400880492.

Marx, Anthony W., and Jamie Woodson. 2019. "The Report of the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy." Washington, DC: Aspen Institute.

Mounk, Yascha, and Roberto Stefan Foa. 2020. "This Is How Democracy Dies." *Atlantic*, January 29, 2020. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/confidence-democracy-lowest-point-record/605686/.

Newell, Mallory et al. 2022. "Seven in Ten Americans Say the Country Is in Crisis, at Risk of Failing." NPR/Ipsos Poll. January 3, 2022. https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/seven-ten-americans-say-country-crisis-risk-failing.

Pearce, Sheldon. 2019. "Review of Is He Real? By IDK." *Pitchfork*, September 11, 2019. https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/idk-is-he-real/.

Sandburg, Carl. 1969. "The People, Yes." In *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg*, 439–617. New York: Harcourt.

Stewart, Andrew. 2008. *Empire Lost: Britain, The Dominions, and the Second World War*. London: Continuum.

Stier, Max, and Tom Freedman. 2022. "Why Democracy's in Such Trouble: A Crisis in Public Trust of Government." *Politico*, March 1, 2022. https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/03/01/democracy-public-crisis-trust-government-faith-00012565.

Stokes, Bruce. 2021. "Poll Shows Americans Don't Believe in 'American Democracy.'" *Foresight*, December 21, 2021. https://www.gmfus.org/news/poll-shows-americans-dont-believe-american-democracy.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. 1875. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Henry Reeve. 2 vols. London: Longmans, Green.

Todman, Daniel. 2020. *Britain's War: A New World, 1942–1947*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ward, Michael. 2008. *The Abolition of Man: C. S. Lewis's Classic Essay on Objective Morality*. Hinsdale, IL: TellerBooks.

Wilson, A. N. 1990. *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*. New York: Norton.