# On Marie Collins Swabey's "Publicity and Measurement"*

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In "Publicity and Measurement," Marie Collins Swabey writes that "if democracy is not to be abandoned, some attempt must be made to devise ways in which what is of genuine public concern may be made to concern the public" (103). Her article grapples with the problem of democratic governance in an age of policy complexity and voter ignorance, a problem that remains arguably the core problem of democracy today, with policy issues having become, if anything, substantially more complex. Unfortunately, despite the prominence and extent of her work on this topic—including four articles in *Ethics* and a widely reviewed book[1]—her contributions to political philosophy have been entirely lost.[2] In this piece, I aim to highlight the continuing importance of the problem with which Swabey is grappling, and the distinctiveness, prescience, and continuing interest of her response to that problem.

This problem can be understood as arising from the tension in the following set of claims:

> SELF-RULE: Democracy is (at least) pro tanto normatively desirable, and it is a constitutive feature of a democracy that the people govern themselves.

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1. "The Rational Character of the Democratic Principle," *International Journal of Ethics* 35 (1925): 140–49, "Democracy and the Concept of Quantity," *International Journal of Ethics* 37 (1927): 189–207, "The Leading Myths of Our Time," *Ethics* 49 (1939): 169–86, and *Theory of the Democratic State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937).

2. Even using sophisticated search engines, I could identify only three citations of this work—all of them very brief—in any article or book published in the past 40 years. It must be remarked: it is, sadly, not entirely surprising that it is a woman whose contribution has been so neglected.

WISE-RULE: For democracy to be a good political system, the people must have the information and aptitude to govern themselves wisely.

LIMITATIONS: People are limited both in what interests them and in how much time they can devote to becoming informed.

IGNORANCE: Most people are ignorant of the facts they need to know to govern wisely.

There are many possible responses. One family of responses interprets self-rule to permit rule by representatives. But even with representative government, the practical and epistemic limits of voters remain serious challenges for ruling wisely, since they affect both the quality of the elected representatives and the extent to which representatives are meaningfully accountable. Here, some go in a Schumpeterian direction and deny the central importance of ruling wisely, maintaining that democracy is good just because it prevents domination by requiring competitive rotation through political elites.[3]

Another family of responses rejects voter ignorance as a problem, on the grounds that even very limited information is enough for ruling wisely. Arguments in this family defend the sufficiency of heuristics; or note wisdom of the crowd error-cancelling effects; or invoke the Condorcet Jury Theorem; or highlight the epistemic benefits of group cognitive diversity—or some combination of these.[4]

Swabey's response in "Publicity and Measurement" is to think creatively about our practical and psychological limitations so as to better address our ignorance. Her work can be seen as a precursor to those advocating deliberative democracy and those concerned with institutional innovation.[5] Like her much better-known contemporaries John Dewey and Walter Lippmann, Swabey sees the task of the democratic theorist as one of developing a response to the problem posed by our ignorance and limitations in terms of time and interest, while defending a robust conception of self-government and wise rule.

3. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956); Ian Shapiro, *The State of Democratic Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

4. See, e.g., John Ferejohn and James Kuklinski, eds., *Information and Democratic Processes* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990); James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds* (New York: Doubleday, 2004); Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

5. See, e.g., Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin, *Deliberation Day* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Mark Warren and Hilary Pearse, eds., *Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Archon Fung, "Continuous Institutional Innovation and the Pragmatic Conception of Democracy," *Polity* 44 (2012): 609–24.

Swabey distinguishes three different responses to the problems of ignorance and insufficient time and interest. One response, which we might call the "pessimistic" response, suggests that "the people" are not adequate to the task of informing themselves and governing wisely. They are, however, easy to manipulate via propaganda that "seeks by one means or another to go back of intelligence to primary organic motives, such as hunger, fear, pugnacity, or sex" (101). This response suggests that we should be realists about the use of these techniques, and to not object as long as they are used to further the genuine interests of the people. The "technocratic" response uses the pessimistic view to motivate taking power out of the hands of the people and putting it into the hands of experts.

Swabey argues against both of these. She acknowledges the problems but wants to pinpoint them properly: they do not require us to dumb down our discourse, use propaganda, or give up on self-rule and look to experts. Instead, "issues may be made to appeal directly to reflective consciousness by utilizing man's intellectual interests in art and science," and we should strive "to engage the popular mind at the level of its aesthetic experience and curiosity for exact knowledge" (103). As she puts it, "the great problem . . . remains a problem primarily of simplification: how to pose complicated issues in an uncomplicated way so as to gain popular notice." To do this, "we must look . . . to art and science as the means best adapted to acquaint men with their problems by revealing facts in their dramatic and regulatory significance" (104). To this end, she advocates for the creation of a "great national bureau of publicity" that would use statistical analyses and "the skillful use of charts, graphs, and pictures" to communicate "what is known about the people to the people themselves" (110–11)—evoking later real-world efforts such as PBS and the BBC. She also advocates for an increase both in the accumulation of statistical information relevant to policy making and in the statistical fluency of the population.

Swabey sets out an optimistic and ambitious conception of a democratic citizen, one who is limited in time and interest, but who can understand complex information (perhaps after improved education in statistics) and will participate in a humanistic, reasoned, statistically informed way if given a chance. This vision now seems hopeless to many, even naive. But that is tragic and premature. Swabey may have been inadequately attentive to the crowding-out effects—in both the media and political markets—of the basely entertaining and titillating.[6] And Swabey may have been overly optimistic about the power of the people to disseminate and obtain high-quality information in an age of corporate-owned, expansive telecommunications and great economic inequality. In the eighty years

6. See, e.g., Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

since she was writing, we have learned a great deal about these additional problems. And she may be a bit sanguine about the possibility of the State as an information provider, given concerns about political capture by elites and self-serving propaganda on the part of elected officials. These all provide reasons to refine her institutional solutions, not to abandon the project of finding such solutions. Indeed, inspired by Swabey, we might come to think that it is not the people that are the problem—as so much of modern electoral democratic theory and political science presupposes—it is the role (greatly diminished; practically powerless; as consumers, not reasoners) that they have been asked and forced to play in the institutions that rule their lives.