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## Book Review

### INDIVIDUALITY OVERCOMING DOCILITY

Alex Zakaras: *Individuality and Mass Democracy: Mill, Emerson, and the Burdens of Citizenship*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 252. \$49.95.)

doi:10.1017/S0034670510000719

Alex Zakaras's *Individuality and Mass Democracy* is an important and timely book. Written in clear, engaging prose, it succeeds both in setting forth a crucially important problem in contemporary political theory, and in summoning the intellectual resources from a long bygone era for its possible resolution.

Like many books about contemporary democracy, *Individuality and Mass Democracy* begins with the worrisome premise that democracy at present is not functioning as it should be: fewer and fewer citizens can be relied upon to vote; knowledge of political issues among voters is poor or nonexistent; and citizens are increasingly susceptible to manipulation and propaganda. Much of what ails democracy, Zakaras claims, is subsumable under a larger problem: that citizens in mass democracies are increasingly susceptible to what he calls "docility." Docility is a "democratic sickness" (24). Citizens are infected by it when they withdraw from politics altogether or else when they allow "their own voices to be manipulated in service of someone else's ends" (16).

There are two ways, we are told in the book's first chapter, to begin accounting for democracy's deficiencies: one structural or institutional, the other focusing on the failures and limitations of political agents themselves. While he acknowledges that "both approaches are indispensable" (4), Zakaras's book is primarily about citizens, not institutions. Yet this binary focus on institutions *or* citizens is spurious in part because it ignores the complex interplay between the two—a point, incidentally, that both Mill and Emerson saw clearly. Democratic laws and institutions tend to produce better democratic citizens, and conversely, an engaged and enlightened democratic citizenry is more likely to design laws and institutions that reflect deeper democratic sensibilities. It is probably impossible, moreover, to assign strict causal ascendancy here. As Hegel long ago theorized, the juridical workings of the state and the ethical dimensions of civil society stand to one another dialectically, in a sort of chicken-and-egg relationship, each requiring the other for its intelligibility. Thus it is somewhat confusing when Zakaras writes, in the book's concluding section, that "neither Mill nor Emerson

46 believed that government could do much to promote individuality other than  
47 protect individual rights, prevent power from accumulating irreversibly in the  
48 hands of any single person or group, and help preserve the integrity of parti-  
49 cipatory and representative institutions" (225). Readers should be forgiven for  
50 thinking that that sounds like an awful lot, and that the connections between  
51 democratic institutions and democratic individuality—between democratic  
52 politics and democratic persons, very roughly speaking—are therefore  
53 deeper and more mutually reinforcing than Zakaras sometimes seems to  
54 suppose. Still, Zakaras is right to highlight the "disparity between what  
55 democracy seems to require and what modern citizens seem able to give"  
56 (14). This is a crucial problem indeed, and *Individuality and Mass Democracy*  
57 does an excellent job at bringing it into vivid relief.

58 The book is organized into four main parts. The middle two parts feature  
59 Zakaras's careful and illuminating readings of Emerson and Mill. These chap-  
60 ters focus on the conceptions of individuality in Emerson's and Mill's writ-  
61 ings, and the important docility-combating role both philosophers assign to  
62 that ideal. These chapters are wonderful; they would make a fine book by  
63 themselves. They achieve that rare balance between painstaking scholarly  
64 research and broad synoptic vision. Mill's and Emerson's texts are throughout  
65 interpreted carefully and loyally, but always with an eye to contemporary  
66 problems. These chapters will be read with profit both by scholars specializ-  
67 ing in Mill and Emerson and also by political theorists without that specific  
68 expertise.

69 In contemporary discussions, individuality is often regarded as antithetical  
70 to engaged, democratic citizenship. To the extent that individuality flourishes,  
71 the idea goes, civic participation wanes. The ideal of individuality is often  
72 depicted as an ideal of Romantic inwardness, of personal authenticity. It is  
73 thought to belong to the snobby, private, idiosyncratic part of our nature,  
74 not the democratic, active, and participatory part. One of the central accom-  
75 plishments of Zakaras's book is its powerful case—made through, and on  
76 behalf of, Emerson and Mill—that this common understanding is mistaken  
77 and incomplete. Zakaras argues convincingly that individuality is an ideal  
78 with a profound democratic dimension, one that demands "that we take  
79 responsibility for our public and private commitments alike" (214).  
80 Individuality has also for a long time been the rallying call of the Right—it  
81 has been defended as the companion ethical ideal to "rugged individualism,"  
82 "self-reliance," "limited government," and other stock phrases of the libertar-  
83 ian Right. Perhaps the greatest achievement of this book, in my judgment, is  
84 its ability to reframe the problem of individuality, not in the service of some  
85 doctrine about the limits of state coercion, but rather in the hopes of recaptur-  
86 ing a robust ethical ideal of democratic citizenship.

87 The work of George Kateb looms large in *Individuality and Mass Democracy*.  
88 Indeed, readers are likely to feel as though Kateb's writings throughout form  
89 a sort of background against which many of Zakaras's ideas are viewed and  
90 tested. There are moments in the book during which it appears as though

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91 Zakaras is merely tweaking and repackaging some of Kateb's ideas. (I am  
92 thinking in particular of Kateb's *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and*  
93 *Democratic Culture* [Cornell University Press, 1992].) It is welcome, therefore,  
94 that Zakaras spends some time distinguishing his views from Kateb's and  
95 makes more explicit his criticisms and points of departure from that impor-  
96 tant work (211–20).

97 In the end, *Individuality and Mass Democracy* has many virtues. It is a book  
98 all political theorists would benefit from reading.

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