

emments to the left, much to the consternation of their true-believing fringes. Perhaps the lesson is that in European democracies, responsibilities of office often induce a sobriety in policy.

Decolonization represents the end of the age of European predominance. In reflecting on Kahler's treatment of this, two further thoughts come to mind. Apparently, possession of an empire was a powerful help in building an industrial economy. For Western Europe it was a trap door. Neither Britain, France, nor any other European colonizer recovered when the door caved in. Yet for Japan, empire was a launching pad. When its imperial adventure crashed, Japan's economy paused briefly and then took off for celestial industrial heights. Does this tell us something about European and Oriental cultures and resilience?

Another thought. As Kahler suggests, divestiture of European empire was more difficult to handle than its acquisition. And its loss devastated imperial economies, perhaps irrecoverably. In the perspective of history, then, was the enormous colonial effort, costing millions of lives, unjustified? Did it create a period of artificial prosperity but leave most of its beneficiaries unprepared for the modern world—doomed to second-class status as the price of imperialism? The answer to both questions is strongly affirmative. It is a measure of the

delusion of nations that these colonial activities are still extolled as their hours of glory.

For provoking these and other reflections, Kahler deserves some measure of gratitude. After all, remembrance is the only inoculation against repetition. All the more regret, then, that his style and sense of organization rank much below his research. However, *Decolonization* is Miles Kahler's first book, and he will, one hopes, produce other works that better display his considerable talents. WV

**STRONG DEMOCRACY:
PARTICIPATORY POLITICS
FOR A NEW AGE**

by Benjamin R. Barber

(University of California Press; 320 pp.; \$16.95)

Barbara Kellerman

When it is a question of public choice, when there is a collective concern, when work needs to be done on behalf of the community, most of us usually leave it to the professionals. The prevailing assumption is that political activity and ordinary people generally do not mix.

This separation between private life and public action was not intended, of course. Ours was to be a government not only for and of the people but by the people. To this day, in fact, the New England town meeting remains a powerful symbol for Americans—the image of locals turning out in full force in order to be heard on matters of common interest. What we actually have is a people so distanced from their government that to almost half of them, according to 1980 figures, even the quadrennial pulling of the lever doesn't seem worth the puny effort.

This decline in political participation, this privatism and alienation, is the subject of Benjamin Barber's provocative new book—or, more accurately, two new books under a single banner. For Professor Barber has actually set himself two separate and distinct tasks: first, to explore why our citizenship is so flabby; and second, to propose how this "thin democracy" might be reversed. The first discussion is grounded in political theory; the second is, perforce, more practically oriented. Here the author has set himself the formidable task of generating concrete suggestions for "participatory politics for a new age."

Barber's most fundamental proposition is that liberalism—in particular those institutions of liberalism that provide for representation—rather than securing democracy, actually destroys it. Representation by political professionals, Barber argues, reduces the rest of us to little more than observers of our own public dramas. Inevitably, we begin to lose interest in a government that at least survives without us; finally, inexorably, we avoid political performance altogether.

Barber explores the "preconceptual frame" on which our liberal democracy is based. He argues that a Cartesian assumption underlies democratic theory: namely, that "there exists a knowledgeable independent ground...from which the concepts, values, standards, and ends of political life can be derived by simple deduction." He argues further that liberal theory gives importance to the premise that man is alone and that therefore the paramount feature of human existence is separateness rather than togetherness. Barber's intellectual history is stitched together by the three dominant "dispositions" of liberalism that recur throughout his analysis. These are (1) the anarchist disposition that inclines women and men to regard themselves as "generically autonomous beings with needs and wants that can...be satisfied outside of coercive civil communities"; (2) the realist dis-

Recent Books We Have Failed to Review

- In Search of L. L. Bean*, by M. R. Montgomery (Little, Brown and Company)
Great Racehorses in Art, by John Fairley (University Press of Kentucky)
Regiment Women: Marriage and the Victorian Army, by Myra Tristram (Oxford University Press)
Ceramic Theory and Cultural Process, by Dean E. Arnold (Oxford University Press)
A Field Guide to American Windmills, by T. Lindsay Baker (University of Oklahoma Press)
How to Stay Two When Baby Makes Three, by Marsha Dorman and Diane Klein (Prometheus Books)
American Bottom Archaeology, by Charles J. Bareis and James W. Porter (University of Illinois Press)
Making Perfect Landings in Light Airplanes, by Ron Fowler (Iowa State University Press)
A Guide to the Imaginary Birds of the World, by Joe Nigg (Applewood Books)
The Dog Observed: Photographs, 1844-1983, ed. by Ruth Silverman (Knopf)
The Parent's Guide to Competitive Figure Skating, by Robert Ogilvie (Harper and Row)
Selecting the Church Computer, by William R. Johnson (Abingdon Press)

position that, in the American context, entails a concern for power but also a preoccupation with law and sovereignty; and (3) the minimalist disposition that accepts the idea that some government power is necessary while also regarding it as distasteful and dangerous. The legacy of these frames, assumptions, premises, and dispositions is a thin democracy. Most innocuously, thin democracy results in malaise; most perniciously, it prepares the ground for totalitarianism.

The antidote to thin democracy is strong democracy, which rests on the idea of a self-governing community of citizens who are united less by homogeneous interests than by civic education and who are made capable of common purpose and mutual action by virtue of their civic attitudes and participatory institutions." Again, Barber's argument is intelligent and carefully developed. He punctuates it with references to political theorists, from Locke to Habermas; he explores rather than merely disposes of objections and caveats to his own line of reasoning; he scrutinizes the nature of democratic regimes and the forms of citizenship; and he pauses every now and then to muse in a more speculative fashion. For example, there is a nice little piece on the nine functions of talk in the democratic process.

But for all the elegance of Barber's treatise, it could be argued that the success of *Strong Democracy* depends finally on the viability of his suggestions for change. The key questions are: Are these suggestions realistic enough to be taken seriously? And if they are serious proposals for political change, does Barber offer us a roadmap for getting from here to there?

On page 307 of the book is a twelve-point "Strong Democratic Program for the Revitalization of Citizenship." The list includes such items as a national system of neighborhood assemblies, a civic videotex service to equalize access to information, recommendations for experiments in informal lay justice and electronic balloting, selective elections to local office by lottery, and a program of universal citizen service. According to Barber, "This program does not illustrate strong democracy; it is strong democracy."

It appears that Barber is perfectly serious about implementing his program. In fact, he addresses the need for "facilitating conditions" for an agenda of this kind—conditions such as civic education, the appropriate kind of leadership, and the acceptance of certain prevailing morals and values. What Barber does not provide, however, is

a precise indication of what will motivate us to change. Where is the engine that will pull us to his place? The trouble is not that he fails to address this problem. He does—but with uncharacteristic imprecision. Thus, for example, although it may be true that neighborhood assemblies meet his criteria of being realistic, workable, and able to deal concretely with the obstacles that modernity places in the way of participation, we are left wondering how they will one day come to dot the landscape. Does Barber expect his own book to be so convincing a treatise that there will be a grass roots movement to follow his lead? Does he expect a few key people to pave the way? Or does he anticipate that natural evolution will take us there?

Barber's insufficient attention to that agent of change does not significantly diminish the importance of his book. For even if it were merely an intellectual exercise—which it is not—the problems of thin democracy are manifestly apparent and Barber's exploration thereof original and brave. We deserve to be discomfited by our collective inertia and provoked into doing something about it. *Strong Democracy* is a push down that long road. WV

WITNESS TO WAR: AN AMERICAN DOCTOR IN EL SALVADOR
by Charles Clements
(Bantam Books; 268 pp.; \$15.95)

WEAKNESS AND DECEIT: U.S. POLICY AND EL SALVADOR
by Raymond Bonner
(Times Books; 404 pp.; \$16.95)

THE MORASS: UNITED STATES INTERVENTION IN CENTRAL AMERICA
by Richard Alan White
(Harper & Row; 319 pp.; \$14.95)

Aaron Segal

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