

Prefacing as Educating: Building Educational Utopias and Barber's *Strong Democracy*

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INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Barber wrote *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* in 1984. In the 31 years since, he has penned three prefaces. One is the companion to the 1984 edition, another came in 1990, and the third was written to commemorate the book's twentieth anniversary edition in 2003. *Common to each preface is Barber's reminder that the only hope America has hangs on the realization of strong democracy.* As such, he ends the 2003 preface with these words: "Strong democracy is no longer America's last best hope - it is humankind's last, best, and only hope."¹ Twenty years earlier, the preface to the first edition concluded in a similar manner: "There is one road to freedom: it lies through democracy. The last best hope, now as two hundred years ago, is that America can be America: truly self-governing and democratic, thus truly free."² Together, Barber's prefaces make two interrelated claims: one, that strong democracy is not only desirable, but also that it is humanity's salvation; and two, that we must keep the faith even though the desired future has not come to pass. With each new preface, the claim escalates. In the initial 1984 preface, strong democracy is American's best hope; in the final 2003 preface, it becomes humanity's only hope. But what does it mean to sustain hope in an idea for over 200 years or, in Barber's case, for 30? For Barber, it must mean, in part, that you stick with it in spite of failure. You keep writing prefaces. You keep reframing the goal as a means to sustain hope in the idea that you believe has the power to change society for the better. But three prefaces to a single text by a living author can begin take on an apologetic tone, striking a pleading note for an audience's continued ear.

The main goal of this article is to explore the criticisms of Barber's idealism by fleshing out the educative purpose of drawing readers into ideals via prefaces. If the purpose of a preface is to introduce background concepts, to frame purposes, to bracket things that will not be spoken about, or here to buttress a strong ideal with words of hope, what does the second and third preface do? In Barber's case, each preface is a call to maintain hope, a reminder that although strong democracy has not come to be, it is still a good idea. It is important to note that time is at work here. Time passes and the world changes, but when the world changes in ways that do not align with the anticipated ideal, that change is frustrating. The world was different in 1984. The Berlin Wall was standing. Computer technology was novel, and had the potential to be a panacea. Today, 31 years later we, the reader, can see all the ways the future is and is not different from the world as it was then and from what was predicted to unfold. From a historical perspective we can moderate between the past and a future to explicate the present. If, in the language of Arendt, the gap between past and future is opened in the act of thinking deeply and publicly, then how do authors address readers in order to educate them in the middle ground of the

present? This essay takes up this question by unpacking Barber's *Strong Democracy* and its trio of hopeful prefaces.

Barber's work is an example of nonideal political philosophy; it is also a space of naturalized and non-ideal reasoning from which philosophers of education may begin to fashion "realistic educational utopias."³ The thesis of this article is that Barber's prefaces educate readers and architects of realistic utopias in two ways. One, the prefaces aim to teach the reader that utopian dreams and the pragmatist's reality are not mutually exclusive; rather, when one takes the passage of time into account, pragmatic, realistic utopias may demand constant prefaces. Two, each preface educates the reader on the status of the ideal, amid criticisms and historic ironies, by inviting the reader into the historical moment and reminding them that we are merely muddling through. The first part of this article explores the balancing act between the prophetic hope of the first preface and the expanded hopes of the third. The task is to layout Barber's argument. We need to know what his vision of strong democracy is and whether it has come to pass. Second, we must investigate whether strong democracy ought to reflect our mode of living. To do this I investigate Iris Marion Young and Seyla Benhabib's critiques of *Strong Democracy* as well as Richard Rorty's response to the question, "Does democracy need foundations?" Third, I work back through the three prefaces to flesh out the educational purpose of continuous, hopeful prefacing.

BARBER'S ARGUMENT FOR STRONG DEMOCRACY

To characterize strong democracy, Barber makes a series of distinctions. He is not building a realistic utopia from scratch; instead, he works to thicken already existing thin and liberal democracy. When Barber says that strong democracy is thick democracy, he means that it is a form of direct democracy. As such, it is participatory and not representative. Its institutional basis is populist and it values activity. Its citizen "posture" is active and its government "posture" is decentralizing.⁴ Strong democracy is not a new idea and it is not Barber's goal to fashion a new mode of political living. His goal is to thicken our existing practices, achieved by making each part of our social life active in transforming the thin and instrumental world of thin democracy into a robust way of living, by adumbrating a theory of citizenship.

Part of the problem with thickening the existing thin democracy, says Barber, is that liberal democracy has become such a powerful model that it monopolizes the alternative forms that a legitimate politics can take.⁵ Liberal democracy is not thin merely because it is simple; its thinness is derived from the relational options open to its citizens. As Barber characterizes it, liberal democracy is a set of political responses to conflict in which: "Autonomous individuals occupying private and separate spaces are the players in the game of liberal politics."⁶ In Barber's taxonomy, these responses to conflict solicit three dispositions: anarchist, realist, and minimalist. In very succinct terms, the anarchist is "conflict denying," which is to say conflict is created only by political interaction.⁷ The realist is "conflict repressing;" for the realist, politics becomes the "art of power."⁸ Finally, the minimalist is "conflict tolerating."⁹ In this last disposition, politics is the art of toleration

because it aims for a life constituted by conflict and dissensus. These dispositions are not evolutionary; rather, they coexist in American politics, and even within the same individual, because they are all part of the same “inertial frame of reference” that constitutes thin democracy.

The inertial frame of reference is Barber’s term for the preconceptual frames of reference on which thin democracy lies; rescinding these is an essential component in the transition to strong democracy. Therefore, it is the embodiment of all of the “pretheoretical givens of a particular world view.”¹⁰ It is a “starting [point] or rest position from which a theorist launches his argument and to which he can safely return when a given philosophical voyage of discovery fails or is aborted.”¹¹ The important point here is that one cannot get behind an inertial frame of reference. It is prior to the theory.¹² Inertial frames are thus backward-looking attempts to find starting points, a quintessential example of which is Rawls’s original position. Barber links his interrogation of inertial frames to Dewey’s work in *The Quest for Certainty* and, with Dewey, he notes that the quest for objective, scientific thinking is the quest for a place where theory must begin instead of where it must end. Cut off from action and practice, the search for static beginnings and safe harbors betrays liberal democracy’s ideal reasoning process as a deficient form of political thinking. In Barber’s estimation, liberal democracy’s inertial frame rests on the 16th century discovery of materialism. Materialism, here, points to a certain “thingness” that finds its way from the natural sciences and into political thought with Hobbes.¹³ The appropriation of “thingness,” a notion first used to describe the cosmos, and subsequently translated to the realm of human political associations, allowed philosophers to depict humans as “things with solidity and externality quite at odds with the traditional teleological, psychic, and spiritual understandings of the human essence.”¹⁴ While the development of materialism is in itself important, more noteworthy here is the final push backward: the development of materialism and its appropriation by political philosophy is wiped off the map by the very notion of an inertial frame, by the search for a rest position normalized by materialism. In this final move, “liberal democracy has pushed its theory back into a dawn where there are only shadows and where inscrutable premises appear *ex nihilo* as the justification for all the scrutables that follow.”¹⁵ Thus, liberal democracy’s inertial frame of reference, materialism, precludes an account of democracy constituted in legitimate political reasoning and based on human activity and historicity.

Strong democracy does not radically diverge from thin democracy, and in the right light could be an outgrowth of 21st century, American, minimalist democracy. It is conceptualized, however, as a legitimate form of political reasoning that is both without preconceptual givens and inertial frames of reference that serve as independent grounds or safe harbors for reasoning. As Barber sees it, strong democracy is not a way of life in the ancient sense, nor is it *the* way of life in the Arendtian sense. Rather, strong democracy is “a way of living-as, namely the way that human beings with variable but malleable natures and with competing but overlapping interests can contrive to live together communally not only to their mutual advantage but also to the advantage of their mutuality.”¹⁶ Strong democracy, like its liberal counterparts,

is a response to conflict, but unlike liberal democracy's three dispositional answers, strong democracy does not seek to mitigate conflict; it looks to transform conflict through civic education and the creation of a public language.¹⁷ To that end, strong democracy is not government "by the people," as mobs of people are no freer than a single cow in a moving herd. To be political, to be a strong democrat in Barber's sense, is to be "free with a vengeance - [it is] to be free in the unwelcome sense of being without guiding standards or determining norms yet under ineluctable pressure to act, and to act with deliberation and responsibility."¹⁸ Citizens of strong democracy are compelled by a need to act because they must use their practical, creative, and willed knowledge to create a humane public. The important caveat is that strong democracy is centered politics in the participatory mode, where public talk leads to public seeing and requires public willing by way of proximate action.¹⁹ In a sense, Barber's dream is full-scale assimilation to strong democratic, participatory citizenship. Perhaps for Barber you can be other than a citizen in private, but his sense of publicness puts heavy demands on the kind of subjectivity necessary for public life.

THE CRITICISM AND RORTY'S RESPONSE

Barber's prefaces and the final chapter, titled "The Real Present," bookend Barber's attempt to deal with modern practicalities and subsequent criticism of *Strong Democracy*. Considering the real present, as it was in 1984, Barber places strong democracy in an institutional framework, "where its realistic potential as a practice can be addressed."²⁰ Barber's aim here is to lay out practical and workable institutions that, and here is the key, complement both large-scale modern society and make modifications to liberal democracy. However, while the goal of these institutions is to make possible the government of citizens in place of government by professionals, these institutions are re-orienting structures and must be accepted *in toto* or not at all. The proposal for institutional reform is as follows: institutionalized strong democratic talk, neighborhood assemblies, televised town meetings, a civics communication cooperative, and a civic education postal act and videotext service.²¹ To institutionalize strong democratic decision-making, Barber describes a national initiative and referendum process, a multi-choice and two-stage voting process, the reintroduction of election by lot, and a modest voucher program for public education. Finally, to institutionalize strong democratic action, a universal citizen service, and a related training and employment opportunities act is proposed, along with other local volunteer programs. Taken together these proposals do not *constitute* strong democracy; they *are* strong democracy.

Given that history often offers its own critique, in some sense the prefaces consider what history has revealed to be the limits of *Strong Democracy's* policy proposals. One such example is its school voucher proposal. In 1984, *Strong Democracy* hesitantly suggested a voucher system for public k-12 education, with the recognition that the door to further privatization was ajar. In spite of this, the modest voucher proposal was included in the proposals because, in 1984, Barber saw that public schools viewed themselves "as little more than the compulsory private domain of those trapped in poverty."²² In the preface to the twentieth anniversary edition, published in 2003, Barber circles back to take up the growing privatization of public tasks and

the neoliberal myth. While he does not explicitly mention the corruption of voucher programs in public education, he does note that the acceptance of “privatization, marketization, and the outsourcing of public ‘tasks’” such as education is the triumph of economics over politics.²³ Here he expands on the text to draw out the connection between the contemporary escalation of neoliberalism and thin democracy, in which citizen/consumers are already accustomed to “choosing,” and thus to outsourcing their democratic duties to elected officials. Within thin democracy, the process of alienation from participatory citizenship is always and already underway, thereby making the neoliberal myth easy to swallow. From the vantage point of 2003, Barber is able to consider the *increasing* privatization of public goods with a different lens. The school voucher program was only advanced in 1984 as a part of a package of strong democratic reforms because, in many ways, public schools were failing to be public. A voucher program within the scheme of thin democracy was not the ideal.

Beyond the lessons we can draw from history, two subsequent critiques of Barber help to clarify the educative importance of his prefaces. Iris Marion Young interrogates Barber’s faith in participation and its relationship to reality, while Seyla Benhabib considers Barber’s methodological choices. Because modern life makes representation necessary, Iris Marion Young says, Barber is wrong to base his entire account on participation, for two reasons. One, it is impractical, and two, the dominant understanding of participation is exclusionary. Young’s first point is that no one person can be present for every decision that will affect his or her life in today’s world.²⁴ To this, Barber has a sufficient response, which was in fact written prior to Young’s 1996 critique. In the 1984 and 1990 prefaces Barber states that *Strong Democracy*’s theory of citizenship requires that persons are present for *some* decisions at least *some* of the time.²⁵ In 1990, with a very candid tone, Barber says: “I am less anxious in this book to call for new political behavior than I am to get Americans to call what they are already doing *political* behavior.”²⁶ To substantiate his desire for Americans to see their everyday public behavior as political, Barber reasons that the impulse toward civic community at the local level must be understood as a vital link in a chain that connects liberty to community in the “real political world.”²⁷ In the 1984 preface and text, Barber is clear that, in its ideal form, strong democracy is strongest when it is based on a theory of active and participatory citizenship. Although he grants that participation does not have to be ubiquitous, he also says that politics is only legitimate in its participatory form. Thus, representative democracy is illegitimate politics, and Young’s critique holds, but only as long as we look no further. By 1990, Barber is willing to say that participation in *some* decisions that affect our life *some* of the time is both sufficient and legitimate, as long as citizens recognize their everyday public behavior as political. The subject of Young’s second critique is less prevalent in Barber’s prefaces. Young’s concern is that strong democracy’s norms of deliberation exclude women and racial minorities. The only nod Barber makes in this direction is that his definition of “democratic talk” places critical importance on silence. He does not deal with oppression or emancipation in any real sense in the main text or the prefaces.

According to Benhabib, Barber’s argument is based on “an opposition between moral theory and political philosophy that is conceptually overdrawn and politically

unrealistic.”²⁸ Stated another way, the problem with a reformist approach, situated in the historical present, and bereft of an inertial frame of reference, is that it is liable to make errors where a strong philosophical orientation would not. The question is whether sticking to a philosophical vision, in this case pragmatism, helps one to miss the minefield of questionable policy proposals in the real present, such as Barber’s voucher recommendation. Benhabib’s critique is cogent, but it is also the kind of claim Barber works to displace. For Barber, knowledge is not something derived from a philosophical orientation; it is something generated in practice. It is something to be tried out and reworked somewhere specific. In the main text he says: “In a word, politics is not the application of Truth to the problem of human relations but the application of human relations to the problem of truth.”²⁹ As Barber sees it, the problem is not one of aligning our moral theory with our political philosophy to construct a coherent philosophical vision. The problem, or the task, is to work from our present somewhere to enact our political dreams. From this perspective, Barber’s voucher proposal was appropriate in 1984. It was part of a political dream situated within his view of public schooling. Benhabib’s critique is not a critique of *Strong Democracy* as such, but rather it is a critique of Barber’s orientation to political philosophy and the demolishing of abstract grounds from which to work.

Rorty responds to this conversation by suggesting that we should start by distinguishing between idealizations of our practices and the foundations of those practices.³⁰ In Rorty’s characterization, the idealization of practice is about creating coherent and utopian visions of the future, whereas a foundational orientation is concerned with the coherence of practice to independent grounds or, in Barber’s parlance, inertial frames of reference.³¹ In Rorty’s sense, Barber is an antifoundationalist who is engaged in a good deal of idealization.³² It is important to notice that, in Rorty’s language, idealization is different from ideal theory. Ideal theory is caught up in the circle of making life cohere to independent grounds; it is the search for objectivity and foundations. Idealization on the other hand is a search for solidarity, and “insofar as a person is seeking solidarity, she does not ask about the relation between the practices of the chosen community and something outside of that community.”³³ The person seeking solidarity within his or her community is caught up in the local utopian dream. Idealization, therefore, proffers a tonic of community solidarity and proximate solutions to the fear of parochialism that undergirds foundational objectivism. In the space of solidarity and idealization, it is possible to say that Barber’s school voucher program was a proximate solution built on the rough ground of the historical now.

CONCLUSION: PREFACE AS EDUCATION

Rorty’s response points to the internal necessity for pragmatists to preface. Pragmatic hope in solidarity and human promise coupled with the demand that we begin from where we are means that we will get things wrong. Thus, the movement of time demands a preface to reorient both our relationship to the goal and our hope in the utopian vision. As Rorty sees it, anyone who is engaged in working out the relations and practices of a community from within that community will need to idealize. That is, they will need utopian dreams because utopian dreams give us

something to work toward, and when they are engendered in politics they make justice and freedom possible. In light of Rorty's argument for utopia, Barber's prefaces show us that certain dreams are not worth giving up on; that good realistic utopias should not be razed, but should be lived in and reformed as necessary. Rorty spends a good deal of time thinking through the relationship between pragmatism and hope and comes to say that, because pragmatists have jettisoned metaphysics, they must hope. Metaphysics and inertial frames allow one to justify present states to ideal foundations, and, thus, one can avoid imagining dramatic change or peaceful social progress. Pragmatists who suggest that community and politics have no foundation outside of our hope in one another need realistic utopias. Rorty puts it this way, "no event - not even Auschwitz - can show that we should cease to work for a certain utopia. Only another more persuasive utopia can do that."³⁴ Barber's three prefaces aim to teach the reader that this utopia is still open, and that it rests on a belief in human progress and on our education in solidarity.

Little has been written on the philosophical importance of preface writing. One exception is an article by Rob McCormack, which draws on Cavell and Wittgenstein to explicate prefacing as an act of educating the reader. For McCormack, the quint-essential example of prefacing is Cavell's extended sentence/preface to *The Claim of Reason*, which jars readers into a recognition that what they are about to read will not be business as usual.³⁵ In more traditional texts, or perhaps texts written for the general public and not academic philosophers, the preface is often a space to invite the reader in and gently instruct her on the best way to approach the text that follows. For Barber, each preface is signed with a place and date, as if indicating to the reader that he too is a part of the world he is describing. With each preface, the reader is invited to consider the relevance of strong democracy to the current moment and present problems.

Barber's prefaces work backwards, taking the reader from conversations about globalization in 2003, to excitement about post-Regan local democratic stirrings in 1990, and to his alarm concerning the crisis facing democracy in 1984. These prefaces not only teach the reader about the history of the idea, but also situate the reader's relationship to the text. Each passing preface educates the reader on the state of the ideal and, as such, each one of Barber's prefaces does something different. The final preface, written post 9/11, is reflexive. From the vantage point of 2003, Barber waxes lyrical about the dialectical relationships that constitute democracy. He invites modern readers into the conversation and to consider the enduring nature of the dialogue. Here the hope for strong democracy becomes global because globalization is the concern. The second preface is more subtle; it begins with the simple phrase "irony has a way with history."³⁶ It considers the unpredictable nature of time and walks the reader back a few steps. It reminds the reader that this work has been witness to important historical moments, some thrilling and others disappointing. The preface to the original edition foregrounds the book's argument and defines the crisis it seeks to address. It brings the reader into the historical present of 1984. Together, the prefaces illustrate that the text and its author are aware of the passage of time, and they remind us that the rough ground of our historical present may look

entirely different in the future. We are taught that Barber is committed to “muddling through,” and thus we too will have to muddle along with him.

What, then, is the joint purpose of Barber’s three prefaces to *Strong Democracy*? They are not mere refrains; they are in and of themselves educative. Each preface educates the reader on the status of the ideal, amid criticisms and historic ironies. Collectively, they invite the reader to take up the idea and its idealization as part of a conversation, and they may in fact send the reader out in search of other voices in that conversation. They remind the reader that there are other answers and new historical ironies they ought to consider. The prefaces also show the reader that, while some ideas may appear impractical or unsuited to our reality, they might in fact be worth tinkering toward. As such, the prefaces encourage one to tinker. Utopian dream and pragmatist reality are not mutually exclusive; we can learn to muddle, to tinker, and to experiment, without losing sight of the goal. Finally, insofar as Barber’s prefaces educate, their primary lesson is that faith in human promise should be our guiding prejudice.

1. Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), xix.

2. *Ibid.*, xxxvi.

3. Alison M. Jagger, “Ideal and Nonideal Reasoning in Educational Theory,” *Educational Theory* 65, no. 2 (2015): 111-126, 126. While I am explicitly drawing on Jagger’s language of realistic utopias here, much of the conversation in this article is framed by the larger discussion on ideal and nonideal theory.

4. Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 141.

5. *Ibid.*, 3.

6. *Ibid.*, 5.

7. *Ibid.*, 6.

8. *Ibid.*, 6, 11.

9. *Ibid.*, 6.

10. *Ibid.*, 26.

11. *Ibid.*, 26-27.

12. *Ibid.*, 28.

13. *Ibid.*, 34.

14. *Ibid.*, 34.

15. *Ibid.*, 44.

16. *Ibid.*, 118.

17. *Ibid.*, 119.

18. *Ibid.*, 121.

19. Barber conceptualizes nine features of “talk,” which constitute the ways private individuals meet and create the public. The consequences of public “talk” are provisional until “talk” transforms into public will. Importantly “talk” features listening as much as it does speaking. *Ibid.*, 202, 178.

20. *Ibid.*, 262.

21. The substitutive piece of this proposal is a call for subsidized postal rates for newspapers, journals, and certain books that offer significant information about political and social options. *Ibid.*, 278-279.

22. *Ibid.*, 296.

23. Ibid., xii.
24. Young, 124.
25. Barber, *Strong Democracy*, xxix.
26. Ibid., xxvi, emphasis original
27. Ibid.
28. Seyla Benhabib, ed. *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Vol. 31. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 71.
29. Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 64-65.
30. Richard Rorty, "Idealizations, Foundations, and Social Practices," in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, Vol. 31, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 334.
31. Rorty, "Idealization, Foundations," 334.
32. Baber accepts this himself elsewhere he has stated that "foundations are dangerous for democrats of my tendencies." In: "Foundationalism and Democracy" in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, Vol. 31, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 348.
33. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," in *Objectivity, relativism, and truth: philosophical papers*. Vol. 1. (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.
34. Richard Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation," in *Objectivity, relativism, and truth: philosophical papers*. Vol. 1. (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 220.
35. Rob McCormack, "Philosophical Writing: Prefacing as professing," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 40, no. 7 (2008): 832-855, 837.
36. Barber, *Strong Democracy*, xxii.