

Some preliminary thoughts on democratic style.

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## **Some Preliminary Thoughts on Democratic Style**

Jeremy Engels

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## Some Preliminary Thoughts on Democratic Style

*Jeremy Engels (bio)*

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The forum that follows is an occasional one, inspired by two events—the

publication of Robert Hariman's 1995 *Political Style* and a panel organized for the 2006 National Communication Association convention in San Antonio that considered the enticing topic of "democratic style." On that warm November afternoon, the panelists took up Hariman's charge to theorize political styles beyond the realist, courtly, republican, and bureaucratic. We talked about what democratic style might look like, in theory and in practice, normatively and empirically. Though the conversation was at times perfunctory, there were some genuine flashbulb moments and even a little dialogue—and, by the way, thanks to those who came to the panel, asked questions, and made it feel like something more than a vita line and something like a town hall meeting.

I will not recount the main arguments of *Political Style* here; the contributors do an admirable job of this, and I do not want to bore the reader with duplicated summaries or spoil the surprises that await. I can say, however, that in the months following NCA, many of us discovered why Professor Hariman did not include a chapter on democracy in his book—because, as he told those who gathered at our panel (to some serious chuckles, I might add), if he appended this fifth chapter he would still be writing. Democracy is difficult, and conceptualizing this amorphous thing called democratic style is equally difficult. There might be no such thing as a democratic style. Arguing that it reduces everything to the lowest common denominator, Friedrich Nietzsche saw democracy as styleless, "hollow," "very boring."<sup>1</sup> For different reasons, the pragmatists, especially John Dewey, would also be critical of this forum. They believed that democracy was constantly being enacted, invented, and reinvented as circumstances and exigencies changed—for them, democracy was found in the doing, not in the theorizing. Yet I believe that, as a resource for **[End Page 439]** concrete action, theory is important; as the ground for rhetorical invention and new political imaginaries, theory is indispensable.

This forum is also occasioned by a prevailing feeling that our democracy is somehow in trouble. In 1814, John Adams wrote: "democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."<sup>2</sup>

The scholars in this forum do not want to see this happen. Though the following essays are wide ranging, the forum as a whole is limited by the interests of the participants. We could do a better job of many things, especially of considering how democracy is lived through categories of race, class, and gender. And, it should be said from the onset, this conversation is not the only talk we Americans need to have. We need to discuss our political structures, the crumbling education system and the shocking reemergence of apartheid education, media consolidation and the delivery system, privatization and neoliberalism. We need to query our cultural fictions (to use Stephen Hartnett's helpful term) about the ways that democracy works: the Protestant Ethic, the City on a Hill, the foreigner and the alien, the teleological End of History, the mythic American Superman with unlimited agency and the ultimate responsibility over his/her actions.<sup>3</sup>

We need to rethink our authorities. We need to discourse about our bootstraps. We need to get down to the nitty-gritty about the Electoral College, about judicial review, about referenda, about perjury, about electronic voting machines, about signing statements, about checks and balances, about matters of war and peace. Yet insofar as it offers an entryway into conversations about the multifaceted relationships between rhetoric and democratic culture by focusing our attention on style, on form, and on the ways in which democratic politics is managed and practiced through aesthetic resources, this forum is an important interjection into current critical conversations. We thus build on Professor Hariman's foundation—not to offer a final word or achieve consensus. Both finality and consensus might well be undemocratic. Instead, our goal is to begin, continue, and extend a conversation about rhetoric, democracy, and style. And as the sparks fly upward, we...

## FORUM ON DEMOCRATIC STYLE

### SOME PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ON DEMOCRATIC STYLE

JEREMY ENGELS

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