



Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People

Nadia Urbinati

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In *Democracy Disfigured*, Nadia Urbinati diagnoses the ills that beset the body politic in an age of hyper-partisanship and media monopolies and offers a spirited defense of the messy compromises and contentious outcomes that define democracy.

Urbinati identifies three types of democratic disfiguration: the unpolitical, the populist, and the plebiscitarian. Each undermines a crucial division that a well-functioning democracy must preserve: the wall separating the free forum of public opinion from the governmental institutions that enact the will of the people. Unpolitical democracy delegitimizes political opinion in favor of expertise. Populist democracy radically polarizes the public forum in which opinion is debated. And plebiscitary democracy overvalues the aesthetic and nonrational aspects of opinion. For Urbinati, democracy entails a permanent struggle to make visible the issues that citizens deem central to their lives. Opinion is thus a form of action as important as the mechanisms that organize votes and mobilize decisions.

Urbinati focuses less on the overt enemies of democracy than on those who pose as its friends: technocrats wedded to procedure, demagogues who make glib appeals to "the people," and media operatives who, given their preference, would turn governance into a spectator sport and citizens into fans of opposing teams.

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