

Interpretation

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William S. Smith, *Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and War-like Democracies*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019, 236 pp., \$70 (cloth).

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Irving Babbitt is something of a forgotten giant in American political thought. His eclipse is puzzling. He decisively influenced T. S. Eliot and Russell Kirk (among others), and his major themes—the rise of nationalism, the endless multiplication of rights, the imperialism of idealistic democracies, and the corruption of liberty into license—are more relevant today than when Babbitt wrote almost one hundred years ago. So why the neglect?

Babbitt's fading reputation may be, in part, his own fault: he was a master without a masterpiece, or at least a master without a career-crowning work. Many of his most original insights are developed not in *Democracy and Leadership* (his major work on politics), but in *Rousseau and Romanticism*, a monograph on French literature. To see any one of his ideas worked out to its full extent, a reader must traverse a half-dozen books on almost as many subjects. A specialized modern scholar, say, in international politics, has little reason to explore a somewhat ponderous disquisition on Chateaubriand, Madame de Staël, and the French Romantics. As a result, Babbitt's audience has dwindled. (That he foresaw how overspecialization and the decline of liberal education would lead to this fate does not make it the more excusable.)

William S. Smith has taken an excellent first step—or rather, first leap—at setting this problem aright. In *Democracy and Imperialism*, Smith collects and sets in order Babbitt's political thought in a far more systematic fashion than Babbitt did himself. In doing so, he has the potential to expand the scholarship on Irving Babbitt beyond the confines of devotees to a much

more general readership. This book belongs on the shelf of any scholar at the intersection of international relations (IR) and political philosophy.

“Babbitt,” Smith writes, “makes a unique philosophical contribution by extending th[e] city-soul parallel to the field of international affairs” (180). This is not an abstruse contribution but one of enduring relevance. Smith presents his subject so that the IR scholar, who might otherwise doze at talk of city-souls, will instead recognize the battle lines between liberal internationalists, constructivists, and realists, even though Babbitt wrote a half century before these divisions emerged. He will likewise recognize the debate between Fukuyama and Huntington that shook the discipline in the nineties and early aughts, and whose tremors continue to shape American foreign policy today. (In 2017, the *Washington Post* ran a long piece on the origins of Trump’s foreign policy in the thought of Samuel Huntington. They might have traced it back further still, to Babbitt.) *Democracy and Imperialism* gives a full chapter to these two thinkers, along with Henry Kissinger; by the end, Smith has convincingly shown that theirs is not a new debate, but simply another round in a centuries-long struggle between Romanticism and tradition—a struggle Babbitt spent most of his life elucidating.

According to Babbitt, the Romantic impulse seeks to liberate man from external control. (The IR scholar will recognize E. H. Carr’s idealists in what Babbitt calls Romantics.) This liberation, though, leads not to free men but to disordered souls. These disordered souls, in turn, lead to disorder in the state, including tyrannies such as the Terror and Napoleonic rule. Disordered states, in turn, lead to disordered politics in the world. Liberal democracies, with their universalizing ideals and their lack of self-restraint, will embark on moralizing crusades, descending into a kind of imperialism as surely as they descend into revolution. Idealism, Babbitt insists, necessarily ends in tragedy (51), and in one of his signature phrases, Babbitt warned against “that singular mixture of altruism and high explosives that we are pleased to term our civilization” (57).

Here Babbitt makes a surprising connection. He argues that Romantic and scientific worldviews are superficially opposed but fundamentally united. Both Rousseau and Bacon (and their heirs) seek to liberate mankind from constraint. It is no accident that emotive humanitarianism found itself in the same trench as machine guns and poison gas. “These two philosophies existed side by side in modernity to unite a worship of scientific power with a worship of emotion and unchecked impulse. . . . [Babbitt wrote,] ‘In seeking to gain dominion over things he lost dominion over himself’” (30–33). Peace

comes only through self-discipline and self-renunciation. Combining utopian feelings of brotherhood with the utilitarian conquest of nature would, Babbitt predicted, lead inevitably to war.

Since the test of a theory is how well it predicts the future, it is worth noting how much Babbitt foresaw. After World War I, when Americans were turning to self-determination as a means to peace, he correctly predicted the rise of militaristic nationalism. In 1917, he predicted the US-Japanese conflict in the Pacific (136). He seems to have guessed at the rise of identity politics, including its connection to the “sublime convicts” (81) of Romantic literature. And, if I may stretch the word a bit, here is his Tocquevillian prediction of the Marvel Cinematic Universe: “the arts would be simultaneously wonderful and trivial” (98).

The political theorist will find Babbitt just as relevant. In his critique of liberalism, Babbitt clearly anticipates the debates provoked by figures such as Patrick Deneen and Sohrab Ahmari: “Babbitt argued that even ‘moderate’ social contract theorists such as Locke had paved the way for the revolutionary” (94). Indeed, it is almost eerie to read an author write, in 1924, that “understanding the difference between a Jeffersonian liberal and a Washingtonian constitutionalist is ‘the key that unlocks American history’” (73), and that the former, if unchecked, will lead to the despotism of a spiritually bankrupt, Epicurean meritocracy (75).

Unsurprisingly, much of Babbitt’s political thought is Burkean, especially his critique of ideology. Smith draws out this intellectual parentage, but he emphasizes, rightly, that Babbitt owes a deeper debt to the ancients. Babbitt’s central theme is a blend of Aristotle and Confucius: of man as a political animal who first must seek to control himself before he seeks to rule others.

Political theorists will also appreciate Smith’s care with his subject. *Democracy and Imperialism* is, first and foremost, a work of faithful reconstruction. Smith approaches his charge like the curator of a historic house: he reconstructs and presents Babbitt exactly as he would have been, with a bit of explanatory commentary along the way, and he trusts that the result will inspire by itself. As part of this approach, Smith largely lets Babbitt speak for himself. On some pages, as much as a third of the text consists of quotation from Babbitt’s works. This method works well: Babbitt wrote manfully, but his argumentation was often haphazard; in letting Babbitt speak for himself, from one book to another, Smith has preserved the force and verve of the

original texts while setting their ideas in a more logical and digestible form for the reader.

Democracy and Imperialism, though, is not just for the Babbitt newcomer. Even those who have read extensively from Babbitt's corpus will find this a valuable resource. Smith gives us a full portrait of Babbitt's thought on international politics, more complete than what any other book offers. It has lost none of Babbitt's clarity, and it has added a much greater coherence. In short, Smith has written a book that is more valuable as a go-to source on Babbitt than anything Babbitt himself composed. In the future, when I need to look up something from Babbitt, I suspect I will turn to Smith first, and to Babbitt second.

Democracy and Imperialism has one last readership, this one the least obvious but the most important: undergraduates. Chapters 4 ("Democracy as Revolution") and 5 ("Democracy as Imperialism") are provocative, accessible, and learned; they are ideal counterpoints to undergraduate readings from Rousseau. They express, directly and accessibly, many of the dangers in this tradition of political thought, and they do so in such a way that the undergraduate needs no additional background reading to be able to enter the conversation. They also pair well with readings on modern idealists such as Samantha Power, for Babbitt forbids excusing failed policymakers on the grounds of good intentions. I have already tested these chapters on my own undergraduates, and I can affirm that the subsequent discussion was the best of the semester.

Democracy and Imperialism has few weaknesses; only four bear mentioning. One, regrettable but unavoidable, is that by focusing exclusively on Babbitt's political thought, Smith has necessarily set aside his work on literature and liberal education. Babbitt's contributions in these areas, though, were just as incisive and prescient as his work on democracy. The interested reader should not stop with this book.

A second weakness is a missed opportunity. Babbitt could easily speak to the classical and Christian realist movements in IR theory (such as Paul Miller's *American Power*), yet these connections are never explored. Likewise, many of Babbitt's hypotheses (which he did not bother to support with evidence) have since been corroborated extensively in modern political science. Babbitt's insistence that democracies might be more imperialistic than nondemocracies has been borne out by the data, and the author missed the chance to point this out.

Third, Smith treats his subject with such reverence that he scarcely dares suggest that Babbitt might have erred. Yet, for as much as authors like Kenneth Waltz grossly oversimplify international politics, they have made at least one lasting contribution: the whole is not the same as its parts. When Babbitt insists that “society is man written in larger letters” (8), it is not clear he appreciates this basic political truth. The state is both more and less than man. Similarly, Smith never qualifies Babbitt’s central claim, that political order depends most on leaders of high character. He goes so far as to insist that “sound and elevated leadership provides the main bulwark against capricious popular opinion” (131). But does it? Babbitt rarely supports this or related ideas with compelling evidence, and *Democracy and Imperialism* might have tried to do more either to support this claim or to allow that Babbitt might have overstated his case.

Finally, *Democracy and Imperialism* strikes me—and here is only personal opinion—as somewhat unjust to American foreign policy. For all its errors and overreach, surely there is yet much to commend about the last forty years. Smith pulls no punches: “There should be no doubt that the recent rise of nationalism in the West was a result of highly unimaginative leaders who were incapable of directing popular aspirations in a healthier direction” (156). Well, yes; granted. But does it follow that the Gulf War was a mistake (177) or that Fukuyama’s prognostications are “rubble” (162)? These judgments, and others like them, seem too hasty. Babbitt lacked faith in American foreign policy, and Smith seems to share his skepticism; this reader, though, finds much to celebrate, even if there is also much to correct.

These few weaknesses aside, this book is excellent. It is a faithful, comprehensive reconstruction of one of the twentieth century’s most interesting (but least studied) political minds. William Smith has written a book we needed. What is more, he has also given us a book full of wisdom, just as Babbitt was full of wisdom. It is worthwhile to have on the shelf even if only to pick up at leisure and search out how to better oneself.

I close with a suggestion. Any scholar interested in both political theory and IR should read this book. The IR scholar and the political theorist, though, should perhaps approach this book in different ways. The theorist should read it from front to back, as written: Smith carefully builds to Babbitt’s main ideas, first by excavating their foundations in Babbitt’s humanism, then building up Babbitt’s theory of democracy, and finally by relating the entire edifice to the American world order. The theorist will appreciate how Smith begins with Babbitt’s critique of Rousseau and how this critique culminates

in a critique of the twentieth-century West. The IR scholar, though, might find this approach too arcane. Smith does not tackle a topic until he has made all the pieces ready, so that, by page 50, he has barely mentioned imperialism, despite its presence in the book's title. Therefore, to IR scholars interested in this book, I would suggest working backward: begin with chapters 5 ("Democracy and Imperialism") and 7 ("World Order"), where Smith applies Babbitt's ideas to twenty-first-century American foreign policy, and then turn to the early chapters, which elucidate the origins of democratic adventurism in Rousseau and his Romantic heirs. That way, the IR scholar will know in chapter 1 why he should care about a long-dead literature professor writing against an even longer-dead philosopher.

Because the IR scholar *should* care. Babbitt is a reminder of the importance and power of a liberal education: "Babbitt's research on Romanticism was what generated his theories on international relations" (110). That a Harvard professor of French literature, a student of eighteenth-century thought, somehow speaks more directly to contemporary debates in American foreign policy than many living pundits, let alone many political scientists, is a call to every scholar to spend a little less time in a secluded niche and a little more in the communion of generations. That, after all, is what defines the *true* cosmopolitan—and the true purpose of university education (140–41).