

book provide much to ponder and will be of interest to scholars, policymakers, and practitioners.

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**Challenges of Ordinary Democracy: A Case Study in Deliberation and Dissent** by Karen Tracy. *University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011. 264 pp. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$27.95.*

This close-range study of democratic decision making focuses on school board meetings in Boulder, Colorado. “Ordinary democracy” refers to the kind of speech that occurs in such meetings as citizens and officials talk with each other. Karen Tracy’s perceptive analysis stays at the ground level; “ordinary” means “local” and “observable” speech that reflects routine concerns—speech that aims to do a solid day’s work in the public world. Though more than a few of her observations and analyses are relevant to normative political theory, she explicitly steers clear of ongoing debates in political theory between liberalism and critical theory, for example, or between deliberative and participatory democratic theory. Her central goal is simply to describe and make sense of the ordinary democratic talk of local government, something as understudied as it is celebrated in political theory.

After providing a recent history of Boulder school board politics, which introduces ongoing community issues and leading actors, Tracy investigates how citizens and officials use the term “democracy” in their public talk, examines patterns of citizen participation in board meetings, considers the role of newspapers, and looks at a controversial election and policy debate. Tracy’s discussion of citizen participation is particularly interesting. She points out that citizen involvement in local government boards is a distinct form of participation. Unlike public hearings, school boards meet regularly and involve people who know each other and will come into contact again after the meeting is over. Unlike New England town meetings, where each citizen has an equal right to speak and vote, school board sessions are marked by stark deliberative inequalities as they give officials unequal power to speak and make decisions. Moreover, Tracy notes a number of ways that citizen participation is further diminished by institutional practices. Rules governing the lay participants’ conduct permitted only those who signed up beforehand to speak on a given evening, determined how many could speak, allotted only two minutes per citizen comment, restricted the amount of time for an agenda item, and regulated the content of the remarks—disallowing ad hominem critiques of board members, for example. Once uttered, lay citizen speech was frequently neutralized and drained of significance as it was entered into the public record. Tracy keenly observes how board secretaries in charge of writing minutes depoliticized public comments by rendering sophisticated contributions

simplistic, smoothing out emotional rhetoric, and favoring passive, soft-edged verbs like “sharing,” “reporting,” and “asking.” By contrast, school board members’ speech was tied to action in the minutes: “supporting,” “agreeing,” “discussing,” “dissenting.” While some of these rules and linguistic short-cuts are no doubt needed for ordinary democracy to function, the biased and hierarchical ways they were made manifest in Tracy’s case turn citizens into spectators rather than co-participants in public processes.

*Challenges of Ordinary Democracy* posits “reasonable hostility” as the appropriate communicative ideal for local deliberative forums such as school board meetings. This ideal captures the give and take of speech as it actually occurs in these settings, where emotion and criticism of people’s actions are mixed, but where discourse is still regulated by norms of civility such as proper forms of address. Passionate expressions of dissent are to be expected in functioning democratic politics, Tracy concludes, rather than avoided and neutralized. In advocating realism over idealism and by paying close attention to details, Tracy rightly directs those interested in understanding contemporary democracy to the sometimes messy everyday practices in the unassuming places all around us.

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**Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism** by Michael Barnett.  
*Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2011. 312 pp. \$29.95.*

At first glance, pairing a study of global humanitarianism with the concept of empire may seem an unlikely strategy for advancing knowledge. Hardly so. Not only is it an honest and forthright approach, it is also a much-needed corrective to enhance our understandings of the humanitarian system and the way in which its key actors understand both themselves and the impact that their actions have on others.

Indeed, and with few exceptions, the self-affirming history of humanitarianism treats moral progress as a given and aid workers as champions of the downtrodden and vulnerable. Michael Barnett throws a spanner in the works here, revealing through careful historical investigation and analysis humanitarianism’s increasingly public, hierarchical, institutionalized, and paternalistic nature—an empire of good. He deftly addresses key dilemmas whose roots run deep throughout humanitarianism’s history but which are often attributed to contemporary emergency relief and development, including the tensions between humanitarian principles and politics, the effects of market influences on humanitarianism, and the nature of humanitarianism’s power over others. The latter dilemma, in particular, finds ample treatment throughout *Empire of Humanity*. Paternalism, which Barnett (p. 34) describes as “the interference with a person’s liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests, or values of the person whose liberty is being violated,” is a recurring theme in his analysis.