

Our Black Jeremiah

Cornel West

Democracy Matters:
Winning the Fight against Imperialism.
Penguin, 229 pages, \$24.95

reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Cornel West is known as a fiery professor-intellectual who brings bookish learning and argumentative rigor to political and social issues. Few academics slide so smoothly from the classroom to the rally or from the library to the talk show. While teaching at Harvard and Princeton, West worked for the 2000 campaign of Bill Bradley, traveled with Al Sharpton to Africa, appeared in *The Matrix 2* and on TV with Bill Maher. The profile seems a perfect mix of inquiry and activism. Set him on a panel on racism and he'll jump from welfare to the *Republic* to rap to Protestantism.

To sustain a public "professor" persona, though, one must not only play the media and mingle with political figures, but also compose works of intellectual heft. Ever since West became a public figure in the early 1990s, this has been a problem for him. A notorious review in *The New Republic* by Leon Wieseltier in 1995 judged West's books "almost completely worthless . . . sectarian, humorless, pedantic, self-endearing." And three years ago, President Summers of Harvard started a tempest by raising questions about West's recent efforts. Defenders retorted that Summers misunderstands the nature of public intellectual activism, but the best scholarly evidence they could marshal was *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, a middling survey of pragmatist thought that West had composed over a decade earlier.

This latest book doesn't advance the dispute. *Democracy Matters* purports to sketch the degraded state of democracy today, and to find inspiration in traditions of Socratic questioning and Jewish prophecy, as well as in youth culture. The thesis comes in fast and furious indictments. An "unholy alliance of plutocratic elites and the Christian

Right" has hijacked the state for greedy and parochial ends. Free-market ideology has led the government to abandon the poor, the uninsured, the unschooled. Foreign policy is "[f]ashioned out of the cowboy mythology of the American frontier fantasy." Republican Party leaders are "drunk with power and driven by grand delusions of American domination of the world." Legal discrimination is over, but "Jim Crow Jr. is alive and well."

The charges pile up, but they never coalesce into an argument. West doesn't reason his way to conclusions, nor does he fortify his complaints with empirical evidence or illustrative cases. He simply tells us *The Way Things Are*. West is, Henry Louis Gates declares on the dust jacket, "Our Black Jeremiah," reciting the sins of what he believes are a fallen people and a corrupt leadership.

The solutions West proposes are just as hyperbolic as his complaints. To face the wrongs, he counsels, we need a mode of Socratic questioning that will "expose and extricate the antidemocratic impulses within our democracy." To act upon the ensuing insights, we must "draw on the prophetic," like the Jewish prophets who, invoking divine justice, stood up to tyrants and overcame the predations of might and wealth. Finally, to temper the Judaic law "we must draw on the tragicomic," that vision of jaded but living hope (best represented in blues and hip-hop) that keeps fatalism at bay and lightens the spirit in a world of pain.

One might rebut every paragraph in this book, but they are stubbornly resistant to discussion. West's language is overheated; his descriptions are tendentious; his moral judgments are held up as gospel from page one. West doesn't back his charges, so why bother? It is better to interpret *Democracy Matters* as a case study in academic celebrity. It shows what happens when a scholar is thrown into the media arena, hailed as an "eloquent prophet with attitude" (*Newsweek*), courted by rival universities, and in-

Books

1 vited, interviewed, and idolized without
2 end. The process is fatal to the scholarly in-
3 telligence. If the public sphere draws an ac-
4 ademic too far from his domain, he loses
5 touch with that which keeps him judicious
6 and deliberative: peer criticism. Without
7 colleagues who thrive on punching holes in
8 each other's work, one's conceptions are
9 untested. Performance ends up counting for
10 more than rigor does. In the strategic
11 realms of media and politics, academics
12 don't reason or inquire. They opine.

13
14 There is nothing wrong with opinion, of
15 course, except when one writes a book of
16 lazy pontification and pretends that it is
17 something more. *Democracy Matters* pro-
18 fesses to be unflinchingly critical and
19 prophetically intellectual, but in truth the
20 content and rhetoric remind one of a Charlie
21 Rose hour. While talking-head criticism
22 makes for quality television, it comes off in
23 print as a symptomatic utterance, the words
24 of a man freed from accountability and
25 enamored of his own voice. Examine it
26 closely and one sees that the characteristics
27 of this celebrity-scholar writing are wholly
28 opposite to the adventuresome, incisive per-
29 sona displayed by the author.

30 West's ideas unfold with predictability
31 and ease. The claim that Republicans en-
32 gage in "myopic mendacity" comes as no
33 surprise. That the "vicious legacy of white
34 supremacy" need only be asserted, not ex-
35 plained, is a sign of West's complacency. As
36 in a talk show appearance, the important
37 thing for West is to articulate his message,
38 to give it urgency.

39 West's language has no anchor in par-
40 ticulars. Bloated phrases and flamboyant
41 epithets do the work properly done by con-
42 crete description. Sometimes, the language
43 acquires a momentum of its own, as in West's
44 versions of life after 9/11. Early on, 9/11 marks
45 "the full-scale gangsterization of America."
46 Before readers can digest *that*, a variant pops
47 up: "9/11 plunged the whole country into the
48 blues." The next page provides a climactic al-
49 ternative: "Since 9/11 we have experienced the
50 niggerization of America."

West's professions of liberality are belied
by vilifications of his opposition. He insists
upon the value of "respectful and candid
dialogue," but every reference to conserva-
tives drips with accusation. His roll call of
"towering social critics" is packed with
demonizers—Noam Chomsky, Susan Son-
tag, Angela Davis, Barbara Ehrenreich.

Finally, against progressivist principle, the
personal prevails over the political. The
only sustained episode in *Democracy Matters*
concerns West's battle with Summers, re-
counted in a fifteen-page narrative aimed at
shoring up his credibility. West's testimony
has the air of truth, and Summers may have
acted as a clod, but his response bears the
pique of one unaccustomed to challenges
on his home turf. Additionally, there is
something sad about a distinguished pro-
fessor proving his seriousness by citing
his rap CD and his weekly chats on the *Tavis
Smiley Show*. As for West's faith in the genius
of hip-hop: What does it say of his judg-
ment that he considers the following lines
"powerful poetry and insightful social
critique"?

What you trying to pull eatin' us like cannibals
Whatever happened to that forty acres and
that animal
Now you tryin' to use integration just to
fool us
Like Malcolm said we been hoodwinked and
bamboozled.

It is fitting that celebrity academics
should promote youth culture. West may
invoke Emerson, Plato, and James Baldwin,
but he saves his passion for the hip-hop
performers DA Smart and Outkast. The
average black student graduates from high
school four years behind his white class-
mates. Close to 70 percent of black children
are born without a father in the home.
Literary reading rates for blacks fell eight
points from 1992 to 2002. But the media
prefers to highlight the juvenile rebellious-
ness and hokey cynicism of the hip-hop ar-
tist. Why should the talking head professor
do any different?