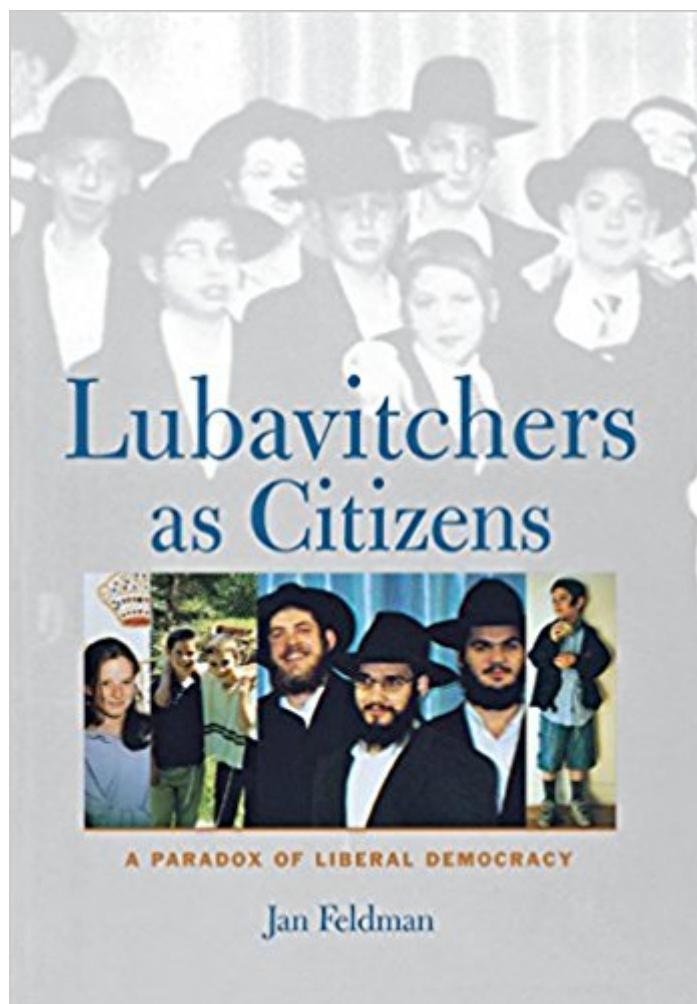


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Lubavitchers As Citizens: A Paradox Of Liberal Democracy



Synopsis

Lubavitchers are active in the civic life of their communities and so should be considered good citizens by advocates of participatory democracy. However, their obviously nonliberal worldview tends to elicit rancor in precisely those quarters. The notion that democratic political institutions require the support of a democratic political culture is pervasive in political theory. Many scholars treat democratic virtues and liberal values as synonymous. As a result, nonliberal groups are viewed with suspicion: if they reject liberal values, they are also seen as rejecting democratic ones. Jan Feldman focuses on a subset of Chassidic Judaism known as Lubavitch, or ChaBad, to explore this assumption. Lubavitchers make an excellent test case, she explains, because they are informed, politically active, and democratic on the one hand, yet embrace nonliberal values on the other. Unlike the Amish or Hutterites, they do not rely on rural isolation for group survival but function remarkably well in secular, urban settings. They embrace rather than withdraw from political life. Although they do not use the state to promote their worldview to a wider audience, their entry into the public realm often generates hostility and fear. Feldman does not claim that liberal values are irrelevant to democracy nor does she argue that all nonliberal groups are equally benign. "What Lubavitchers allow us to investigate," she writes, "is the common assumption that liberal and democratic attitudes are inextricably linked." Through numerous interviews in the centers of Lubavitch life in Montreal, New York, and Washington, D.C., she not only illuminates a group fascinating in its own right but also provides insights into long-held assumptions about the relationship between liberal and democratic values.

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Customer Reviews

"When might a civic virtue become a civic vice? When it is practiced by an illiberal group, says Jan Feldman. It is a view she explains but criticizes in Lubavitchers as Citizens. . . . Lubavitch rejection of liberal values is misconstrued, she writes, as rejection of democratic citizenship. It is not, for example, that Lubavitchers fail to respect freedom. For them, freedom is achieved in the fulfillment of one's responsibility to God and the community."•Nina C. Ayoub. Chronicle of Higher Education, May 2, 2003" If Chabad has done awesomely well by American liberalism, how has liberation adapted to Chabad? That's the question Jan Feldman poses in her academic but homey tome, 'Lubavitchers as Citizens: A Paradox of Liberal Democracy.' . . . Feldman's interesting approach is to test John Rawls and other liberal theorists to see whether their models can accommodate the Lubavitchers. Along the way, she provides a comprehensive overview of Lubavitch and general Orthodox theology."•Abigail Radoszkowicz. Jerusalem Post, June 27, 2003" In this study of the Lubavitcher Chassidic group in the US and Canadian democracies, Feldman analyzes several assumptions underlying the question. . . . Issues about the status of women, secular versus religious education, sacred symbols, or behavior in public places provide many examples in her discussions of the liberal values of critical reasoning, individualism, autonomy, and the Lubavitchers' faith-based values of reason and obligation. . . . Summing up: Recommended. Graduate students through faculty."•R. L. Herrick, Westmar University, Choice Magazine, Dec. 2003." It is political scientist Jan Feldman's startling contention that the Lubavitcher Jews have a great deal to teach academic political theorists, particularly perfectionist liberals, about citizenship and liberalism. . . . Feldman's book, the work of a woman who is herself a professor and an observant Jew with 'a close affiliation with Lubavitch,' succeeds in humanizing the Lubavitchers and in capturing the rhythm of their lives, built around the Hasidic belief that even ordinary people can hasten the coming of the messiah through the joyous, enthusiastic fulfillment of the commandments. She also exposes some typical limitations of academic political theory concerning the devoutly religious."•Peter Berkowitz, Policy Review No 126" Lubavitchers as Citizens is an original and provocative contribution to the debates on the limits and possibilities of liberal democracy. Using the case of the Lubavitcher Chassidic group, Jan Feldman argues that non-liberal groups can meet the tests for democratic citizenship. She thus suggests that a pluralist democracy can broaden the boundaries of what is tolerated and even valued."•Morton Weinfeld, McGill University" Jan Feldman's meticulous and revealing study of Lubavitch political culture makes clear that democracy can exist•even

flourish in an illiberal group. The book challenges the popular notion that democracy is always threatened by illiberalism and, in doing so, breaks important new ground in the study of liberalism, democracy, and citizenship. Modest in its claims, but sweeping in its import, Lubavitchers as Citizens will force political theorists to rethink the relationship between liberalism and democracy." •Tom Rice, University of Northern Iowa

Jan Feldman is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Vermont

This book was simply about the authors sabbatical that she took after her horrible divorce from her Russian Jewish husband. I cannot believe a tree was cut down to publish such grammatical ranting. The book is written as if she was writing her thesis for a masters class and goes on about the friends she made while studying at a Chabad in Montreal. By reading it you can immediately realize that she is embellishing on some of the experiences. She raves about her feminism under control while in the Lubavitch community. Don't waste your money on this book.

I have always thought of the Lubavitch as the "Hippies" of the Hasidic movement, since they are viewed as way left by absolutely all of their Hasidic neighbors (some sects won't even talk to these "infidels", and in my observation have drawn lots of secular lefties from around the world. I'm not a Lubavitch but love em! Kinder, wiser, less judgemental people you cannot find -- the way they love G-d is admirable by all who have had a less than ideal religious background.

This book was HORRIBLE! From premise to conclusion this book really had no firm ground to stand on. What a futile exercise in intellectualism!! Look elsewhere to read about the Chabad Lubavitch sect, such as the Rebbe's Army...

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