

## The Good Neighbour Nation: the democracy of everyday life



Row of Houses Brighton, Brooklyn (Photocredit: [amg2000](#))

**Neighbours can make us miserable, disturb our sleep, provide company and care, rescue us in emergencies, and betray us to political authorities. Dr Joe Mazor, Assistant Professor in Political Science and Philosophy, explores neighbourly relations in everyday life following the Brian Barry Memorial Lecture with Professor Nancy Rosenblum.**

What are the elements of good neighbourly relations? What is the relationship between the democracy of everyday life and the democratic politics of the state? Is the informal (and often petty) politics among neighbours something to be celebrated or merely grudgingly accepted? These are a few of the questions we were able to explore as part of this year's **Brian Barry Memorial Lecture**, which took place on May 21<sup>st</sup> at the **LSE**.

Brian Barry was a prolific and influential political theorist. He was a professor at the LSE from 1987 – 98. The annual lecture in his memory provides the LSE community with an opportunity to hear from some of the leading political theorists in the world about a variety of important topics. This year, we had the pleasure to explore the elements of good neighbourly relations with Nancy Rosenblum, a Professor of Political Theory at Harvard University. As Professor Rosenblum highlights, our relationships with our neighbours are not just about exchanging occasional pleasantries. Problems such as noise, pets, and local public good management and provision often arise that require political solutions.

It is often simply too costly to involve the state and the legal system in these disputes. Instead, we rely on a certain type of informal neighbourly politics – what Professor Rosenblum calls “the democracy of everyday life” – to provide solutions.

As Professor Rosenblum argues, the democracy of everyday life is not simply a school to prepare citizens for participating in the politics of the state. It is also not simply a microcosm of the broader state politics. Instead, it is a unique (and undertheorized) form of politics – one that has its own set of appropriate governing norms.

What, then, are the elements of a well-functioning democracy of everyday life?



Professor Rosenblum claims that this type of politics, when it works well, is characterized by three elements. Reciprocity among decent folks, speaking out, and live and let live.

The requirement of neighbourly reciprocity is difficult to define precisely. It is more than simply offering a cup of sugar when a neighbour has run out. It can mean offering to watch others' children in an emergency or being willing to take in the mail when others are on vacation and even helping out in times of disaster. Not everyone has to participate. The reclusive neighbour does not necessarily do anything wrong. But the democracy of everyday life works best when neighbours are willing to respect norms of reciprocity, at least among other decent folk.

Neighbours not only do each other good turns. They also speak out when one neighbour is being inconsiderate or is being a bully. Social pressure can be a powerful tool when the more formal mechanisms of the state are unavailable, too costly, or ineffective.

Finally, the democracy of everyday life works best when neighbours do not try to act as a virtue police. Good neighbourly relations are characterized by an ethos of live and let live – one that allow neighbours to live their own lives without too many invasions of privacy and moralizing tut-tutting by others.

Several questions came up after the lecture: Who are our neighbours? Professor Rosenblum responds that it is not just about proximity. Rather, the key characteristics involve interactions that influence our lives, a kind of involuntariness about whom we interact with, and a lack of familiarity that differentiates our relations with our neighbours from friends.

Is the democracy of everyday life something to be celebrated or something to be grudgingly accepted? It is not obvious that the democracy of everyday life is a good thing. The mechanisms of the state may be cumbersome, bureaucratic, and intrusive. But they also prevent political disputes from becoming popularity contests. A democracy of everyday life arguably provides fewer protections to the curmudgeon and to unpopular minorities than does a well-functioning state.

However, Professor Rosenblum argues that the democracy of everyday life is not simply something to be grudgingly accepted. Not every dispute is best addressed by a lengthy legal battle. And as long as the protections of the (hopefully) more impartial state are ultimately available when the pathologies of neighbourly politics arise, perhaps there is a kind of virtue to settling certain disputes and solving local problems through an under-recognized but unique form of politics – the democracy of everyday life.

You can watch the Brian Barry Memorial Lecture on the [Government Department website](#).

**Note: This speech gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Department of Government, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.**



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