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Introduction

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We live in a democratic age. Constitutional documents throughout the world proclaim their democratic character, and few governments wish to be thought undemocratic. People throughout the world demand democracy, and pro-democracy feeling is high even in the most unlikely places. Indeed, with some very minor exceptions, as the historian JoŸ Dunn has noted, the word ‘democracy’ has come to symbolize the only legitimate political system in most languages.¹ ‘Democracy’ is today hailed as a ‘universal value’,² and this appears to be the ‘democratic moment’ *par excellence*.

Yet despite the rhetorical triumph of democracy, its meaning remains disputed, and disappointments with its reality are keenly felt. The standard view of liberal democracy, with its emphasis on electoral institutions, ‘checks and balances’ and individual rights, has been challenged both by illiberal populists claiming to speak more clearly on behalf of ‘the people’ and by conceptions of tecŸocratic management reinvigorated by the apparent successes of a Chinese model that still officially wishes to be called ‘the people’s democratic dictatorship’.³ The contemporary democratic moment combines high esteem for the vague idea of ‘democracy’ and surprisingly low esteem for actually existing democracies.

But the idea of democracy has not always been held in high esteem, much less been considered to be a universal principle of political legitimacy and institutional design. On the contrary, up until the nineteenth century, the history of thought about democracy has mostly been the history of arguments against democracy, and the history of democratic practices often a history of fugitive moments, unrecognized as such even by participants. Today’s democratic moment masks the fact that democracy has always been a contested concept, controversial from the moment the word was introduced to the Western political tradition in Ancient Greece.

This collection offers new readings of a variety of texts that contributed to the making of our current global democratic moment. Like many such collections, it can hardly aim to be comprehensive. Some classic texts on democracy are omitted, and some less well known and less influential texts included, in an attempt to go beyond the canonical history of democracy, with its beginnings in Ancient Athens and its climax in the French and American revolutions. Along with many classic Western texts, the book thus also includes texts by writers with little experience of institutions of popular participation, from Alfarabi in the Baghdad of the Abbasid Caliphate to Alexander Radishchev in the absolutist monarchy of Catherine II of Russia, as well as from writers not usually considered to be important theorists of democracy, such as Bolívar in nineteenth-century Latin America, Gandhi in pre-independence India, Sun Yat-sen in republican China and Shamsuddin in mid-twentieth-century Lebanon. These essays aim to de-center our understanding of the moments where the idea of democracy was articulated, rejected and appropriated.

The book nevertheless starts, as it must, with Ancient Greece. Though the idea that democracy was invented in a ‘small municipality in Southeastern Europe’ is exaggerated,⁴ almost all systematic written discussion of democracy first emerged from reflection on the Greek, and especially Athenian, experiment. Athens may not have originated the practice of democracy, but it almost certainly inaugurated the practice of written criticism of democracy; textually speaking, this was the first ‘democratic moment’. And from the beginning, democracy was faulted for putting power in the hands of the unqualified and destroying natural hierarchies of wealth, prestige or virtue. But these criticisms were tempered by the recognition that some measure of democracy could produce political stability, and that the forms of equality it drew upon could not be simply dismissed. Even Plato, Athens’ most famous critic, put in Protagoras’ mouth a still striking and powerful defence of democratic equality, in which democracy is made possible by the moral capacities of ordinary people, as James Kierstead’s chapter describes.

Athenian democracy was the quintessential ‘assembly democracy’, where citizens came together to directly decide on most political questions. This was for a long time the only picture of democratic institutions available to later writers, and it remains an inspiration to radical theorists of participatory and direct democracy even today. As Paul Blackledge notes in his chapter on Lenin, Marx and later Marxists took inspiration from the direct democracy of the Greeks even as they sought to transcend its limitations by locating the key locus of democratic power in the economic sphere. Yet even in ancient times democracy was never fully identified with a particular institutional configuration of popular power. As Joel Schlosser’s chapter shows, writers from Herodotus onward understood that the forms of equality associated with democracy could be seen in many different regimes, including non-democratic regimes. Democracy as a set of

institutions of popular participation was constantly in dialogue with other forms of government, which could and did express, in their own ways, these values, and which were thought to be better adapted to particular cultural and social 'ecologies'.

Nevertheless, already in Herodotus democracy is identified with forms of equality – of power, voice and law – which could not but be in opposition to existing hierarchies of power and status, and which were obviously associated with Athenian institutions. These institutions were in part understood as an outcome of fundamental conflicts between rich and poor, as Aristotle was among the first to emphasize. Disagreements between the rich and the poor about the meaning and appropriateness of political equality were in turn thought to account for the democratic tendency towards disorder and conflict. Yet Aristotle was also aware that democracies were not all identical. As Kevin Cherry describes in his chapter, he carefully considered contemporary forms of democracy to determine their appropriateness to different contexts, noted their differing capacities to preserve the rule of law and justly mediate class conflict, and advised statesmen on how democracy's tendencies to conflict and disorder could be mitigated by mixtures with other forms of government. The eventual result of this line of thought, the theory of the 'mixed constitution', was one way in which democracy was 'tamed' for ancient Republican thought.⁵ Even Cicero, that Roman arch-conservative, granted that some degree of democratic participation in rule was necessary to the stability of a constitution, even as he denied that citizens should be considered socially equal, as Jeffrey Tatum discusses in his chapter. On its own, democracy's runaway equality was dangerous; properly tempered by other values and institutions, it was essential for an enduring political regime.

The fall of the Roman Republic led to a decline in writing about democracy in the West except as a historical curiosity. Yet recognizably democratic practices asserting the political equality of the members of a particular community and keeping governors at least morally accountable to a broader public did not disappear completely. They were especially important in the early centuries of Islam, when mosques and other forms of what today we would call 'civil society' helped keep rulers accountable and ensured that the idea of political equality did not die out. Indeed, long after Athens was just a dim memory, preserved only in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the appeal of democratic equality and its concomitant valuation of a diversity of ways of life could still be understood by thinkers with no experience of institutions of popular participation in rule, as Alexander Orwin's chapter on Alfarabi shows. Alfarabi's discussion of the 'democratic city', drawing both on Plato's *Republic* and on his own experience of tenth-century Baghdad, is perhaps best understood as a description of what Tocqueville would later call the democratic social state, with its levelling of social distinctions and its multiplicity of associations ('cities') and ways of life. And though Alfarabi had no conception of popular consent or sovereignty, he could see how this

social state led to the dependence of the ruler on the approval of the ruled, even if for him democracy as a political institution would have been little more than ‘monarchy, tempered by riots’, to paraphrase Lewis Namier’s famous phrase about eighteenth-century England.

The Greek conception of democracy had little to do with the modern idea that legitimate power requires the consent of the citizenry. This latter notion emerges slowly in medieval European political thought, along with the notion of representation. As Takashi Shogimen notes in his discussion of Marsilius of Padua’s *Defensor Pacis*, while medieval political thought did not approve of democracy in general, Marsilius’ claim that some law is *instituted* rather than divine in origin, and that instituted law requires *consent*, leads to the idea that the community can be *represented* by a part of it. Law is not *discovered* by the citizenry, but it must be *approved* by the ‘greater’ part of it – the part that can genuinely discern the community’s common good – if it is to have authority.

Disapproval of democracy, associated as it was with Athenian tumults and disorder, would nevertheless remain the default position for most writers until the nineteenth century. Indeed, most of the founders of what we now think of as our democratic institutions were no ‘democrats’ themselves; they were anti-aristocrats and republicans first of all.⁶ But the resurgence of republican political thought in Italy in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries led at least some people to argue for a stronger role for popular participation in politics, even when they still avoided the word ‘democracy’. Machiavelli, in this as in many other things an original voice, was among the first to take a decidedly democratic turn, as Catherine Zuckert argues in her essay. ‘The people’, whose interests primarily lay in not being oppressed, represented a better guarantee of political order than the nobles, who too often wanted to oppress the former. And by competing for the favour of the people, the great would in turn prevent the emergence of tyrants.

Later republicans, including Spinoza and Harrington, further developed the case for granting significant power to the people in a republican context. J. C. Davis notes that Harrington thought democracy was possible in his time because of the spread of land ownership, even as he also worried about how to contain the potential for factionalism that had always been thought to be inherent to the involvement of the people in politics. More importantly, for Harrington, the irrationality of ordinary men was no longer seen as an obviously disqualifying fact about democracy. And as Emma Cohen de Lara and Nathan Cooper argue in their chapter, Spinoza sought to ground political power in the people even while holding a significantly negative view of their individual capacities. Spinoza’s radical republicanism is especially notable in this respect; not only does Spinoza argue that democracy is more stable than monarchy, in spite of the ignorance and superstition of most people, he is uncompromising in his defence of the freedom of thought that we now think of as foundational to liberal conceptions of democracy. Monarchy, Spinoza argues, is fundamentally deceptive; the monarch can only keep power by

keeping people in a condition of superstition and ignorance, a condition which he thinks democracy mitigates.

A distrust of monarchy and aristocracy soon became a clear theme in the emerging democratic moment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Paine thought monarchy deserved contempt, and mobilized this feeling rhetorically to support popular participation in government, as Mario Feit shows in his chapter. And Alexander Radishchev, writing in absolutist Russia, mobilized outrage against the depredations of the nobility to argue for the fundamental equality of human beings and an embryonic notion of human rights, as we see in Andrew KaŸ's essay. To be sure, unlike radicals like Paine, Radishchev did not think Russia was ready for any kind of representative government, and he did not go so far as to assert that fundamental human equality should translate into political equality or even suffrage. But his vision of how the community retains a fundamental right to hold those who have abused their power to account, and his assertion of a fundamental right to liberty, demonstrates how democratic themes could be appropriated even in the most unfertile soils; it is no wonder that the Bolsheviks would later claim him as a precursor in radical politics.

New democratic ideas at this time were still self-consciously opposed to 'ancient' ideas of democracy (as we see most explicitly in Constant's famous essay contrasting the 'liberty of the ancients' with 'the liberty of the moderns'), but they still offered an initially radical alternative to aristocracy as the rule of inherited privilege. Though most democratic thinkers agreed the people could not rule on their own, given the scale of the political community and the complexity of government, they must at least have an opportunity to consent to the law: no one could have political authority by birth. The alternative to aristocratic monarchy was thus often articulated in the language of representation. And as Lucia Rubinelli shows in her essay on Sieyès, the new notion of representation was part and parcel of an emerging conception of society as a complex division of labour that was self-consciously contrasted to the 'simplicity' of Athens. For Sieyès, society was better off the more individuals were more fully represented by others, not just in politics but in all kinds of activities.

The need for representation by wiser, better others was especially present to the minds of the statesmen who had to deal with the aftermath of the bloody wars of independence in Latin America. These were democratic revolutions in the sense that they were waged for the sake of popular sovereignty and appealed to values of equality and the consent of the governed. But, as Guillermo Avelledo shows in his chapter on Bolívar, while popular sovereignty was widely seen as the only legitimate revolutionary goal, the people themselves seemed unsuited to the responsibilities of government. Factionalism plagued the new republics, and the fault was the people's lack of civic education. The people should be sovereign, not as they were, but as they should be; and education was essential to bring about their enlightenment. But in the meantime, it was still necessary to constitute

a people that *could* take on political responsibilities. Bolívar found the right model for the people in his revolutionary army, with its egalitarian mixture of races and its demonstrated virtues; the army could thus represent the people as a whole.

Democracy in any case soon came to mean not just an institutional scheme enabling the representation of the people in government, but an entire culture that levelled social distinctions, and made a democratic people a living reality. The United States was the key exemplar of this new culture; but, as Tocqueville noted, there was a danger that a democratic culture tended to undermine the virtues that preserved democratic government itself. In particular, the democratic citizen, emancipated from hierarchical social ties, had a tendency to narrow the scope of his interests and values, hindering the emergence of the sorts of civic virtues that had made American democracy so lively, and making new forms of despotism possible. As Ryan Balot and Zhichao Tong note in their chapter, Tocqueville thought that in order to preserve democratic government, democratic societies required leaders capable of expanding the horizons of citizens and refining their views. And while his prediction about the kinds of institutions likely to produce such was perhaps misguided, Tocqueville's preoccupation with the privatization of citizenship in the new democratic (and capitalist) age was to remain an enduring concern for democratic theorists.

Excessive concern with narrow private or family interests was a vexing problem for theorists of representative democracies, since their scale, as earlier theorists had usually argued, precluded the kinds of involvement in politics that standard republican thought would have recommended. But the problem could not always be traced to the democratic social state itself. As Katherine Smits shows in her chapter, Harriet Taylor Mill saw the excessive narrowing of citizen interests as one of the evils that flowed from the exclusion of women from the public sphere. Her corrective was to argue for formal inclusion, not only as a matter of basic justice, but precisely as a way to ensure that citizens would care for the common good. Though universal suffrage had to wait until after the end of the First World War in most of Europe, and until the mid-twentieth century in much of the rest of the world, the dynamic of democratic inclusion, with its levelling of arbitrary social distinctions, was already unstoppable.

Formal inclusion, however, was soon believed to be necessary but not sufficient to realize democratic self-rule. For Marx and later Marxist thinkers, including Lenin, capitalism seemed to make a mockery of representation. In particular, if economic power was also political power, it followed that it was necessary to democratize economic power, starting at the locus of production. Marxists did not necessarily dismiss the emancipatory power of representative democracy, but they did seek to supplement it by democratizing other spaces. The 'soviet' vision of democracy, though grotesquely distorted in the Soviet Union, did have its origins in a genuine account of democracy and the state, as Paul Blackledge argues in his chapter.

And Rosa Luxemburg's concern with the democratizing power of the people in the street bears more than a family resemblance with earlier views of the power of civic engagement, if in a stronger fashion more appropriate to the revolutionary period she lived through, as we see in Rosemary H. T. O'Kane's chapter.

Marxists were not the only people concerned with the corrosive power of capitalism, and more broadly modernity, on democracy. J. A. Hobson, writing in the 1930s, did not think democracy could survive unless it could address the broader problems of global capitalism and imperialism, as Colin Tyler notes in his chapter. The complexity of the economy and the international system meant that all visions of direct democracy were doomed; but the scope of the regulatory state and international institutions could only be safely enlarged if it was subject to democratic control by a properly educated electorate. The same complexity of modern government had led Max Weber to argue that democracy required charismatic leadership. Like other modern social orders, democracy was subject to pressures towards bureaucratization that made genuine popular control impossible. Democracy, on this view, is a matter for elites, a view that would be further articulated by Schumpeter and the proponents of the 'minimalist' conception of democracy. But Weber also stressed that properly structured democracies were also better able than the alternatives to produce responsible leaders and keep them accountable.

In the twentieth century democratic ideas came to resonate far beyond the European core, the Anglosphere, and Latin America. Even before the end of the Cold War, elections with universal suffrage, the primary mark of modern representative democracy, had become ubiquitous, even if they were not always meaningful or fair. But they were also reinterpreted in new ways. Today's democratic moment is resolutely post-Western. Gandhi's struggle against the British empire, for example, led him to put 'dissent', rather than collective control, front and centre in his conception of democracy, as we see in Anuradha Veeravalli's chapter. The individual conscience, speaking truth to power, was also to be a part of the democratic resistance to totalitarian states. Sun Yat-sen saw democracy as the best way to build a strong national state, capable of resisting the depredations of imperial powers while ensuring welfare for the people, but self-consciously drew on Chinese ideas of meritocratic selection to argue for a balance between competence and popular control in democratic states, as Theresa Man Ling Lee shows in her chapter. And many Muslim thinkers came to see democracy, understood as popular sovereignty, as fundamentally compatible with Islam, given the fallibility of human rulers, as we see in Hamid Mavani's chapter on Muhammad Mahdi Shamsuddin.

A collection like this necessarily has some important limits. Democracy, as an idea and as a practice, developed not just through the ideas of elite writers but also through the actions of many ordinary people who did not care to theorize their activity. Democratic moments are not all textual. Yet this work focuses mostly on theoretical elaborations (and critical

discussions) of the idea of democracy: its meaning, its reach, the principles and institutions that express it. Despite their limits, we think these texts are illuminating about the history of democracy and its power.

Notes

- 1 Joÿ Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005).
- 2 Amartya Sen, 'Democracy as a Universal Value', *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 3–17.
- 3 See, for example, Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- 4 Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4. Assembly forms of government are attested in the Syria-Mesopotamia region and the broader Mediterranean before the classical age of Athens. See Joÿ Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009), chapter 2. There is also evidence that such forms of government have been independently re-invented multiple times in world history.
- 5 See Xavier Márquez, 'Cicero and the Stability of States', *History of Political Thought* 32, no. 3 (2011): 397–423.
- 6 Przeworski, *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*, 5–8.