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Author(s): DONALD SHELL

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The Development of Democracy

DONALD SHELL

Donald Shell is Lecturer in Politics at the University of Bristol, UK.

Apart from Ancient Greece, democracy was virtually unknown until the eighteenth century. It then arose in different places, drawing inspiration from various sources and taking different forms. Properly understood democracy involves attitudes and ideas, not simply institutional arrangements. Much so-called democracy in the modern world is only skin deep.

No single group, person or nation can claim to have founded democracy. Many different individuals, political parties, and governments, have thought, written and acted in ways which have advanced in some sense what is now recognized as democracy. But the process has been haphazard, and the understanding and practice of those laying claim to the title "democratic" has frequently been in sharp conflict. "Democracy is a noun, but should be an adjective" writes John Lucas (1976) because democracy is not a thing, a state of affairs or a particular system of government; it is more akin to an idea, a method, an approach, a way of going about things. The idea bears institutional fruit of considerable variety.

Government by the people, Greek city-state style, would today be seen as sexist, racist and elitist

Though today democracy has become widely popular this has by no means always been the case. In fact only a century or so ago democracy was generally regarded with suspicion, distrust and outright hostility, not least in some of those countries which now consider themselves foremost in the democratic tradition. "Democracy used to be a....bad thing (until) about 100 years ago. Then within 50 years democracy became a good thing... in the last 50 years... democracy has become an ambiguous thing" (C B Macpherson, 1966). In the twentieth century the spreading claim to be "democratic" has resulted in the use of all sorts of qualifying words along with

the term democracy, such as liberal democracy, representative democracy, parliamentary democracy (alternatively seen as bourgeois democracy or capitalist democracy) as well as people's democracy, guided democracy, popular democracy and so on. Anyone who thinks that their particular system alone exemplifies genuine democracy demonstrates either naivete or arrogance (or both I suppose).

ANCIENT GREECE

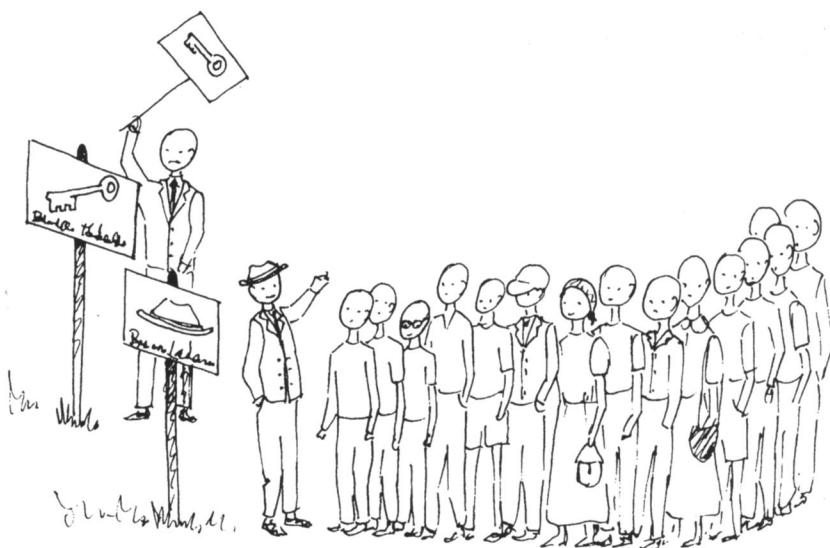
But why has such confusion arisen? As is well known the word "democracy" is from the Greek words "demos", meaning people, and "kratos", meaning government. Democracy in the sense of government by the people, rather than government by a single ruler or a small group, was a form of government which arose in some Greek city-states of the fifth century BC. The important point to note is the collective nature of decision making between those who were ranked as equals, that is between all citizens. This was government by open discussion. The focus for such discussion was the collective good of the city. Positions of particular responsibility were filled by rotation, election or by the casting of lots. A frequently quoted contemporary description is given by Pericles: "Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class but the actual ability which the man possesses.... just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other. ... We are free and

tolerant in our private lives; but in public affairs we keep to the law" (Thucydides).

It may be thought that the contrast between the small and autonomous city-states of ancient Greece and the vastly larger and more complex societies of today renders this description irrelevant. But several ideas important in the future development of democracy are embedded in this quotation, notably that of participation, of equality before the law, of tolerance for the views and behaviour of others, and of a division between a public and a legitimate private domain. However the citizenry involved were only the sons of Athenians; immigrants were excluded as were all slaves and of course all women, leaving only some ten to twenty per cent of the total population citizens. Government by the people, Greek city-state style, would today be seen as sexist, racist and elitist.

The democracy of ancient Greece had its critics then too. Plato (c 427-347 BC) lived at the time of Greek decline; he was scathing about democracy in *The Republic* because it meant treating people as equal when they were not equal, and inevitably led to disorder and instability; rule by "philosophers" was to be preferred! Aristotle (384-322 BC) in *The Politics* carefully expounded the democratic form of government but he too was critical because democracy meant not only liberty but also equality and this was dangerous.

For many centuries thereafter the business of government was carried out without reference to democratic ideals. For the people – the masses, the peasants, the rabble – even to think in terms of taking power was seen as dangerous. The "nuclear" threat of the middle ages was the disintegration of society as a result of popular rebellion. The need was for government, for order, for authority to be exercised in society. The lawless, the



brigands, the wandering bands of thieves must be controlled. The ideal was not the active citizen of ancient Greece, but the dutiful subject, an ideal reinforced by the spread of Christendom.

ANTECEDENTS TO DEMOCRACY

From the time of ancient Greece down to at least the sixteenth century whenever democracy was explicitly thought about it was seen as idealistic, utopian and hence, from the point of view of those with power in society, dangerous. Democracy would mean the abolition of classes and almost certainly the equal distribution of property. It would destroy the natural order which had received divine sanction. It would require not simply the overthrow of existing governments but the destruction of Government itself – at least as Government was then known.

But looking back through the middle ages various antecedents to modern democracy can be recognized even though democracy itself was sharply repudiated. The notion of the rule of law and of government being conducted according to certain fixed principles (the idea of constitutionalism) received varied and erratic expression from Roman times and onwards. In England Magna Carta (1215) involved a monarch compromising with a powerful nobility in regard to the rights of his subjects. The presence of both strong monarchical institutions, to check the “plunder and pillage of marauding barons”, as well as a nobility with real independence capable of eliminating royal absolutism, has been stressed by Barrington Moore Jr. in his fascinating study *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966) as “decisive preconditions for modern democracy”.

REFORMATION AND PURITAN REVOLUTION

The sixteenth century Reformation unleashed a whole new way of thinking which had repercussions far beyond what its leaders expected or intended. The individual mattered; the ordinary person was no longer merely expected to live out a life in tutelage to a Church and a State indissolubly bound to each other. When freedom of conscience was asserted many another freedom followed. “The spirit of the Reformation was individualistic ... Modern democracy is the child of the Reformation, (but) not of the Reformers” (Gooch, 1898).

Democracy was seen primarily as a mechanism to be extended to those who had a stake in society in the form of property

In England the seventeenth century “Puritan Revolution” took place. The King was driven from his throne and executed; a Commonwealth was declared. The contemporary political theorist, Hobbes, thought that the massacre of a thousand puritans would have saved England from the civil war. A ferment of debate broke out; numerous tracts and pamphlets bore witness to a new radicalism (see Wootton, 1986).

Though the English revolution gave birth to only a short lived interregnum, to be followed by a Restoration, with the

return of Monarch and House of Lords, the relationship between Crown and Parliament was never to revert to its former pattern. Proof of this was seen in the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688 when a Monarch who attempted to go back to the old ways was pushed from the throne; a Bill of Rights followed in 1689, though this established the rights of parliament vis a vis the Monarch not the rights of individuals vis a vis the Government. England had not become democratic in the modern sense of that term, but the foundations had been laid for a gradual development towards democracy. This took place amidst much deliberate ambiguity, with changes being made tentatively and pragmatically, and with an emphasis on keeping the old institutions while altering the relationships between them.

GOVERNMENT BASED ON CONSENT

Two great English political theorists of the seventeenth century wrote against this background, Hobbes (1588-1679) and Locke (1632-1704). Both emphasized the need for government based on consent rather than a doctrine of Divine Right. For Hobbes (*Leviathan*) people had an equal right to choose their ruler but once chosen he must be a sovereign on behalf of the people. Locke (*Two Treatises on Government*) eschewed such illiberalism and argued that rulers should exercise power only on conditions imposed by those who delegated that power; if these were broken “power devolved into the hands of those who gave it, who may place it anew where they think best for their safety and security”.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Locke’s writings had a strong influence in North America. The settlers in that continent, from the time of the sailing of the Pilgrim Fathers in the Mayflower in 1620 onwards, had in general enjoyed a greater degree of self-government than was experienced in Europe. In 1776 the Declaration of Independence was formulated, including the famous words “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...”. Intense debate preceded

the formulation of the constitution in 1787 (see *The Federalist*, Hamilton et al). The "founding fathers" were not simply concerned with expressing ideas but with working out a system of government. The fear of mob rule or of a tyrannical majority resulted in an emphasis on "checks and balances".

The American form of democracy accordingly developed in ways quite different from the British. Democratic politics was seen as essentially a matter of deliberation, bargaining and compromise. Pluralism rather than party majority rule became characteristic of America. Today there is much talk of pluralist stagnation in the USA, with many Americans looking wistfully at the way political parties link the Executive and the Legislature together in Britain to permit strong government. But many in Britain bemoan "elective dictatorship" and envy the checks and balances of the American system! Both systems involve the notion of consent, with the tasks of government being entrusted to elected representatives, who must give an account of their stewardship to the electorate who have the opportunity periodically to appoint different representatives.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

In contrast to representative democracy was the notion of direct democracy emphasised in the eighteenth century by Rousseau (1712-1778). His ideas were influential during the upheaval of the French revolution (1789 to 1794), when the absolutism of the old order was swept away in an orgy of violence. "The people of England regards itself as free; but it is grossly mistaken; it is free only during the election of members of Parliament. As soon as they are elected, slavery overtakes it, and it is nothing" (Rousseau, 1762). The people must retain their sovereignty in their own hands. Their efforts should be directed towards seeking the common good and the General Will. In advancing such concepts Rousseau was in sharp disagreement with the individualism of Locke. In order to ensure that the common good may be more readily perceived it was desirable in Rousseau's view to eradicate the causes of vested interests. Individuals must be stripped of self-interest; even a common form of civil religion was desirable. Rousseau had grown up in Geneva, then still a city very much in the mold bequeathed by Calvin. Undoubtedly he was influenced by the pattern of government found there. His views have of course been linked with the development of totalitarianism. But his writings do force us to think about the

notion of a common interest as something separate from the sum of individual interests. Furthermore he confronts us with awkward questions about what really is best for a society; is there a right answer to political questions, a solution which really does express the common good, as opposed to the good of some section?

Democracy ought to be a transformative force

The English, the American and the French revolutions represented different routes towards democracy, and the differences are reflected today in a multitude of differing forms and practices. But all became subsumed in the notion of liberal democracy which became characteristic of "Western" societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

PROTECTIVE DEMOCRACY

C B Macpherson (1977) argues that whereas before the nineteenth century the proponents of democracy were fired by ideals and sought to catalyze a new kind of person, the early advocates of liberal democracy in Britain took people as they were or rather as they had been shaped by market forces. Adam Smith (1723-1790) had published his *Wealth of Nations* in the same year as the American Declaration of Independence. Maximizing self-interest through the market was natural for people; securing their self-interest through politics was just as natural and was indeed every individual's right. Bentham (1748-1831) and James Mill (1773-1836) developed the theory of utilitarianism under which the guiding principle for government was the greatest happiness of the greatest number, with each individual the best judge of his own happiness. Under their influence democracy was advocated as a "logical requirement for the governance of a society, freed from absolute power and tradition, in which individuals have unlimited desires, form a body of mass consumers and are dedicated to the maximization of private satisfaction" (Held, 1987).

Their writings contained no enthusiasm for democracy; it was simply seen as the best way of protecting individuals from governments and from each other, so that each could the more readily pursue his own interests. An emphasis on procedural aspects of

democracy resulted. Democracy was seen primarily as a mechanism to be extended to those who had a stake in society in the form of property. The basic task of government was to defend property rights and to uphold the rule of law. Of course it was hard to resist pressure to extend the franchise, and gradually throughout the nineteenth century in England and elsewhere such extension took place, including eventually women as well as men.

A TRANSFORMATIVE FORCE

Extension of the franchise was resisted because of fears about how the uneducated and the propertyless would use the right to vote. But for some the inevitability and indeed the moral virtue in such extension was so obvious that the real need was to think about improving the capacities of individuals. James Mill's son, John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) gave much thought to how democracy could become a means of education and human improvement. He deplored the notion that the "normal state of human beings was that of struggling to get on... trampling, crushing, elbowing and treading on each other". Democracy ought to be a transformative force.

This basic approach to democracy was nurtured in Britain within sections of the Liberal Party and the early Labour Party. Democracy was not simply a matter of rules and procedures, reluctantly resorted to as the best device for safeguarding individuals. Rather democracy involved behaviour and attitudes; the aim of democracy was to foster a new kind of fellowship within a society. Building a welfare state and socializing the ownership of some industries were seen as part and parcel of this trend. In the twentieth century such folk as R H Tawney (1880-1962) sustained these views (see for example *The Acquisitive Society*). The British Labour Party has throughout most of its existence been dominated by such views.

KARL MARX

But against all such variants of liberal and social democracy Karl Marx (1818-1883) protested, because rather than threatening capitalism they seemed to reinforce that system, and in so doing preserve an exploitative class society. The State far from being neutral (as these democrats claimed) was in effect the tool of the capitalist class. Existing democracy was therefore a sham; indeed the continuation of capitalist society would

prevent the arrival of true democracy. Marx made extravagant assumptions about the possibilities for change, the inauguration of a classless society and the withering away of the State. This is not the place to discuss these. But the vision Marx bequeathed was seized on by revolutionaries notably in Russia in 1917, China in 1949 and elsewhere.

A society needs some kind of vision

Marxist thinking has been much adapted, and within Marxism sharp controversies have arisen. But Marxists generally would describe western style liberal democracy as "bourgeois democracy", arguing variously that it has created no more than an illusion of popular participation; that the machinery of the State remains an instrument controlled by a ruling class; that institutions such as competitive political parties and parliaments are typically there to contain, neutralize and reduce popular pressures (See for example Miliband, 1969 and 1982).

TOTALITARIANISM

If Marxist inspired revolutions gave rise to totalitarianism of the left, the twentieth century has also witnessed totalitarianism of the right, notably in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Both of these also claimed the mantle of democracy. The totalitarian assumes he has the right answers, not just for himself but for the whole of society. Mussolini (1883-1945) claimed that in its purest form democracy is "what ought to be". And when the mass of people are weary with politics, impatient for change, eager to see their society organized the better to exploit industry and technology, the totalitarian temptation can be powerful. J. L. Talmon has argued that *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952) lie with Rousseau and his disciples; totalitarian democracy "is based on the assumption of a sole and exclusive truth in politics... it widens the scope of politics to embrace the whole of human existence.... (it sees liberty as being) realized only in the pursuit and attainment of an absolute collective purpose.... Whereas totalitarianism of the left is concerned with man, his reason and salvation, that of the right has been concerned with the collective entity, the state, the nation, the race".

The hideousness of such regimes became glaringly obvious. But the heresy on which they were based, like heresies

generally, had a starting point in truth. Democracy, indeed politics generally, if it is to remain healthy, does need an idealistic dimension embracing an acknowledged community. A society needs some kind of vision. If democracy is seen merely as a mechanism, a kind of glorified market for maximizing individual self-interest, if indeed the very existence of society is denied, then politics and democracy are seriously impoverished. Maybe nothing better can be expected in a society devoid of faith, secularized and materialistic. Maybe in such a society nothing better should be expected lest the ideals and the vision go sour and the putrefaction of totalitarianism takes over. But at least we should recognize what we have lost.

ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF DEMOCRACY

Schumpeter in *Capitalism Socialism and Democracy* (1942) suggested that politicians deal in votes as a businessman deal in oil; they are the entrepreneurs, the voters are the consumers. Democracy allows the people to choose between two or more competitive elite groups thereby authorizing a government. What they choose, or rather which political entrepreneur devises the policy package (maybe capitalist, maybe socialist) which garners the most votes is irrelevant. Schumpeter's views were very influential among social scientists. Analysis of so-called democratic governments became overwhelmingly empirical; thought and deliberation about what ought to be was replaced by collecting data and formulating theories to explain what is, with a good deal of pride being taken in

If attitudes degenerate, if vision is lost, if greed takes over, the most robust of institutions may fail

the realism of such an approach. But what was explanatory and descriptive also became by implication normative and prescriptive. This was how the system worked; who dared be so naive as to suggest it could be different? To appeal to anything more elevated than voter self-interest was idealistic, unworkable. The ultimate goal of any political system was simply its survival, its stability. In

such a context public apathy rather than activity became positively functional. And participation in politics was best understood according to the costs imposed on the participant (time, money and so on), and the trade off between this and the likely benefits from participation.

ELITISM AND PLURALISM

Within this framework a basic division arose between the elitists and the pluralists. How widely dispersed was power or even influence within western democratic systems? There may ultimately be consumer sovereignty in the political market place, and the right to vote may be distributed in a strictly equal way, but what of all those other resources (especially money) which appeared to have a purchasing power in the political market, maybe a power to shape the way the mass electorate spent its votes?

Empirical studies in politics seemed not to endorse the assumptions of classical democracy. People were not political animals; participation in political activity was by no means a good thing; voters were overwhelmingly influenced by personal economic well-being. But it does not follow that such assumptions should be discarded. Democracy viewed purely as a mechanism may be found to be compatible with growing inequality, with the development of an underclass who lack the resources to register any effective demand in the political market place. Or to put the same point another way, it may be found impossible to develop the mechanisms (either through lack of will or lack of technique) to limit the importance of money or status in buying votes at election time, or buying influence in Washington, or London, or Brussels or Bonn.

Western style democracies need regular reinvigoration with ideals if they are to survive. In the United States the gap between credal values and political practice has periodically erupted in a ferment of change (Huntington, 1980). In Britain the immediate post-war years saw widespread political agreement on the need to extend the rights of citizenship, for example to basic income levels, health care and educational provision. The 1960s saw demands for increased participation. The 1970s saw fears about government "overload" as political parties outbid each other for electoral support, driving themselves and the system of government to the point of bankruptcy.

The development of supra-national bodies adds another dimension of

concern. Democratic accountability can all too easily be diminished as decision making power is syphoned away from national governments to such bodies. The European Economic Community is an outstanding example; as the scope of Community decision-making is increased, so the powers of the directly elected European Parliament have been expanded. But the latter process has scarcely kept place with the former; hence the growth in what is now being called the "democratic deficit". The problem is made more difficult because governments have little incentive and little wish to increase the power of the European Parliament (better to keep power in the hands of ministers and officials) and the public have little interest in the matter.

IDEAS AND INSTITUTIONS

Democracy is by no means an all or nothing affair. Perhaps some countries that think of themselves as foremost in the democratic league table (of their imagination) have the most glaring blindspots. The role of money in the USA leads many to see its politics as simply corrupt; the absence of a codified constitution and any form of entrenched rights in Britain astonishes others. What can only be seen as aberrations in institutional practice as far as democratic criteria are concerned may in fact not matter much because of the values and attitudes people hold. The relationship between ideas and institutions involves lines of causation moving in both directions. Deficiencies in institutions may be compensated for by healthy popular attitudes; conversely if attitudes degenerate, if vision is lost, if greed takes over, the most robust of institutions may fail. Recognizing this point would often induce a good deal more caution and humility about the virtues and vices of our political systems.

The end of the traditional colonial era saw western style democracy, and in particular the so-called Westminster model, exported to many newly independent countries in both Africa and Asia. It was strange that a political system, which had evolved over several centuries in a highly homogeneous and industrialized country, should be thought suitable for the vastly different conditions prevailing in former colonies. Western style democratic systems in newly independent countries have usually proved short-lived. But other ways of capturing democratic ideals may be

found. The large gathering which is open to all and allows free discussion for all before a consensus is reached remains one such practice. One party democracy may sound a contradiction to westerners, but may institutionalize democratic ideals in some societies much more readily than competitive party politics, at least if there is some open competition among candidates aspiring to party nomination.

GLASNOST FROM THE EAST

The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and reform within the USSR have been seen, quite correctly, as contributing to the spread of democracy. Western Governments have emphasized their concern to export "know-how" about democracy, not simply economic assistance. This sounds fine, but it is clear that part of the know-how involves encouragement to build close – if possible indissoluble – links between free market capitalism and democracy.

"Cappuccino democracy" – froth on the surface but a very different taste beneath

This could turn out to be a forced marriage as unnecessary as it is unwise. To insist on capitalism in the sense of privatisation and deregulation as the price of democracy is to make the tail wag the dog. Democracy can co-exist with a substantial public sector and a high degree of regulation; the example of Sweden illustrates the former and policies towards agriculture in many western democracies the latter. It is of course currently fashionable to privatise and de-regulate in the name of democratic enhancement, just as it is fashionable to think that markets and socialism are irreconcilable opposites. But these ought to be thought of as fashions capable of being changed rather than irrefutable laws (see for example Le Grand and Estrin).

CAPPUCCINO DEMOCRACY

The wind of change blowing through Eastern Europe has been felt in many other parts of the world, both in terms of changed aspirations and in a drying up of Soviet support for revolutionary

movements and socialist regimes. In much of Africa the World Bank has begun to insist on "good governance" as a precondition of further economic aid; this seems to mean enhancing democracy through multi-party systems and competitive elections. A difficulty is that such pressures from multi-national bodies can all too easily be perceived as simply a new kind of colonialism, administered by dark-suited nameless bankers rather than politicians of a more traditional style.

The 1980s saw military autocracy replaced by ballot boxes in many Latin American countries, with an associated reduction in human rights abuses, a more outspoken media and so on. But both here and in much of Asia the alternation between democrats and generals looks likely to continue. Democracy cannot simply be switched on from the top of a society; it needs to grow from the bottom up. There is a pattern of what has been termed "cappuccino democracy" – froth on the surface but a very different taste beneath – in such countries. Freedom of speech and of the media, independent courts, public servants of integrity and reasonable impartiality, these are among the qualities needed if democracy is genuinely to grow, and its growth is certainly desirable. Such qualities need to be nurtured by many different folk, not merely politicians.

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