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DEMOCRACY

A History

"A masterly performance . . .
the next time you hear the word *democracy*,
reach for this book."—*THE ECONOMIST*

JOHN DUNN

P r e f a c e



WHY DEMOCRACY?

This book tells an astonishing story. It is the story of a word of casual origins, and with a long and often ignominious history behind it, which has come quite recently to dominate the world's political imagination. Over the course of the book I try to show how little we yet understand that remarkable ascent, but also how we can learn to grasp its causes and significance altogether better.

Why does democracy loom so large today? Why should it hold such sway over the political speech of the modern world? What does its recent prominence really mean? When America and Britain set out to bury Baghdad in its own rubble, why was it in the name of democracy of all words that they claimed to do so? Is its novel dominance in fact illusory: a sustained exercise in fraud or an index of utter confusion? Or does it mark a huge moral and political advance, which only needs to cover the whole world, and be made a little more real, for history to come to a reassuring end?

This book sets out to explain the extraordinary presence of democracy in today's world. It shows how it began as an improvised remedy for a very local Greek difficulty two and a half thousand years ago, flourished briefly but scintillatingly, and then faded away

almost everywhere for all but two thousand years. It tells how it came back to life as a real modern political option, explaining why it first did so, under another name, in the struggle for American independence and with the founding of the new American republic. It shows how it then returned, almost immediately and under its own name, if far more erratically, amid the struggles of France's Revolution. It registers its slow but insistent rise over the next century and a half, and its overwhelming triumph in the years since 1945. In that rise we can see how strong the continuities remain, but also how sharp the breaks must be, between its Greek original and any modern democratic state. We can grasp what it is about democracy which equipped it to evoke such vital allegiance, but which also guarantees that it will continue to arouse intense fear and suspicion, and open intellectual and moral scorn. Within the last three-quarters of a century democracy has become the political core of the civilization which the West offers to the rest of the world. Now, as never before, we need to understand what that core really is. As do those to whom we make that offer.

In this book, accordingly, I try to answer two very large questions. The first concerns an extremely strange fact about modern politics. The second concerns the single most unmistakably momentous political outcome of the last three-quarters of a century. I know of no serious attempt to answer the first question. Few even care to pose it in a clear and reasonably frank way. Answers to the second question, by contrast, are two a penny. They litter the pages of serious newspapers and form a commonplace of contemporary political commentary. Most, however, are plainly wrong; and once the question is considered with care, it becomes all too clear that it is exceedingly hard to answer. I believe that the answers to these questions are closely connected, and that, between them, they show something of immense importance about modern politics. But readers may judge otherwise, and still, I hope, learn for themselves from the challenge of trying to answer each.

The first question has two distinct elements: the existence of a single cosmopolitan standard, and the term selected to express it. Why should it be the case that, for the first time in the history of our still conspicuously multi-lingual species, there is for the present a single world-wide name for the legitimate basis of political authority? Not, of course, uncontested in practice anywhere, and still roundly rejected in many quarters, but never, any longer, in favour of an alternative secular claimant to cosmopolitan legitimacy. This is a startling fact, and clearly requires explanation; but in itself it is not necessarily any stranger than much else about the world in which we now live. What is very strange indeed (in fact, quite bizarre) is the fact that this single term, endlessly transliterated or translated across all modern languages,¹ should turn out to be the ancient Greek noun *demokratia*, which originally meant not a basis for legitimacy, or a regime defined by its good intentions or its noble mission, but simply one particular form of government, and that a form, for almost two thousand years of its history as a word, which, it was overwhelmingly judged by most who used the term, had proved grossly illegitimate in theory and every bit as disastrous in practice.

The first question, therefore, is in part a question about the history of language (the vocabulary of modern politics, and its historical antecedents). But it is also a question about the history of political thought and argument, and about the history of political organization and struggle. Why should it be this word that has won the verbal competition for ultimate political commendation across the globe? What does it carry within it to gain it this smashing victory? How did the ideas we now take it to imply, in the end and after so very many centuries, face down the variety of ideas which for so long dominated it with such apparent ease? How did it shake off its lengthy notoriety, adjust its register from dispassionate or disabused description to confident and committed commendation, and pick up the oecumenical allure which its Athenian inventors never intended, and could not distantly have imagined?

At the core of this story is the intensely political history of a very political word. But the word itself cannot answer our questions. Once it was there (as far as we know, summoned into existence precisely to name the regime form which Kleisthenes pioneered for Athens, for his now largely inscrutable reasons, very late in the sixth century BC), that word could be carried laterally in space, and aimed backwards as well as forwards in time. It could be deployed to designate communities which had never heard of Kleisthenes, or even Athens, and practices, whether earlier or later, which were clearly quite unaffected by anything the Athenians ever did, or anything else which we know them to have said. But for over two thousand years it remained a noun designating a system of rule. Not till very late in the eighteenth century, very close to France's great revolution, and apparently largely in and because of it, did *democracy* transform itself into a noun of agency (a *democrat*), an adjective which expressed allegiance and did not merely allude to it (*democratic*), and a verb (to *democratize*), which described the project of refashioning politics, society, and even economy in their entirety, to meet the standards set by the idea of popular self-rule. Ancient Greece had partisans of democracy as a regime. But, as far as we know, it did not exactly have democrats: men (or women) who did not just favour democracy in a particular setting within a given conflict, but were also confident of the clear illegitimacy anywhere of every rival political form, and relatively clear just where the superiority of democracy lay. Certainly, no Greek thinker or political actor ever either defended or explained their political aspirations as efforts to raise distinct aspects of political, economic or social arrangements to the exacting standards which democracy implies.

Athens gave democracy a name, and worked out an elaborate, highly distinctive and astonishingly thoroughgoing interpretation of the political conditions required to achieve it. But it took the French Revolution, well over two thousand years later, to turn *democrat* into a partisan label and a badge of political honour, and first lend imag-

inative credibility to the idea of transforming human collective life, anywhere and everywhere, to fit those requirements. Only after 1789, as far as we know, did any human beings begin to speak of *democratizing* the societies to which they belonged.

For us, democracy is both a form of government and a political value. We quarrel fiercely, if confusedly, over how far the value vindicates or indicts our own practices of government; but we also quarrel over how far the same value is practically coherent, or desirable in its prospective consequences in different circumstances, on any scale between an individual family or domestic unit and the entire human population of a still painfully disunited globe. When we do so, we largely recapitulate Greek arguments between local partisans of democracy as a form of rule, and intellectual critics who invented political philosophy, alongside other genres of critical reflection on politics, in their attempts to call its merits into question.

With the French Revolution, democracy as a word and an idea acquired a political momentum that it has never since wholly lost. Its merits, both moral and practical, have been contested vigorously throughout, as they still are today. But despite these blatant and endlessly reiterated vulnerabilities, it has become ever clearer that, whatever its limitations, there is something irresistibly potent about democracy as a political rallying cry, and that any hope of halting it permanently in its tracks is utterly forlorn. The political potency of democracy as a word is no guarantee of its intellectual potency as an idea. But its political force is no standing miracle. It cannot issue merely from a meaningless or unintelligible buzz of sound. Democracy has won its present prominence, and even the degree of reluctant deference which it now enjoys, in ferocious competition with very many other words, and not a few other ideas. Today, it is plainly a source and embodiment of political power in itself; and its cumulative victory, however disappointing or hollow if judged against loftier aspirations of its own or others, has itself been a sustained display of political power.

In this book I tell the story of democracy's passage from parochial eccentricity and protracted ignominy, seek to capture its main metamorphoses along the way, and show what its long, slow and wholly unexpected victory really means for the political world in which we all now have to live. In tracing that vast arc across space and through time, I try throughout to do full justice to two clear perceptions which most students of democracy have found it uncomfortable to combine: the startlingly insistent power lurking in this apparently drab word and in the ideas which it has come to evoke, and the speciousness of applying it at all literally to the organizational and governmental structures of any human population early in the third millennium. It is easy to grasp democracy by suppressing either perception. But, if you do, what you grasp must always be drastically other than what is really there: a cynical truncation of that reality, or a stupidly ingenuous gloss upon it. (It is not hard to be an idiot in politics. We are all strongly tempted to political idiocy quite a lot of the time.)

The citizens of Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BC, to a now bewildering degree, governed themselves. What they meant by democracy (which was originally their word) was the extraordinary complex of institutions which enabled them to do so. No modern population can govern themselves in the same sense; and we lose all feeling for political reality when we strive today to see in America or Britain, as they prepare for war or draw up their public budgets, instances of either people governing itself in even a mildly opaque way. When any modern state claims to be a democracy, it necessarily misdescribes itself. But that is very far from rendering the misdescription inconsequential, and cannot credibly be viewed merely as deliberate self-deception. There is every reason for today's citizens to insist that their own state describe itself in these terms, and choose its friends and commit its power and resources largely alongside other states which also choose to do so. There are, as we shall see, very practical advantages to doing so over time, even if most of them

might be furnished just as reliably for a bit under a more clinical vocabulary.

But the label of democracy does more than affirm a clear duty for states to provide their citizens with these practical advantages. It also expresses symbolically something altogether different: the degree to which all government, however necessary and expeditious, is also a presumption and an offence. Like every modern state, the democracies of today demand obedience and insist on a very large measure of compulsory alienation of judgement on the part of their citizens. (To demand that obedience and enforce such alienation is what makes a state a state.) When they make that demand in their citizens' own name, however, they do not merely add insult to injury, or perpetrate an evident absurdity. They also acknowledge their own permanent potential for effrontery in levying any such demands, and offer a slim measure of apology for the offence inherent in levying them. With that offer, they close the circle of civic subjection, and set out a framework of categories within which a population can reasonably think of itself over time as living together as equals, on terms and within a set of presumptions, which they could reasonably and freely choose. Everywhere that the word *democracy* has fought its way forward across time and space, you can hear both themes: the purposeful struggle to improve the practical circumstances of life, and to escape from arbitrary and often brutal coercion, but also the determination and longing to be treated with respect and some degree of consideration. What we mean by democracy is not that we govern ourselves. When we speak or think of ourselves as living in a democracy, what we have in mind is something quite different. It is that our own state, and the government which does so much to organize our lives, draws its legitimacy from us, and that we have a reasonable chance of being able to compel each of them to continue to do so. They draw it, today, from holding regular elections, in which every adult citizen can vote freely and without fear, in which their votes have at least a reasonably equal weight, and in which any

uncriminalized political opinion can compete freely for them. Modern representative democracy has changed the idea of democracy almost beyond recognition. But, in doing so, it has shifted it from one of history's hopeless losers to one of its more insistent winners.

My second question, then, is what exactly it is, embodied in or centred upon this novel state form, that has given this very old and much reviled word the stamina and drive to win through in the end.

This book, then, tells three remarkable stories. It tells in the first place the story of a word. But it also tells alongside it the story of an idea, by turns inspiring and ludicrous, and the further story of a range of widely varying practices associated with that idea. One broad family of those practices, the governmental forms of the modern representative capitalist democracy, now dominates the world through its wealth and confidence, and through the quite unprecedented powers of destruction which it has at its disposal. The first two stories are long, complicated, and closely intertwined. The first two sections of the book, accordingly, tell them in the boldest outline. The third is far briefer, but also much denser and more complicated: the very core of the political history of the globe over the last half-century. It is not clear that it could yet be told as a story at all, let alone told convincingly at endurable length. In this third section, therefore, I attempt not to record what has happened, but to explain why it has done so.

This is a story, all too obviously, about us: the story, at the very least, of the historical backcloth to the lives of an ever-growing majority amongst us.² The question I try to answer here, the book's second question, is why this particular state form, the modern representative capitalist democracy, has for the present won the global struggle for wealth and power. This is a hard question; and I cannot claim to have answered it conclusively. What I hope to show is why its answer cannot be either of the two conclusions which we are endlessly urged to draw from it (because it is evidently just and

because it works reliably in practice), and where, instead, that answer must lie. If these judgements are right, they imply at least one simple conclusion: that our own need to understand the political reality of the world in which we now live is still every bit as urgent as the need which prompted the Athenians to invent and deepen that very distant system of self-rule. For them, it was a price they chose to pay to protect their freedom, as well as an expression of that freedom in itself. We cannot protect our freedom in the same way. But we too, if we care to, can see how pressingly that freedom still needs protection, judge how best it can be protected amongst the many claimants who volunteer their services for the purpose, and choose for ourselves the price we are or are not willing to pay to protect it as best we can. We too, if we choose, can use this antique word, not in theft and mystification, but to focus the challenges which history sends us, and face them alertly together.