
MODELS OF DEMOCRACY

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Preface

Models of Democracy has two prime purposes: the first, to provide an introduction to central models of democracy and, above all, to those of the Western tradition from Greece to the present day; the second, to offer a critical narrative about successive democratic ideas in order to address the question, raised directly towards the end of the book: what should democracy mean today? This book is, then, both an introduction and an 'interpretative essay'. These two objectives are not as incompatible as they might seem. For all introductions necessarily examine their subject from a particular perspective within generally complex and much-disputed fields. I have tried to keep the text as 'open' as possible, so that the reader has the clear opportunity to reflect upon arguments and positions independently of my own, but obviously I hope to interest the reader in the views I develop, views which inescapably impinge upon the text.

In a book with as wide a scope as this, I have often had to adopt positions about matters of much-contested interpretation. Undoubtedly, scholars of particular areas will find much to disagree with. There are many places where questions could be raised. None the less, I hope that the book will be rewarding, especially for those who are thinking through questions about democracy for the first time.

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Some sections of this book have been adapted from previously published essays. While the substance of each of these essays has been extensively modified and developed for the purposes of this volume, the details of the original publications are as follows:

'Central perspectives on the modern state'. In D. Held *et al.* (eds), *States and Societies*. Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983, pp. 1-55. Parts of this essay helped inform chapter 2.

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'Power and legitimacy in contemporary Britain'. In G. McLennan, D. Held and S. Hall (eds), *State and Society in Contemporary Britain*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984, pp. 299-369. Sections of this essay helped structure chapter 7.

'Socialism and the limits of state action' (with John Keane). In J. Curran (ed.), *Future of the Left*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984, pp. 170-81. Material from this essay was adapted for a section of chapter 9.

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Introduction

The history of the idea of democracy is curious; the history of democracies is puzzling.

There are two striking historical facts. First, nearly everyone today says they are democrats no matter whether their views are on the left, centre or right. Political regimes of all kinds in, for instance, Western Europe, the Eastern bloc and Latin America claim to be democracies. Yet, what each of these regimes says and does is radically different. Democracy seems to bestow an 'aura of legitimacy' on modern political life: rules, laws, policies and decisions appear justified and appropriate when they are 'democratic'. But it has not always been like this. The great majority of political thinkers from ancient Greece to the present day have been highly critical of the theory and practice of democracy. A united commitment to democracy is a very recent phenomenon.

Secondly, in the records we have, little is said about democracy from ancient Greece to eighteenth-century Europe and North America. The widespread adherence to democracy as a suitable form for organizing political life is less than a hundred years old. In addition, while many states today may be democratic, the history of their political institutions reveals the fragility and vulnerability of democratic arrangements. Democracy is a remarkably difficult form of government to create and sustain. The history of twentieth-century Western Europe alone makes this clear: fascism and Nazism came very close to obliterating democracies. Democracy has evolved through intensive social struggles and is frequently sacrificed in such struggles. This book is about the idea of democracy, but in exploring the idea we cannot escape too far from aspects of its history in thought and practice.

While 'democracy' came into English in the sixteenth century from the French word *democratie*, its origins are Greek. 'Democracy' is derived from *demokratia*, the root meanings of which are *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule). Democracy means a form of government in which, in contradistinction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule. Democracy entails a state in which there is some form of *political equality* among the people. 'Rule by the people' may appear an unambiguous concept, but appearances are deceptive. The history of the idea of democracy is complex and is marked by conflicting conceptions. There is plenty of scope for disagreement.

Definitional problems emerge with each element of the phrase: 'rule'? – 'rule by'? – 'the people'? To begin with 'the people':

- who are to be considered 'the people'?
- what kind of participation is envisaged for them?
- what conditions are assumed to be conducive to participation? Can the disincentives and incentives, or costs and benefits, of participation be equal?

The idea of 'rule' evokes a plethora of issues:

- how broadly or narrowly is the scope of rule to be construed? Or, what is the appropriate field of democratic activity?
- if 'rule' is to cover 'the political' what is meant by this? Does it cover (a) law and order? (b) relations between states? (c) the economy? (d) the domestic or private sphere?

Does 'rule by' entail the obligation to obey?

- must the rules of 'the people' be obeyed? What is the place of obligation and dissent?
- what mechanisms are created for those who are avowedly and actively 'non-participants'?
- under what circumstances, if any, are democracies entitled to resort to coercion against some of their own people or against those outside the sphere of legitimate rule?

The potential areas for disagreement do not stop here. For, from ancient Greece to contemporary Europe and North America, there have also been fundamentally different opinions expressed about the general conditions or prerequisites of *successful* 'rule by the people'. Do the people have, for instance, to be literate before becoming democrats? Is a certain level of social wealth necessary for the maintenance of a democracy? Can democracies be maintained during times of national emergency or war? These and a host of other issues

have ensured that the meaning of democracy has remained, and probably always will remain, unsettled.

There is much significant history in the attempt to restrict the meaning of 'the people' to certain groups: among others, owners of property, white men, educated men, men, those with particular skills and occupations, adults. There is also a telling story in the various conceptions and debates about what is to count as 'rule' by 'the people'. The range of possible positions includes, as one commentator usefully summarized them:

- 1 That all should govern, in the sense that all should be involved in legislating, in deciding on general policy, in applying laws and in governmental administration.
- 2 That all should be personally involved in crucial decisionmaking, that is to say in deciding general laws and matters of general policy.
- 3 That rulers should be accountable to the ruled; they should, in other words, be obliged to justify their actions to the ruled and be removable by the ruled.
- 4 That rulers should be accountable to the representatives of the ruled.
- 5 That rulers should be chosen by the ruled.
- 6 That rulers should be chosen by the representatives of the ruled.
- 7 That rulers should act in the interests of the ruled. (Lively, 1975, p. 30)

Positions taken derive in part from different ways of justifying democracy. Democracy has been defended on the grounds that it achieves one or more of the following fundamental values or goods: equality, liberty, moral self-development, the common interest, private interests, social utility, the satisfaction of wants, efficient decisions. Within the history of the clash of positions lies the struggle to determine whether democracy will mean some kind of popular power (a form of life in which citizens are engaged in *self-government* and *self-regulation*) or an aid to decision-making (a means to legitimate the decisions of those voted into power – 'representatives' – from time to time). What should be the scope of democracy? To what domains of life should it be applied? Or, alternatively, should democracy be clearly delimited to maintain other important ends?

These are extremely difficult questions. Analysis of the variants of democracy, the chief task of this book, does not resolve them, although it may help to illuminate why certain positions are more

attractive than others. In focusing on the chief variants, this volume will set out some of the political options we face today. But it is as well to say that these options do not present themselves in a simple clear-cut manner. The history of democracy is often confusing, partly because this is still very much an *active* history, and partly because the issues are very *complex* (Williams, 1976, pp. 82-7). It is important to say also that my account of the myriad of issues is helped, as are all such accounts, by a particular position within this active history: a belief that democratic ideas and practices can only in the long run be protected if their hold on our political, social and economic life is *deepened*. The precise nature of this view and the reasons I have for holding it will, I hope, be clarified later, but it does mean that I am inevitably more sympathetic to some democratic theorists than others.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I sets out four classic models of democracy: the classical idea of democracy in ancient Athens; two types of liberal democracy (protective democracy and developmental democracy); and the Marxist conception of direct democracy. Part II explores four contemporary models that have spawned intensive political discussion and conflict: competitive elitist democracy, pluralism, legal democracy and participatory democracy. Part III examines some of the central problems of democratic theory and practice, and addresses the question: what should democracy mean today?

Thus, the concerns of *Models of Democracy* span some of the earliest conceptions of democracy, the eclipse of these ideas for nearly two millennia, the slow re-emergence of democratic notions from the late sixteenth century with the struggle of liberalism against tyranny and the absolutist state, the reformulation of the idea of democracy in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in both the liberal and Marxist traditions, and the clash of contemporary perspectives.

The models of democracy that are the prime focus of attention in the following chapters are set out in figure 1, as are the very general relations between them. The models could reasonably be divided into two broad types: direct or participatory democracy (a system of decision-making about public affairs in which citizens are directly involved) and liberal or representative democracy (a system of rule embracing elected 'officers' who undertake to 'represent' the interests and/or views of citizens within the framework of 'the rule of law'). These broad classificatory labels will occasionally be used for the purpose of grouping together a number of models. However,

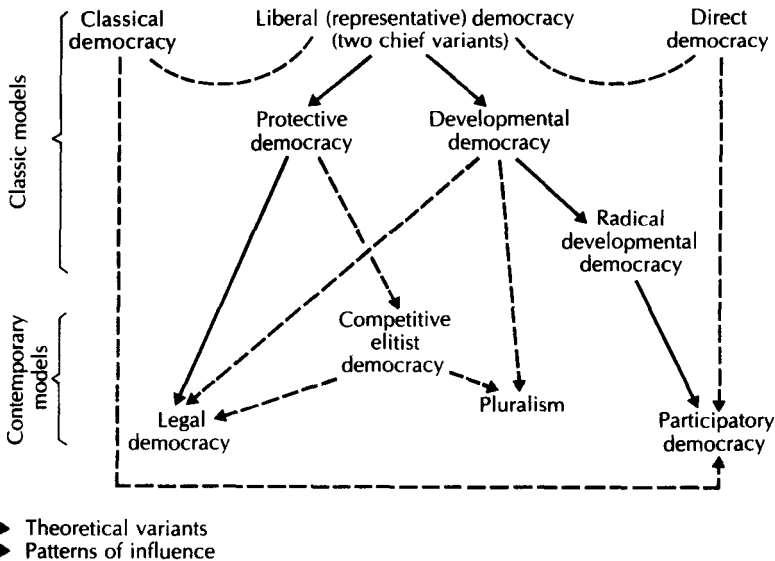


Figure 1. Variants of democracy.

they will be deployed only on a highly restricted basis; for one of the central purposes of this volume is to explicate and assess a far wider range of arguments about democracy than are suggested by these two general notions alone. There is a great deal to be learned, for instance, about the differences between classical democracy, radical developmental democracy, direct democracy and participatory democracy, even though they all might be labelled a type of 'direct democracy'. To focus on them merely as forms of the latter is to risk missing significant divergencies between them – divergencies which justify a more complex classificatory system. A similar point can be made about 'variants' of liberal democracy. Accordingly, the terms listed in figure 1 will be generally used. The context of their use should clarify any ambiguity about the type of democracy under discussion and the similarities and differences between them.¹

¹ There are additional terminological difficulties which should be mentioned. Among the most central political traditions, at least for modern Western political thought, is, of course, liberalism. It is important to bear in mind that the 'modern' Western world was liberal first, and only later, after extensive conflicts, liberal democratic (see chapters 2 and 3). It should be stressed that by no means all liberals, past and present, were democrats, and vice versa. However, the development of liberalism was integral to the development of liberal democracy. Therefore, while

The development of democracy encompasses a long and much-contested history. The field of democratic theory comprises a vast range of considerations and debates. In cutting a path through this history and set of controversies, this volume intends to offer both a map of the key positions and arguments, as well as a series of critical reflections upon them. However, although the book covers a substantial range of issues, it is as well to stress that it is selective. In including four classic models (and some of their variants), I have been guided by the supposition that a fairly extensive coverage of a number of the most central ideas and theories is preferable to a superficial glimpse of all. Therefore, I have not included an analysis of certain political traditions which, in many people's lexicon, have made significant contributions to democratic theory, for example, that of the anarchists. There are other lacunae. I had originally planned to dwell at considerable length on the origin, source and context of each major theoretical trajectory in democratic theory. It was necessary to forgo this in order to keep the length of the volume to a manageable level, although I have tried to provide a brief historical and theoretical introduction to each model. In addition, I should perhaps emphasize that I have selected only those 'models of democracy' which I consider to be of central importance to classic and/or contemporary political debate.

There are three additional matters I should like to stress about the approach taken in this book and about the assumptions that underpin it. First, a word about the notion of 'models'.² As I use the term here it refers to a theoretical construction designed to reveal and explain the chief elements of a democratic form and its underlying structure or relations. An aspect of life or set of institutions can only be properly understood in terms of its relations with other social phenomena. Models are, accordingly, complex 'networks' of concepts and generalizations about aspects of the political, economic and social.

I shall treat liberalism and liberal democratic theory as distinguishable modes of political thought in certain contexts, I shall also, especially in later chapters, use the term 'liberalism' to connote both liberalism and liberal democracy. Again, the context in which these terms are used will, I hope, leave no ambiguity as to their meaning.

² In setting out the idea of 'models' of democracy, I am indebted to the work of C. B. Macpherson (1977). The terms 'protective' and 'developmental' democracy also derive from his work (1966, 1973, 1977). However, I shall develop all these ideas in a substantially different way.

Moreover, models of democracy involve necessarily, as will presently be seen, a shifting balance between descriptive-explanatory and normative statements; that is, between statements about how things are and why they are so, and statements about how things ought or should be. While the classical Greek theorists often intended their work to be both descriptive and prescriptive, offering a unified teaching of ethics, politics and the conditions of human activity, many 'modern' theorists from Hobbes to Schumpeter claimed to be engaged in an essentially 'scientific' exercise which was non-normative, as they saw it. Hobbes fundamentally altered the tradition of political theory by sharply separating morals and politics; for him political analysis was to be a 'civil science' built upon clear principles and closely reasoned deductions. The rise of the social sciences (in particular, the disciplines of 'government' and sociology) in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries added momentum to the view that the study of democracy must be based on the pursuit of science. There has been a marked shift in the weight granted to 'scientific method' in the explication of the meaning of democracy. But 'science' has by no means triumphed everywhere over 'philosophy'; and a purely empirical approach to democratic theory has been extensively criticized. Furthermore, irrespective of the proclaimed method used in political analysis, one can find in all models of democracy a complex intermingling of the descriptive and the normative. As one observer put it:

Some democratic theorists have seen clearly enough that their theories are such a mixture. Some have not, or have even denied it. Those who start from the tacit assumption that whatever is, is right, are apt to deny that they are making any value judgements. Those who start from the tacit assumption that whatever is, is wrong, give great weight to their ethical case (while trying to show that it is practicable). And between these two extremes there is room for a considerable range of emphasis. (Macpherson, 1977, p. 4)

In examining past, present and perhaps future models of democracy, it is important to inquire into their key features, recommendations, assumptions about the nature of the society in which democracy is or might be embedded, their fundamental conceptions of the political capabilities of human beings, and how they justify their views and preferences. And in assessing these models we must attend to the nature and coherence of theoretical claims, to the adequacy of empirical statements and to the practicality of prescriptions.

Secondly, in presenting a diversity of democratic models, I have tried to keep my own 'prejudices' under tight rein, so that an accurate representation of these models is given. But all 'representation', as already pointed out, involves interpretation – interpretation which embodies a particular framework of concepts, beliefs and standards. Such a framework is not a barrier to understanding; on the contrary, it is integral to it (Gadamer, 1975). For the framework we bring to the process of interpretation determines what we 'see', what we notice and register as important. Accordingly, particular interpretations cannot be regarded as *the* correct or final understanding of a phenomenon; the meaning of a phenomenon is always open to future interpretations from new perspectives. Interpretations are, therefore, always open to challenge. In the story that I tell some of my concerns, standards and beliefs – 'prejudices' – do inevitably appear. While I believe that the most defensible and attractive form of democracy is one in which citizens can participate in decision-making in a wide array of spheres (political, economic and social), I do not think any one existing model alone provides a satisfactory elucidation of the conditions, features or rationale of this democratic form. Part of my approach to assessing 'models of democracy' involves considering not only what democracy has been and is, but also what it might be.

Finally, in focusing above all on democratic 'ideas', I do not mean to imply that these ideas have been decisive in shaping political and social life. Rather, in general, I believe that it is only when ideas are connected to propitious historical circumstances and structural forces that they develop sufficient influence to alter the nature and workings of institutional forms. However, this statement itself needs careful qualification; for there are unquestionably circumstances in which the impact of particular political ideas has either lingered with potent effects or has had the most dramatic consequences. The place of ideas in the historical process does not lend itself to easy generalization. But whatever the relation between 'ideas' and 'social conditions', an examination of models of democracy has its own justification, especially in a world like our own where there is pervasive scepticism and cynicism about many aspects of political life. In such a world it is more important than ever to examine the possible ways in which politics – democratic politics – might be transformed to enable citizens more effectively to shape and organize their own lives. It is hard to see how this task is possible

without, among other things, an attempt to come to terms with the development and fate of democratic ideas, practices and institutions.