DEMOCRACY
AND ITS CRITICS

ROBERT A. DAHL

ROBERT A. DAHL

◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆

DEMOCRACY
AND ITS CRITICS

◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆

DEMOCRACY AND ITS CRITICS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆

This book has been in the works for many years. Perhaps, without my quite knowing it, it has been under way since I began teaching an undergraduate course called "Democracy and Its Critics" some years ago. I later gave it separately as a seminar for graduate students. I wish I had dreamed up the title, but I did not. A course with that title had been taught at Yale for some time before I took it over. The late Professor Louis Hartz also had given a course with a somewhat similar title at Harvard. Perhaps it was Hartz's course that B. F. Skinner had in mind when he had Frazier, the chief guardian in his undemocratic republic, Walden Two, remark:

> "I think you had better give the reader the whole story," Frazier said. "After all, you must realize that some fool professor is going to assign your book as outside reading in a course in political science. 'The Critics of Democracy'—something like that. You'd better be explicit." (Skinner 1948, 263)

However that may be, in much of what I have written in the last decade I was deliberately working out problems I intended to discuss in this book. Consequently, wherever I felt that a passage from one of my previously published pieces was pretty much what I wanted to say here, I shamelessly reappropriated it, though rarely without some revision. With only a few exceptions, however, I have not cited my own publications but instead I have listed in the appendix my earlier works from which passages in this text have been adapted.

My obligations are so enormous that I can explicitly mention only a few. It will be obvious to the reader that my greatest debt, and my most long-lasting one, is to the extraordinary thinkers from Socrates onward who have engaged in the everlasting debates about democracy. Without them, this book would not and could not exist.

Not many years after my first encounters with Socrates and his successors, I began to incur another long-standing debt—to my students, both undergraduates

and graduate students, from freshmen to advanced Ph.D. candidates. They have stimulated me to think afresh about old problems, compelled me to deepen and clarify my ideas, and by no means infrequently have provided me with new insights. As I have already suggested, it was in my graduate and undergraduate seminars and lectures that I first began in a systematic way to shape the argument of this book.

My specific obligations to colleagues who have read and commented on some part of one draft or another are extensive. While indicating them here is scant recognition for their contributions, to acknowledge each more fully would burst the limits of an already long book. My thanks, then, to Bruce Ackerman, David Braybrooke, David Cameron, James Fishkin, Jeffrey Isaac, Joseph LaPalombara, Charles E. Lindblom, David Lumsdaine, Jane Mansbridge, Barry Nalebuff, J. Roland Pennock, Susan Rose-Ackerman, James Scott, Rogers Smith, Steven Smith, Alan Ware, and Robert Waste.

Although I offer the usual caveat exempting those I have named from responsibility for the final product, honesty requires me to insist that their comments and criticisms resulted not only in my making significant changes but also, I feel certain, in my writing a better book.

In addition, research by Michael Coppedge and Wolfgang Reinecke contributed greatly to chapters 16 and 17.

Finally, I am happy once again to acknowledge the superb editing by Marian Ash at the Yale University Press.

CONTENTS

✦✦✦✦✦✦✦✦

10. Majority Rule and the Democratic Process   135

11. Is There a Better Alternative?   153

12. Process and Substance   163

13. Process versus Process   176

14. When Is a People Entitled to the Democratic Process?   193

PART FIVE · THE LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF DEMOCRACY

15. The Second Democratic Transformation: From the
    City-State to the Nation-State   213

16. Democracy, Polyarchy, and Participation   225

17. How Polyarchy Developed in Some Countries and
    Not Others   232

18. Why Polyarchy Developed in Some Countries and
    Not Others   244

19. Is Minority Domination Inevitable?   265

20. Pluralism, Polyarchy, and the Common Good   280

21. The Common Good as Process and Substance   299

PART SIX · TOWARD A THIRD TRANSFORMATION

22. Democracy in Tomorrow's World   311

23. Sketches for an Advanced Democratic Country   322

    Notes   343

    Appendix   373

    Bibliography   375

    Index   385

INTRODUCTION
◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆

From ancient times some people have conceived of a political system in which the members regard one another as political equals, are collectively sovereign, and possess all the capacities, resources, and institutions they need in order to govern themselves. This idea, and practices embodying it, appeared in the first half of the fifth century B.C. among the Greeks, who though few in number and occupying but a tiny fragment of the world's surface exerted an exceptional influence in world history. It was the Greeks, and most conspicuously the Athenians, who brought about what I want to call the first democratic transformation: from the idea and practice of rule by the few to the idea and practice of rule by the many. To the Greeks the only thinkable site of democracy was, of course, the city-state.

That extraordinary conception of rule by the many all but vanished for long periods of time; and only a minority of the world's people have ever sought and successfully managed to adapt political reality in some significant measure to its demanding requirements. Yet that early vision has never wholly lost its ability to charm the political imagination and foster hopes that the vision of an ideal but nonetheless attainable polity might be more fully realized in actual experience.

At about the same time that the idea of rule by the many was transforming political life in Athens and other Greek city-states, it also took root in the city-state of Rome. It is of the utmost relevance to our understanding of democracy that the pattern of the political institutions of the Roman Republic continued to reflect the original mold of the small city-state long after Romans had burst through the bounds of their city to begin their conquest of the Italian peninsula and eventually much of Europe and the Mediterranean. A thousand years after the republican government was superseded by Caesar and Augustus, popular government reappeared among the city-states of medieval and Renaissance Italy.

But the city-state was made obsolete by the nation-state, and in a second demo-

1

cratic transformation the idea of democracy was transferred from the city-state to the much larger scale of the nation-state. This transformation led to a radically new set of political institutions. It is this new complex of institutions that taken together we commonly refer to as "democracy."

Is a third transformation now within reach? Even if it is, ought we to make an effort to achieve it? These questions guide the discussion in this book. To answer them we need to understand not only why democracy is desirable but also what its limits and its possibilities are. If we overestimate the limits we shall fail to try, and if we underestimate them we shall probably try—and fail. One could easily fish out innumerable historical examples of both.

Today, the idea of democracy is universally popular. Most regimes stake out some sort of claim to the title of "democracy"; and those that do not often insist that their particular instance of nondemocratic rule is a necessary stage along the road to ultimate "democracy." In our times, even dictators appear to believe that an indispensable ingredient for their legitimacy is a dash or two of the language of democracy.

It may seem perverse that this historically unprecedented global expansion in the acceptability of democratic ideas might not be altogether welcome to an advocate of democracy. Yet a term that means anything means nothing. And so it has become with "democracy," which nowadays is not so much a term of restricted and specific meaning as a vague endorsement of a popular idea.

An important cause of the confusion over what democracy means in our present world is that it has developed over several thousand years and stems from a variety of sources. What we understand by democracy is not what an Athenian in the time of Pericles would have understood by it. Greek, Roman, medieval, and Renaissance notions intermingle with those of later centuries to produce a jumble of theory and practices that are often deeply inconsistent.

What is more, a close look at democratic ideas and practices is bound to reveal a considerable number of problems for which no definitive solution seems to exist. The very notion of democracy has always provided a field day for critics. Critics are roughly of three kinds: those fundamentally opposed to democracy because, like Plato, they believe that while it may be possible it is inherently undesirable; those fundamentally opposed to democracy because, like Robert Michels, they believe that, while it might be desirable if it were possible, in actuality it is inherently impossible; and those sympathetic to democracy and wishing to maintain it but nonetheless critical of it in some important regard. The first two might be called adversarial critics, the third sympathetic critics.

My aim in this book is to set out an interpretation of democratic theory and practice, including the limits and possibilities of democracy, that is relevant to the kind of world in which we live or are likely to live in the foreseeable future. But I believe that no interpretation of this kind can be satisfactory unless it deals fairly with the major problems posed by both the adversarial and sympathetic critics of democracy.

◆

What the critics often focus on are problems that advocates of democracy tend to neglect, or worse, to conceal. What might loosely be called democratic theory—a term about which I shall have something more to say in a moment—depends on assumptions and premises that uncritical advocates have shied away from exploring, or in some cases even openly acknowledging. These half-hidden premises, unexplored assumptions, and unacknowledged antecedents form a vaguely perceived shadow theory that forever dogs the footsteps of explicit, public theories of democracy.

By way of illustration, and to anticipate the argument ahead of us, let me mention a few of the key problems concealed in the explicit theories that make up part of the shadow theory of democracy. Many of these problems were present at the creation. Take, for example, the elementary idea of "rule by the people." To designate their new conception of political life and the practices it gave rise to in many city-states, toward the middle of the fifth century B.C. Greeks began to use the word *demokratia*. Although the root meaning of that term is simple enough, even self-evident—*demos*, people, and *kratia*, rule or authority, thus "rule by the people"—the very roots themselves raise urgent questions: who ought to comprise "the people" and what does it mean for them "to rule"?

What properly constitutes "the people" is doubly ambiguous and has frequently been a source of controversy. The first ambiguity is in the notion of "a people": what constitutes "a people" for purposes of democratic government? The Greeks took it for granted that the Athenians, the Corinthians, the Spartans, and the residents of the other numerous Greek city-states each constituted "a people" that was entitled to its own political autonomy. By contrast, although the ancient Greeks saw themselves—the Hellenes—as a distinct people with their own language and history, they did not regard themselves as "a people" in the political sense of a group of persons who, rightly considered, should govern themselves in a single democratic unit. Greek democracy was not, in fact, *Greek* democracy; it was Athenian, or Corinthian, or whatever. Although the city-state mentality may seem quaintly parochial today, the same issue is still with us. Why should Americans constitute "a people" and their neighbors the Canadians and the Mexicans separate peoples? Why should there be a political boundary between, say, Norway and Sweden, or Belgium and Holland, or French-speaking Swiss and French-speaking French? Or put the question another way: are people in local communities within a nation-state entitled to a measure of self-government? If so, what persons, on what matters? No doubt questions like these transcend "democratic theory." But that is precisely my point. Advocates of democracy—including political philosophers—characteristically presuppose that "a people" already exists. Its existence is assumed as a fact, a creation of history. Yet the facticity of the fact is questionable. It is often questioned—as it was in the United States in 1861, when the issue was settled not by consent or consensus but by violence.

The assumption that "a people" exists, and the further presuppositions of that assumption, thus become a part of the shadow theory of democracy.

The second ambiguity is nested in the first. Within "a people" only a limited subset of persons is entitled to participate in governing. These constitute *the* people in another sense. More properly, they are the citizens or citizen body, or as I shall often say here, the *demos*. Who ought to be a member of the demos? This question has always been troublesome to advocates of democracy. Democratic advocates, including as we shall see in chapter 9 many of its most celebrated theorists like John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, have often proposed an explicit public theory of the demos that is remarkably discordant with their half-hidden, or sometimes wholly concealed, assumptions, which lurk unacknowledged in the shadow theory, from where, however, they are plucked by the external critics of democracy to be displayed as witnesses to the alleged self-contradictions in the democratic idea.

Again, historical experience lends concreteness to the abstract question of the demos. As we shall see in the next chapter, even at the height of Athenian democracy the demos never included more than a small minority of the adult population of Athens.[1] Although Athenian democracy may have been extreme in its exclusivity, it was in no sense unique. From classical Greece to modern times some persons have invariably been excluded as unqualified, and until this century, when women gained the suffrage, the number of persons excluded has exceeded—sometimes as in Athens by a wide margin—the number included. Such was the case in the first modern "democracy," the United States, which excluded not only women and, of course, children, but most blacks and native Americans as well.

While the exclusions are invariably said to be justified on the ground that the demos includes everyone *qualified* to participate in ruling, the hidden assumption dispatched to the shadow theory of democracy is that only some people are competent to rule. But the adversarial critics of democracy gleefully expose this hidden assumption and convert it into an explicit argument in the antidemocratic theory of guardianship. The idea of guardianship, which is probably the most beguiling vision ever created by the adversaries of democracy, not only was espoused by Plato in democratic Athens but has appeared throughout the world in a variety of disparate forms, of which Confucianism and Leninism, different as they are, have influenced by far the greatest number of people. The adversarial critics compel us to scrutinize in the full light of day the assumptions about political competence hidden in the shadow theory.

Another assumption that usually reposes unnoticed in the shadow theory (except when critics of democracy, both adversarial and sympathetic, force it into the open) is the question of scale. Just as the Greeks took for granted that the proper scale of democracy, or for that matter any decent political system, was necessarily extremely small—a few tens of thousands of people—so since the late eighteenth century advocates of democracy have generally assumed that the natural locus of democracy is the nation-state or, more generally, the country. In adopting this assumption, what often goes unacknowledged is how profoundly the historic shift

in scale, from city-state to nation-state, has transformed the limits and possibilities of democracy. The transformation is so profound that if a fifth-century Athenian citizen were suddenly to appear in our midst he (being a citizen of Athens, it would necessarily be he, not she) would probably find what we call democracy unrecognizable, unattractive, and undemocratic. To an Athenian of Pericles' day, what we regard as democracy would probably not look like democracy at all, mainly because of the consequences for political life and political institutions of the shift in scale from the small, more intimate, and more participatory city-state to the gigantic, more impersonal, and more indirect governments of today.

One consequence of the change in the scale of democracy is to magnify the already significant utopianism of the democratic ideal. The public theory of democracy tends to assume that today's large-scale democracy can retain all the advantages of large scale and still possess the virtues and possibilities of small-scale democracy. And the public theory tends to neglect the limits of both. Thus the problem of scale is mainly relegated to the shadow theory.

A final illustration. Considered as an actually existing or real-world entity, democracy has been variously conceived of as a distinctive set of political institutions and practices, a particular body of rights, a social and economic order, a system that ensures certain desirable results, or a unique process of making collective and binding decisions. The central conception I adopt in this book is the last. As we shall see, this way of thinking about democracy—as the *democratic process*—by no means excludes the others and in fact has strong implications for the others. Yet any conception of democracy as a process will and I believe should cause concern. Critics, not only the adversaries but those who are sympathetic to "rule by the people," contend that a process of collective decision-making, no matter how "democratic," cannot be justified unless it produces—or at least tends to produce—desirable results. These critics thus cast the familiar problem of process versus substance in the setting of democratic ideas and practices. Although the problem itself has become fairly prominent in discussions of democratic theory, proposed solutions to it (and nonsolutions) usually depend on assumptions in the shadow theory.

The issues I have mentioned—we shall encounter others as we proceed—are I hope sufficient to illustrate my point. To develop a satisfactory theory of democracy will require us to excavate the assumptions in the shadow theory, subject them to critical examination, and try to recast the theory of democracy into a reasonably coherent whole. In identifying and exploring the assumptions on which to build a coherent democratic theory, the arguments of critics of democracy, both adversarial and sympathetic, are invaluable.

◆

The two millennia since the idea and institutions of democracy were explicitly developed by the Greeks have added enormously to what is relevant to democratic theory and practice. Yet the use of the term "democratic theory" to designate a particular field of inquiry, analysis, empirical description, and theorizing is fairly

recent, and what a "democratic theory" might reasonably include remains unclear.

At the outset we confront the fact that in both ordinary and philosophical language democracy may properly be used to refer both to an ideal and to actual regimes that fall considerably short of the ideal. The dual meaning is often confusing. In addition, if democracy is both an ideal and an attainable actuality, how are we to judge when an actual regime is sufficiently proximate to the ideal that we can properly regard it as a democracy? The problem is not merely a trivial one of word usage, though it is also that. It is a problem of deciding on a reasonable threshold. In short, how can we reasonably judge that a regime, system, or process is democratic, as against, say, oligarchic, aristocratic, meritocratic, or whatever? Evidently we need indicators that can be reasonably applied to the world of actual political systems. In building and using indicators of democracy we necessarily move from the language and orientation of justification and evaluation—in the jargon of contemporary political science, normative theory—toward more empirical discourse. Can both the normative and the empirical aspects of democracy be combined in a single theoretical perspective? As this book will show, I believe they can, but the task is a wide-ranging one.

I like to think of democratic theory as if it were like a very large three-dimensional web. Much too large to take in at a single glance, the web is constructed of interconnected strands of differing elasticities. While a few parts of the web are composed of rigidly connected strands (that is, strictly deductive arguments), other parts are more loosely held together, and some connections are very tenuous indeed. Like one well-known model of the universe, the web appears to be finite but unbounded. As a result, when you make your way along a strand of argument, you do not come to a definite edge that marks a distinct and conclusive limit to the unbounded universe of democratic theory. Follow out an argument to what you think might be the end, and you find yourself pursuing yet another strand. And so on, indefinitely I fear.

Table 1 is a crude mapping of some of the important aspects of democratic theory. As with a finite but unbounded web, one could well start anywhere, but why not begin at the northwest corner? Here the argument is more explicitly philosophical, as it would be, for example, in efforts to set out the grounds on which a belief in democracy would be justified. The argument here is also less critical, more sympathetic with democratic values. If we were now to proceed directly eastward, we would find the argument taking on a more and more empirical tone. For example, after pausing at (3) to examine the criteria that distinguish a fully democratic process from other processes for making decisions, we might move back to (2) in order to consider the characteristics of an association for which the democratic process would be a desirable, even the most desirable, form of government. Presumably states would qualify. Would economic enterprises? Universities? And what about the family? Or the military? Or government bureaucracies? If democracy is not appropriate for some of these, why not, and what does their exemption imply about the limits of the democratic idea?

Venturing still further eastward to (4) we might begin to explore the institutions

Table 1. Some Aspects of a Theory about the Democratic Process (Domain: Associations that satisfy the requirements of (2) below)

The argument is more explicitly philosophical: assertions as to values, epistemology, "human nature," etc. ————→ The argument is more explicitly empirical

Less critical

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Philosophical grounds (justifications) for the assumptions of (2)	Characteristics of an association sufficient to require the democratic process (3)	Criteria specifying a fully democratic process	Institutions required in order to satisfy (3) at the levels historically achieved by certain concrete associations 4.1. Very small demos 4.2. Small demos 4.3. Large demos 4.31. . . . . 4.321. . . . . 4.32. Variations in the institutions of polyarchy	Conditions that facilitate[a] the development and persistence of (4) 5.1. . . . . 5.2. . . . . 5.3. Conditions that facilitate the institutions of polyarchy 5.31. Effects of variations in conditions

More critical

(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Other valid grounds and criteria, not (1) and (2)	Critique and evaluation 7.1. The extent to which the institutions of (4) fail to meet the ideal criteria of (3)—e.g., incomplete democratization 7.2. Defects by other criteria (6)	Institutions that would be required to meet deficiencies specified under (7): e.g., for further democratization of polyarchy	Conditions that would facilitate (8)

[a]Deliberately ambiguous: may mean necessary to, sufficient for, or increase (significantly) probability of . . . .

that the democratic process would require in order to operate. An assembly of citizens? A representative legislature? Evidently the institutions required would vary depending on circumstances, particularly the scale of the society. Still further eastward on our journey, at (5) we could investigate the conditions that would facilitate the development, and the continuing existence, of the institutions that are necessary to a democratic order.

You may have noticed that by now we seem to have moved into a part of democratic theory where we intend our inquiry to be almost entirely empirical, and it may look like a long distance back to the philosophical northwest corner where we started. Yet none of the terrain we have explored lies outside the bounds of democratic theory.

To complicate matters further, at this point we might want to explore the historical origins of democratic institutions and of the conditions that make these institutions possible. Here our flat, two-dimensional map might be better represented as three-dimensional, as a cube, perhaps, with time—history—as the third dimension. Notice, though, that insofar as historical experience is necessary to an explanation, we still remain within the domain of democratic theory—empirical theory, if you like, but surely a part of the finite but unbounded web of democratic theory.

Suppose we move in another direction. Advocates of democracy sometimes appear to believe that the values of democracy constitute the complete universe of value: if you could have a perfect democracy, they imply, then you would have a perfect political order, maybe even a perfect society. But this is surely too restricted a vision. Democracy is only a part, though an important part, of the universe of values, goods, or desirable ends. By proceeding toward (6) in the southwest corner we could begin to explore some of these other values—efficiency or distributive justice, for example. You might suppose our exploration has now moved us right off the map of democratic theory; yet these other goods or values could give us grounds for criticizing even a perfect democracy, if it failed to achieve these substantive ends. We are, therefore, still on the map, still moving along the boundless web of democratic theory.

Perhaps I can now leave further explorations of the map to the reader. Our brief tour will have sufficiently shown, I think, that democratic theory is not only a large enterprise—normative, empirical, philosophical, sympathetic, critical, historical, utopianistic, all at once—but complexly interconnected. The complex interconnections mean that we cannot construct a satisfactory democratic theory by starting off from an impregnable base and marching straight down the road to our conclusions. Although strictly deductive arguments have a place in democratic theory, their place is necessarily a small one, and they are embedded in crucial assumptions with which strictly deductive argument does not concern itself and probably cannot handle successfully. Consequently, I will not often use a favorite word of deductive theory—"rational"—nor ever indulge myself in its favorite assumption of perfect rationality. However, I shall often say that it is "reasonable"

to believe so and so, and I try to show why it is reasonable. Whether it is so, the reader will have to judge.

As I explore one part of the complex, interconnected web of democratic theory in this book, I shall have to ignore the other parts momentarily, though I may nod in their direction to acknowledge that they await our exploration in due time. In the path I have chosen, however, there is a certain logic, or at least, if I may say so, a reasonableness. While what I set out here is in no sense a strictly deductive theory, the argument is cumulative, and the later chapters depend heavily on the argument of the earlier chapters.