Political Agency and Transformation

The
Promise
of
Democracy

Fred Dallmayr

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**To all young people willing and eager
to practice democracy**

Everything depends on establishing this [civic] love in a republic.

—Montesquieu

Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.

—John Dewey

To understand and judge a society, one has to penetrate its basic structure to the human bond upon which it is built.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being that is constituted by bitter experience . . . but is a recurrent possibility as long as the meaning of the political survives.

—Sheldon Wolin

Preface

The modern age is often described as an era of science and indus-try—and also of democracy. Since the time of the European Enlighten-ment, societies have been rocked by powerful upheavals, and most prominently by democratic or semi-democratic revolutions. The French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville saw these upheavals as momentous signposts and democracy as a near-providential destiny. Ideologies and ideological movements have sprung up in support of this destiny. During the twentieth century, great wars have been fought to make the world "safe for democracy"; and the end is not in sight. In tandem with this massive upsurge, however, grave doubts have arisen regarding its trajectory. In the view of some, the historical trajectory has come to a halt; for others; democracy finds itself now in deep crisis.

A leading American political philosopher has written a book recently raising the question "Is democracy possible here?" (and providing only a very ambivalent answer). In turn, political theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain has published a stirring text titled *Democracy on Trial*. Focusing mainly on American democracy, Elshtain pinpoints as a central concern the "danger of losing democratic civil society" under the onslaught of rampant fragmentation and self-aggrandizement. Although a properly construed democratic agency, she writes, is "not boundless subjectivist or self-seeking individualism," the worry is that "it has, over time, become so." Once this happens, "the blessings of democratic life that Tocqueville so brilliantly displayed—especially the spirit of equality—give way" and in their place "other more fearful and self-enclosed, more suspicious and cynical habits and dispositions rise to the fore."[1]

Worries of this kind are not fanciful, but are grounded in real-life experience as well as in broader historical considerations. What is at stake is not so much or not only (as is often claimed) the relation between individual liberty and security, but that between liberalism and democracy itself. Apart from its other epithets, modernity is also called the time of the unfolding of human freedom; and as a modern

regime, democracy cannot possibly deny the claims of freedom. But here history enters the scene. Modern liberalism arose in the eighteenth century, well before the rise of democracy; hence, there is a sibling rivalry with the elder frequently trying to trump or erase the other. As it happens, early liberalism typically located individual liberty in a presocial and prepolitical "state of nature," a stratagem that inevitably places political democracy in a subordinate or derivative position. This claim of a presocial or prepolitical status is the source of the rampant "individualism" about which Elshtain complains. In our time, under the aegis of neo-liberalism and *laissez-faire* market ideologies, this hankering for a presocial (Hobbesian) "state of nature" has reached its zenith, with the result of undercutting democracy as a shared political regime. Although hard to believe in a presumably "civil" or civilized period, we now have bands of mercenaries and well-paid "hired guns" providing for "public security and peace" without any public accountability. As someone has observed (and only half in jest): democracy is being "outsourced," or has already been outsourced, to private contractors.

Tired of cumbersome bureaucracies, some well-meaning individualists—including some "postmodern" intellectuals—may find appealing the thought of exiting society and "return to nature." On closer inspection, however, they may want to revise their inclination. Returning to nature here does not mean escaping to an idyllic island. In the vocabulary of Thomas Hobbes—to which modern Western thought remains deeply indebted—the so-called "state of nature" is also a state of incessant warfare, of relentless killing or being killed. In the opinion of the political philosopher mentioned above, we are getting close or have already reached that condition. "American politics," he writes, "is in an appalling state. . . . We are no longer partners in self-government; our politics are rather a form of war."[2] Well-meaning people, especially devoted democrats, should ponder this fact. For, in unregulated warfare—and departing somewhat from the Hobbesian scenario—killing does not happen in an egalitarian fashion. Typically, killing is being done by the side with superior weapons, superior manpower, and superior financial resources. Thus, in a modern state of nature, warfare (civil or uncivil) tends to pit the powerful against the powerless, the rich against the poor, the ruthless against the cautious. What is equally distributed in this condition—which Hobbes correctly described as "nasty, solitary, and brutish"—is only the pervasive sense of fear or what today we prefer to all "terror." Those enamored with the "downsizing" of politics and the project of "privatizing" everything in sight should note well the end point

of their project: the unleashed condition of mayhem and fear, with everyone trying to terrorize everyone else.

Have things gone too far already? Maybe so. But this only means that particularly dedicated efforts have to be made to change course and to champion resolutely a "return to the political": in the sense of a return to a well-ordered regime or *polis* committed to justice and ethical well-being. In our time, this has to be a return to democracy—or rather the anticipation of a possible, although not presently actual, democratic regime. As another political theorist has recently remarked: "We could take the perfect storm threatening democracy as an occasion—an instigation—to reinvent boat(s) more worthy of journeys to the democratic promise."[3] It is in this spirit that this volume takes the present dismal condition as an "instigation" to pursue another possibility or potentiality: the largely untapped "promise of democracy" or what Jacques Derrida has called "democracy to come." To be able to move in this direction, however, a radical change or transformation (perhaps a *Kehre*) has to happen: a change from rampant self-interest and fragmentation in the direction of a more generous and other-directed disposition, a disposition sensitive to the needs of others and of society as a whole (as well as societies around the world). This disposition has traditionally been called attentiveness to the "common good" where everyone can participate in the "goodness" (not the fear or mayhem) of a shared public life.

In charting a course in this direction, this book is inspired by a number of great philosophers or thinkers both in the past and the present. A distant, although pervasive, influence is Aristotle's conception of politics as a sustained *praxis*, as an ethical engagement ideally approximating friendship. In modern times, a major instigation or provocation for me has been Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*. As will be remembered, Montesquieu portrayed democracy not as a machine or a Hobbesian artifact but rather as a political regime sustained by a distinct spirit or ethical disposition: the "love of democracy," which is a "love of equality"—where the latter does not mean a quantitative measure but an equality of care and mutual esteem. As one may also recall, Montesquieu defined the central disposition in despotism as "fear"—which speaks volumes about contemporary societies dominated by nothing but fear of terror. Montesquieu's lead was followed, with changed accents, in Hegel's notion of a public *ethos* or *Sittlichkeit* and in de Tocqueville's emphasis on a vibrant civil or associational life. Among later or more recent perspectives, this volume pays particular tribute to American pragmatism, and especially to a philosopher too widely neglected by contemporary political theorists: John Dewey.

Among the great merits of Dewey's work was his emphasis on the needed ethical fiber of democracy, as well as his insistence on keeping thinking and *praxis* closely together, in lieu of the fashionable retreat of philosophy into esoteric abstractions. Another great merit—particularly salient for democratic theory—was Dewey's "holistic" reformulation of political agency in such a way that, in the course of action, both agent and world are simultaneously shaped or transformed.

In my view, it was a great misfortune (approximating an unmitigated disaster) that, in the middle of the twentieth century, Deweyan pragmatism was cavalierly brushed aside in favor of philosophical doctrines massively imported from Europe: especially logical positivism (from Vienna) and analytical philosophy (from England). Basically, this shift signaled a return to some of the more dubious features of modern Western thought: especially Cartesian rationalism with its bifurcations of mind and body, subject and object, thought and practice. From a Deweyan perspective, the development meant the renewed upsurge of (what he called) the "spectator theory of knowledge," manifest in the primacy of logic and epistemology, and the almost complete erasure of ethics and practical politics from sustained philosophical attention.[4] The primacy exacted a cost. To a considerable extent, it accounts for the fact that some of the most egregious political derailments in recent history were rarely noticed in academia and often met only with "deafening silence" on the part of professional philosophers.

The sidelining of pragmatism also had effects in a field presumably preoccupied with politics: political philosophy and political theory. Apart from some efforts to embrace scientific epistemology, political thought tended to become backward-looking and historical or else esoteric, thus shying away from concern with ongoing political affairs—including the deepening malaise of democracy. Favorite preoccupations of political theorists became ancient writers, early liberalism and the "founding fathers"—but not (or rarely) the cultivation of civic dispositions needed in democracy. There were exceptions, to be sure. But even among theorists specifically concerned with contemporary issues, there was a strong tendency to favor an individualistic brand of liberalism, that is, to celebrate private inwardness and disconnected subjectivism—which is another way of leaving politics behind.

This book pays tribute to pragmatism, but not in a doctrinaire or historicist way. As I believe, and as Dewey would surely have agreed, the only way to honor his work is to move beyond it with the changing times. Another figure invoked in the text is a thinker who is rarely suspected of pragmatist affinities: the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Even more radically than Dewey, Heidegger has been sidelined

or expunged by the political theory "establishment." In fact, there is hardly a recent thinker who has been more thoroughly vilified and even demonized by supposedly "liberal" and progressive intellectuals; frequently this is done with the fervent closed-mindedness that the same intellectuals would severely castigate in the case of religious "fundamentalists." (There is also, I am afraid, a liberal fundamentalism.) The condemnation often is based on a deliberate "shunning" or nonreading of Heidegger's work—or else a selective reading of a few (admittedly unfortunate) writings of the period between 1933 and 1935. In this book, I invoke a number of other writings, texts that—in a pragmatic manner—elaborate on the basic meaning of *praxis*, especially the *praxis* of "letting be." At another point I refer to his innovative construal of "humanism" in the sense of connectedness.

As I point out in the introduction, the book moves from Dewey and Heidegger to a number of other political thinkers or philosophers who have been broadly influenced by Heidegger or else by some other recent Continental-European authors; these thinkers include Hannah Arendt, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Derrida. In every instance, an effort is made to explore their closeness to, or distance from, central pragmatic teachings and the contributions their writings can make to the promotion of a viable democracy. From this examination of individual authors the book turns to a discussion of broader themes: first, the idea of a nondomineering "humanism" compatible with democratic self-rule; and next, the relation of democracy to various forms of contemporary religious resurgence, with special attention to Islam. The book concludes with a critical review of the dominant Western model of democracy—liberal proceduralism or minimalism—enlisting for this critique voices from East and West, but especially the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi regarding the need for an ethical and self-limiting *swaraj* (self-rule).

By emphasizing the ethical dimension of democracy I run several risks, especially the risk for either outright rejection or else gross misunderstanding. It has become customary among liberal political theorists—and also some "postmodern" thinkers—to denounce notions like the "good life" or the "common good" as incompatible with individual freedom. Particularly in our time of multiculturalism, it is claimed, the idea of a common good stifles the unfolding of cultural, ethnic, or religious differences. The claim is a complete *non-sequitur*. On the contrary: it is precisely in the context of "deep" pluralism that shared ethical or civil bonds are needed that allow differences to "be" and to unfold into the fullness of their potential. As political theorist William Connolly has rightly remarked, a multicultural or culturally "plural"

democracy requires the practice of "receptive generosity"—clearly an ethical virtue—on the part of all participants.[5] But such generosity does not just occur without further ado (as an *a priori* endowment); rather, it needs precisely to be "practiced," that is, nurtured and cultivated over time. And this can only happen in a conducive civil context—the context of an ethical and plural democracy.

This brings into view the importance of education in any present and future democracy. Among political philosophers, no one has highlighted this linkage of democracy and education more eloquently than Dewey—who has not had many successors. The notion of an education in and for democracy is sometimes accused of fostering brainwashing or mind control; but apart from presupposing an a-social mind, the charge only holds for miseducation. As Dewey has shown, democracy does not deal with "finished" agents (endowed by nature with everything needful), but with human beings constantly in the process of formation, of the difficult sorting out of good and ill potentialities. Basically, democracy means that people rule themselves; and if they cannot do this, they will be ruled by others (elites or tyrants). But people are not "by nature" able to rule themselves; hence, self-rule—like any competence—has to be learned and practiced, as part of educational formation. Far from involving brainwashing, educational formation hence aims at something good: the goodness of not wishing to dominate others but to live with others exercising "receptive generosity" in democratic fashion. Seen from this angle, "goodness" does not denote induction into some doctrine, but the willingness and ability to "over-rule" oneself, when needed, in favor of the well-being of others. To this extent, democracy is a form of *orthopraxis* rather than orthodoxy.

Generally speaking, the study presented here aims to underscore the importance of ethical practice and educational formation in democracy—as long as the latter's "promise" is kept alive. Additionally, emphasis is placed on the need to cultivate a proper mode of democratic agency: one that shuns mastery and hyperactivism, as well as passive withdrawal, and thus allows for transformative horizons to emerge. The book was written and is published at an auspicious time when some dark clouds are lifting or at least receding. During the past decade it has appeared to me that the world was drifting steadily into the morass of unlimited violence, blood-lust, and brutality; even in supposedly civilized countries there was an upsurge of unsuspected levels of savagery. But now at last, some rays of hope seem to be breaking into the darkness. Unexpectedly, young hearts and minds are opening themselves again to the call for a good and decent way of life—and hence to the "promise" of democracy.

The usual acknowledgments are in order. As in the past, my thinking has been greatly stimulated and enriched by a number of colleagues and friends. Among them I should mention here, above all, Charles Taylor, William Connolly, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Bhikhu Parekh, Hwa Yol Jung, Stephen White, and Richard Falk. Many other individuals, of course, have also participated in my ongoing "formation" (*Bildung*). I owe a special thanks again to Cheryl Reed who, with her usual competence and efficiency, has typed and helped correct several versions of the book. My deepest debt of gratitude goes, as always, to my family—my wife Ilse (with whom I recently celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary) and our children Dominique and Philip for being the ever-nurturing soil of my thinking and living.

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Introduction

The Promise of Democracy

To present democracy as a "promise" means that it is not presently an actuality or concrete reality. But at the same time, to call it a "promise" does not stamp it a mere whim or empty pipe dream. For, a genuine promise is somehow anchored or latently present in reality: as a possibility or potentiality whose realization may require a long process of maturation and cultivation. Thus, a child may have the promise of becoming a great artist or scientist—but this is not going to happen by itself or without further ado; in fact, it usually requires sustained practice and training. For too long, democracy has been treated either as a readily achieved fact, or else as a hopeless illusion (hopeless because of human viciousness). Little investigation is required to see that presently existing democracies are in large measure travesties, given the enormous abuses and glaring inequalities flourishing in them. As it appears, many so-called liberal democracies hover just an inch over a war-like "state of nature," with slim procedural formalities serving as fig leaves to cover prevailing modes of domination. But it also seems to be a fact of life that millions of people around the world eagerly cling to democracy as a hope or promise to rescue them from their miseries.

To say that millions of people in the world hope for democracy may seem a bold and not fully persuasive claim. As cynics are prone to retort: what people are eagerly striving for are food, shelter, and a decent living—not democracy. However, the retort easily can be rebutted. People striving for food, shelter, and decent living also necessarily strive for a society in which the production and distribution of goods is equitably managed from the people's angle—and this happens (or is meant to happen) precisely in a democracy. Another objection is more difficult to answer because it relies on theological and metaphysical

arguments. When we speak of promise in an elevated sense, the objection goes, we usually mean something like the "promised land," the "coming kingdom," the "reign of the Mahdi," or the like—and none of these phrases is a synonym for democracy. In fact, according to some "fundamentalist" theologians, the rule of God and the rule of the people are radically incompatible, such that the latter undermines the former. I cannot fully delve into this issue here (some of it has to be left to the rest of the study)—except to point out: If it is true, as many religions hold, that the "image" of God is implanted in the human heart, then it would seem to follow that, rather than being a pointless appendix, that image is meant to become steadily more manifest in history and approximate society to a promised democracy (which is not at all the opposite of God's kingdom).

Allowing myself to be inspired at least in part by this trajectory, I turn now to several more immediate concerns having to do with democracy as a political regime. First, I discuss the possibility of seeing democracy as an ethical or properly humane form of political life. Next, I turn to detractors of this view, especially to procedural minimalists and rational choice theorists. Finally, I reflect on the promise of democracy in the context of current debates regarding modernity versus postmodernity and against the backdrop of the relentless process of globalization.

Democracy as an Ethical Community

Throughout long stretches of human history, democracy has had a bad press. Philosophers as well as theologians assigned the common people—presumably in charge of democracy—to the low end of a totem pole whose upper reaches were reserved for kings, priests, and sages. Predicated on a fixed or "essentialist" metaphysics, the people were assumed to be base, fickle, and incapable of self-rule—and hence needed to be governed by a qualified elite in the same manner as passion needs to be governed by reason and desire by duty and moral principles. To be sure, different societies exhibited variations of this scheme and different historical contexts allowed for modifications. The most illustrious modification—a kind of fluke of Western history—was the Greek and especially the Athenian *polis*. However, as we know, this "cradle" of Western democracy did not produce a sturdy and long-lasting offspring. Quite apart from being severely limited in its membership, the *polis* was in a way sandwiched between very undemocratic alternatives: the earlier period of tyrants or des-