



DEMOCRACY

SECOND EDITION

Anthony Arblaster

Concepts in Social Thought

Democracy

Second Edition

Anthony Arblaster

University of Minnesota Press

Minneapolis



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First published in this second edition by Open University Press, 1994

Published simultaneously in the United States, 1994
by the University of Minnesota Press
2037 University Avenue Southeast, Minneapolis, MN 55455-3092

Printed in Great Britain

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Arblaster, Anthony.

Democracy/Anthony Arblaster. – 2nd ed.

p. cm. – (Concepts in social thought)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8166-2600-6 (hc). ISBN 0-8166-2601-4 (pb)

1. Democracy. I. Title. II. Series.

JC423.A685 1994

321.8–dc20

94-9589

CIP

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Democracy

Second Edition

Concepts in Social Thought

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Lurking here and there in the backwoods of the social studies, or 'sciences', there are no doubt still a few old-fashioned positivists who believe that you can 'keep politics out of politics'; who suppose, in other words, that you can, or should try to, write a book about democracy as 'objectively' as one might write about the mating habits of goldfish or the geology of the moon. It is more difficult than the positivists suppose to be 'objective' even about goldfish or geology. What possibility, then, is there of writing with cold detachment about something which matters to us all as much as democracy? And even if there were, would it really be desirable? Neutrality in such matters is all too likely to be a recipe for dullness.

It seemed better to run the risk of annoying readers rather than boring them. I have therefore not tried to avoid being controversial in this book, which is better regarded as one more contribution to an ongoing debate than as an attempt at anything more magisterial. I hope, however, that it will prove useful to students (in the widest sense of that word) of political ideas and ideologies. If it stimulates a little discussion among them it will, I think, have served its purpose.

In preparing and writing this book I have, as usual, made extensive use of the resources of Sheffield University Library, for which I am most grateful. My friend and colleague Geraint Williams kindly read the chapter on Greek democracy and made several useful suggestions and necessary corrections. I am grateful to Frank Parkin, editor of this series of books, for his encouragement and support. Above all I must thank my wife Lynda for help in preparing the manuscript for publication, and for undertaking a

quite disproportionate amount of child care and household chores while I was closeted with my typewriter.

Anthony Arblaster
Sheffield, March 1987

Preface to the Second Edition

Since this book was first published in 1987 the world has gone through some of the most dramatic changes of this century. It has even been suggested – plausibly enough, since events have a way of ignoring the tidy ten- and hundred-year compartments into which we try to organize history – that the abrupt and virtually total collapse of European Communism marks the end of the twentieth century, which began, somewhat late, with the outbreak of World War One in 1914.

Those changes have not only rendered out of date some of the incidental comments in the first edition of this book; they have radically altered the historical perspective within which the major political developments of this century, and, indeed, the two hundred years since the French Revolution, must now be placed. Or perhaps I should say that they *ought* to have made such an impact; for my impression is that, apart from a certain amount of more or less crude Western triumphalism over the end of Communism, and even (according to some of the rasher commentators) of socialism and the Left as well, the necessary debate over the significance of these extraordinary events has hardly begun to take place. Perhaps we are still too close to them, too involved with their immediate consequences in central Europe, in the Balkans, in the former Soviet Union, as well as further afield in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, to be able to assess them with the necessary calmness.

Be that as it may, it is at least clear that the context in which any historical and ideological discussion of democracy takes place has changed drastically. It is this, rather than any remarkable new

developments in democratic theorizing, which led me to welcome the publisher's suggestion that the book be revised for a second edition. No doubt this version too will become dated in due course. But for the time being I have tried to take account of those changes which give the idea of democracy a different ring and significance in the 1990s than it had in the last years of the Cold War.

I am most grateful to David Williams, my copy editor at the Open University Press, for reading the entire text, old and new, with great care, and for making many suggestions for improvements in style and clarity which I was happy to incorporate. All remaining clumsinesses, inaccuracies and inadequacies are solely my responsibility.

Anthony Arblaster
Sheffield, April 1994

Contents

	<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	vii
	<i>Preface to the Second Edition</i>	ix
1	Introduction: Defining Democracy	1
	PART ONE: HISTORY	
2	The Invention of Democracy	13
3	The Re-emergence of Democracy	25
4	Popular Politics	36
	PART TWO: IDEAS	
5	Government by the People	59
6	Majority Rule and its Problems	66
7	Equality and the General Interest	72
8	Representation and 'Direct' Democracy	79
9	Consent, Freedom and Debate	87
10	Conclusion: Creating Democracy	96
	<i>Notes</i>	104
	<i>Bibliography</i>	111
	<i>Index</i>	115

Introduction: Defining Democracy

At first sight, it might appear that to produce a book about democracy in the 1990s would be to do no more than add one further voice to the chorus of self-congratulatory celebration which has drowned out most of the more uncertain or sceptical utterances, at least in the West, since the abrupt and generally unexpected collapse of European Communism and its global superpower, the Soviet Union, in the years from 1989 to 1991. The West has won. Democracy has defeated totalitarianism. Capitalism has finally and definitively proved its superiority to Communism as an economic system. What room is left for doubt or argument?

This triumphalist interpretation of the recent past has been supported, in a more philosophical vein, by the historicist arguments of Francis Fukuyama, a former US State Department official whose article, 'The End of History', appeared with extraordinary timeliness early in 1989. He has since developed the argument at book length.¹ Fukuyama's suggestion was that capitalist democracy represents the final and highest stage of the development of human political and economic institutions. Capitalist democracy has not yet been realized on a global scale, and perhaps may never be; but nevertheless that is the goal to which all developing and modernizing societies tend and aspire, however fiercely the tendency may be resisted by reactionaries on the one hand, and socialists and Communists on the other.

Such an historical perspective was clearly designed as an alternative to the Marxist one. That envisages capitalism and bourgeois democracy as interim developments which will eventually be superseded by socialism and the end of government and the state as

we know them: 'The government of persons will be replaced by the administration of things.' Fukuyama's thesis was thus an audacious one, which might well have been received as a suggestive *jeu d'esprit*, had not events suddenly offered such dramatic evidence of the instability and indeed transience of institutionalized Communism, while simultaneously seeming to demonstrate both the durability and the attractiveness of democracy with capitalism as a combined politico-economic system.

The Western world has always tended to be complacent about democracy. It has long been assumed that democracy is something which already exists in our part of the world. (Fukuyama includes a chart in his book which classifies Great Britain, the United States and several other countries as 'liberal democracies' as long ago as 1848, even though well over half the population in both countries was disenfranchised at the time, and slavery was not yet abolished in the United States.)² In this century democracy had to be defended, against fascism before 1945 and against Communism during the Cold War. But both threats have now vanished, or diminished to the point of insignificance. The major task which now confronts the democracies is to help establish democratic systems and institutions in societies which have never known them, or where they were swept away by authoritarian take-overs. How much is actually being done by the West to promote the growth of democracy is a question to which we will return later.

This perspective on democracy starts from the assumption that democracy is something which 'we' (in the West) already have, but are generously and idealistically anxious to export to less fortunate parts of the globe. To give an account of democracy will therefore be largely an exercise in description of current Western realities, coupled, perhaps, with some account of how this happy state of affairs came about. Such an account will not have to be either critical or challenging, although it may be found to be so in societies where democracy has yet to be realized. The disappearance of the 'people's democracies' of the Communist world has only reinforced this self-satisfied mood; for however grotesque a mockery Communist and Marxist societies made of the democratic idea, there were traces in their theory and perhaps even in some of their practice, of an alternative conception of what democracy might mean which did offer some kind of a challenge to Western complacency. C. B. Macpherson gave a sympathetic

account of these alternative perspectives in *The Real World of Democracy*.³

Yet as soon as we start thinking seriously about what democracy is, what the term means, and has meant, some healthy doubts will begin to cloud this mood of self-congratulation. For democracy is a concept before it is a fact, and because it is a concept it has no single precise and agreed meaning. It has had very different meanings and connotations in its long history, and is understood differently today in the context of different social and economic systems. What is now called democracy in the West would not satisfy some of those, past and present, who have had a different conception of it.

Common sense may want to brush this aside, as an unnecessarily sophisticated attempt to confuse the issue. 'We all know', it might be briskly claimed, 'which nations or states are democratic and which are not.' But do we? For instance: is the test of a democracy the fact that a government is elected by the votes of the people? When Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933, he did so through a normal constitutional process, and as leader of the party with the largest single share of the popular vote in elections for the Reichstag. He thus had a good democratic claim to the office. Yet no one would want to describe the Third Reich as a democracy. So at what point did it cease to be so?

Elections of a kind used to be held in the Soviet Union and in other Communist countries, and in many other countries which are, officially or unofficially, one-party states. Many people would not want to call these states democratic either. They would claim that elections in the Soviet Union, or in, say, El Salvador or the Philippines under President Marcos, were not free: the people did not have a genuine choice open to them. But what constitutes a free election? There were elections in Nicaragua in 1984, contested by a plurality of parties, several opposed to the Sandinista government. Nicaragua contended that the elections were free, and that they demonstrated that the Sandinista government had genuine popular support. The United States, and some other Western governments, went to considerable lengths to try and discredit these elections as being not free, but fraudulent. So was Nicaragua then a democracy, or did it only become so when the Sandanistas lost the elections of 1990, as some would argue?

Or take contemporary Britain. One common conception of democracy is that it means 'government by the people', or at least

by the people's elected representatives – since it is generally accepted, rightly or wrongly, that in large modern states the people themselves cannot govern. But since 'the people' are likely to be divided among themselves, the government is likely to be representative, not of all the people, but at best of a majority of them. Already then, we are having to redefine democracy. In practice it means government by the representatives of a majority of the people. But Britain, which is usually thought of as a democracy, especially by the British, does not meet even that criterion. No British government in the past forty years and more has been elected with even a bare majority of the votes cast. With an electoral system like Britain's, and with more than two parties dividing the popular vote, a government is elected by, and so represents, only the single largest minority of those who vote. This may not be much more than forty per cent of the voters, leaving the non-voters and the remaining sixty per cent of those who took part in the election to be governed by an administration which is not of their choosing. We are already at quite a distance from the original simple idea of government by the people.

And there are, of course, other grounds for doubt. To what extent do the elected representatives of the people, that is the House of Commons, actually govern? (We will leave aside, for the moment, the upper House of the British Parliament which consists entirely of persons elected by nobody at all.) If, as is generally agreed, it is not Parliament itself which governs, to what extent is the Government itself, ministers, civil servants, and the whole apparatus of the state, actually accountable and answerable to the Commons, and so in principle controllable by it? It is well known that many members of Parliament are among those who are deeply dissatisfied with Parliament's ability to control the executive, or even to find out what it is doing. How is it possible, in a democracy, for a committee of the House of Commons (the elected representatives of the people) to find itself prevented from interviewing civil servants when it wishes to do so, or faced with witnesses who refuse to answer questions that are put to them, as was the case when the Commons Select Committee on Defence attempted to investigate the Westland affair in 1986? Why does it need a judicial inquiry to uncover the truth about Britain's supply of arms to Iraq before the Gulf War of 1991, and to uncover the extent to which government ministers gave misleading or untruthful answers to parliamentary questions at the time?

We do not need to reach firm answers to these questions to see that

the realities of British politics – both the process of electing a parliament and the relation of that elected body to those who actually form and control the machinery of state – certainly do not neatly correspond to or embody the original notion of government by the people or the people's representatives. Is it the best that can be achieved, the nearest practicable approximation to the democratic principle? Or is there not ample room for improvement? And if the latter is the case, is it not at least something of an oversimplification to say that Britain *is* a democracy, as if the problematic relationship of British realities to the basic democratic principle or ideal can be simply ignored or brushed aside?

Or take one province of Great Britain: Northern Ireland. For fifty years between 1922 and 1972 the Unionist Party won every election in the province with a clear majority of the votes cast. Unscrupulous manipulation of constituency boundaries gave them even more of the seats in the Stormont Parliament than they properly deserved, but this gerrymandering was unnecessary. Even without it the Unionists had a popular mandate such as no Westminster government has enjoyed. They used this strong position to reduce the Catholic and generally Irish nationalist minority of the population to the level of second-class citizens, discriminated against in public housing and employment, and excluded from positions of power and authority. In doing this they undoubtedly commanded the enthusiastic approval of most of their Protestant supporters. Was this, then, democracy in action in Northern Ireland? Certainly, when today's Unionist leaders call for a 'return to democracy' in the province, that is what they have in mind – the restoration of simple majority rule, which would in effect be the restoration of Protestant domination. It is easy to say that the years of Unionist rule were a travesty of what democracy is, or ought to be. But what, precisely, is the theoretical basis for denying it the honorific title of 'democracy'? If democracy does not mean the rule of the majority, what does it mean?

Here, surely, are sufficient examples to show that, however banal or simple our definition of democracy, it soon turns out that it cannot be used as a plain, uncomplicated term of description at all. As soon as we start thinking seriously about what democracy means, and what the relation is between the idea and the reality, we discover that common sense is a quite inadequate guide.

And the problem of the relation between idea and reality is only

one of the difficulties. Just because contemporary reality does not readily correspond to some of the classical notions of what democracy is, some twentieth-century writers have argued that we need to revise our conception of democracy itself, to suit what is realistically possible in modern advanced societies. We do not have to follow them along that particular path to see that the question of definition is also raised by the examples I have briefly cited. Those who are unhappy about calling Unionist Northern Ireland a democracy, or equally unhappy about *not* calling Britain as a whole a democracy, are compelled to return to questions of meaning and definition. Attention to the theory of democracy cannot honestly be avoided. We need to be clearer than we usually are about what we mean by 'democracy'. And as soon as we begin to enquire into the meaning of the term, we discover that it has been and still is understood in a variety of different ways, which may have a common core or root but are not identical.

This is not a matter of accident, or simple confusion, or even of deliberate attempts to use or misuse the word for particular political purposes – although all of these factors may, and in fact do, come into it. Democracy is what W. B. Gallie once christened an 'essentially contestable concept'. It is an inherently debatable and changeable idea. Like 'freedom', 'equality', 'justice', 'human rights', and so forth, 'democracy' is a term which, whatever its precise meaning, will always signify for many a cherished political principle or ideal, and for that reason alone it is never likely to achieve a single agreed meaning. This is inconvenient to the tidy-minded, but should not otherwise be a matter for regret. Democracy is one of the most durable ideas in politics, and it has become, in the twentieth century, one of the most central. It is not likely to lose that centrality, but nor is its meaning likely to become static or fixed. Neither lexicographers nor political theorists can or should hope to halt this process of constant revision, although they may legitimately aspire to guide or nudge it in one direction rather than another.

There are therefore good reasons to think that those who try to define democracy only in terms of present-day realities – as a type of political system or culture which some societies possess and others do not – will find themselves left behind by history. Democracy is likely to remain not only a contestable concept, but also a 'critical' concept: that is, a norm or ideal by which reality is tested and found

wanting. There will always be some further extension or growth of democracy to be undertaken. That is not to say that a perfect democracy is in the end attainable, any more than is perfect freedom or perfect justice. It is rather that the idea and ideal is always likely to function as a corrective, rather than as a prop, to complacency.

In saying this, I am saying little more than that history, more or less as we have known it, will continue in the future (if humanity has a future). For when we look backwards, it is this process of constant change and adaptation in ideas as well as material realities that we discover. To suppose that this century can fix the definition of democracy or, even more arrogantly, that it is in this century that democracy has been finally and definitively realized, is to be blind not only to the probabilities of the future but also to the certainties of the past. Hence any study of what democracy is, any attempt to discover its essence or meaning, must necessarily be an historical study at least in part. Contemporary understanding of the idea needs to refer to historical usage of the term, if only to prevent an acceptance, without doubt or enquiry, of present notions of democracy as permanently definitive.

An historical perspective reveals, in particular, one at first sight rather puzzling and paradoxical feature of the history of democracy. For most of its long history, from the classical Greeks to the present day, democracy was seen by the enlightened and educated as one of the worst types of government and society imaginable. Democracy was more or less synonymous with 'the rule of the mob', and was, by definition, a threat to all the central values of a civilized and orderly society. C. B. Macpherson puts this point very well:

Democracy used to be a bad word. Everybody who was anybody knew that democracy, in its original sense of rule by the people or government in accordance with the will of the bulk of the people, would be a bad thing – fatal to individual freedom and to all the graces of civilized living. That was the position taken by pretty nearly all men of intelligence from the earliest historical times down to about a hundred years ago. Then, within fifty years, democracy became a good thing.⁴

Clearly it is of prime importance to know how and why this dramatic reversal of traditional attitudes has occurred, and to ask ourselves the question why our approval of democracy should be so automatic