

THE THEORIES, CONCEPTS AND  
PRACTICES OF DEMOCRACY

Series Editor: JP Gagnon

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# THEORISING DEMOCIDE

Why and How  
Democracies Fail

**Mark Chou**



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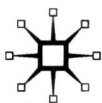
# Theorising Democide: Why and How Democracies Fail

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## Theorising Democide

## *The Theories, Concepts and Practices of Democracy*

General Editor: **Jean-Paul Gagnon**, School of Political Science and International Studies and the School of Mathematics and Physics, University of Queensland, Australia

The discourse of democracy suffers from ambiguity: its literature is too vast and there is no codified understanding of its theories, concepts and practices. The uncertainties surrounding the meaning of democracy resulted in serious political problems for all levels of democratic government – both historically and presently. The literature on democracy is so vast that it is highly improbable for one person to understand the core of this mass. Such an understanding is, however, needed to resolve the problematic ambiguity associated with democracy.

The aim of this book series is to define, analyse and organize democracy's hundreds of theories, concepts and practices. The objectives, supporting this aim, are as follows:

- Curate and consider works on democracy;
- Identify and fill gaps in the literature on historical and contemporary democracies;
- Find opportunities to synthesize or separate specific theories, concepts or practices of democracy.

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*For my Mum*

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# 1

## Constituted to Fail: Democracy and Its Self-Negation

**Abstract:** *Despite experiencing what for many commentators constitutes nothing short of a 'world-historical peak', democracy also finds itself enervated by a number of interminable ailments. Widespread governmental torpor, strongarm executives, declining levels of political bipartisanship and an apathetic political culture are just some of the factors said to be responsible for the democratic disillusionment and authoritarian nostalgia felt in certain parts of the world today. In response to these claims, the conventional position put forward by democratic advocates has been to view such democratic setbacks as an anomaly; at odds with the 'proper' workings of democracy. This chapter challenges the prevailing wisdom and offers an alternative take on democracy's failings. To do so, it critically reviews the recent works of a small minority of otherwise democratically committed scholars, before making the somewhat controversial claim that the fallibility of democracy is not now nor has it ever been an anomaly as much as a constitutive feature of democracy.*

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For something that began life largely as an ad hoc political experiment, an ancient project said to have been hastily cobbled together by a group of revolutionary Athenians, democracy has certainly come a long way.<sup>1</sup> Considered by many as a pejorative and potentially dangerous idea for much of its blotted history, democracy has defied the odds and in our own uncertain age become 'enshrined across the globe as the only legitimate, even imaginable, form of political society'.<sup>2</sup> Today, it is no exaggeration to suggest that few systems of political governance are as commonplace as that which seeks to hand power to the people. With more than 120 different episodes of democratisation having swept through some 90 countries in the brief period since the 1960s alone, the natural conclusion to draw is that the golden age of democracy is now.<sup>3</sup> Particularly notable have been the recent transitions to democracy – now known collectively as the Third Wave – that began in the early 1970s after prolonged periods of dictatorships in places like Portugal, Greece, Spain and then later in Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Chile, the Philippines, South Korea, and Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup> Together, these and other democracies slowly established the type of competitive multiparty electoral systems that had become mainstays in long since matured democracies. Nearly 40 years on, and with what appears to be the beginnings of a Fourth Wave of democratisation now taking place, the global standing of democracy remains strong. From the far reaches of the former Soviet Union, where democracies replaced the old communist regime decades ago, to the nascent democratic configurations that have taken root as a result of the Arab Spring, there is no denying that democracy is enjoying something of a 'world-historical peak'.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, this was precisely the prediction made by those who first associated democracy with the so-called end of history thesis. Beginning with Bruce Russett, one of the intellectual forefathers of the now infamous democratic peace theory, we read that 'if history is imagined to be the history of wars and conquest, then a democratic world might in that sense represent "the end of history"'.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, what we can take away from Russett's thesis is the entrenched assumption that there is something implicitly progressive if not teleological about democracy, which is coincidental with the end of wars, the end of conquest and with the end of history as such. For his part, Francis Fukuyama concurs. His argument begins with the claim that at the end of the Cold War, a resounding global consensus appeared to have emerged regarding both the prevalence and legitimacy of liberal democracy as the best system of governance.<sup>7</sup>

This was a statement which has been backed both empirically and normatively by a range of political scientists and international relations scholars in the post-Cold War era.<sup>8</sup> But Fukuyama takes it a step further by choosing to equate liberal democracy with the 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the final form of human government'.<sup>9</sup> Unlike previous ideologies and systems of governance whose intrinsic 'defects and irrationalities' eventually corrupted themselves, liberal democracy represents the pinnacle of an 'evolutionary process [that] was neither random nor unintelligible' but 'would end when mankind had achieved a form of society that satisfied its deepest and most fundamental longings'.<sup>10</sup> This, according to Fukuyama's prescriptions, is what has begun to happen with democracy's rise to global prominence.

And although even Fukuyama would not dispute the claim that democracy is still a work in progress, a point which became especially pertinent as the post-Cold War optimism gave way to the post-9/11 pessimism, these projections do seem buoyed by the fact that there are now political reforms moving in a distinctly democratic direction in contexts where democratisation would have been impossible only a decade earlier. No single case is a better example of this trend than the democratic developments taking place within China, the world's largest nation to have resisted democracy's global spread thus far. Though it continues to be perceived by many Western powers as an 'outlaw regime' potentially at odds with liberal democratic values and US hegemony, China has made significant strides when it comes to democracy in recent years.<sup>11</sup> As Peter Foster, the *Telegraph's* Beijing correspondent, recently made clear, China may still be 'far from free, but three decades after 150 years of invasions, civil wars and political upheaval finally came to a close, it is a long way from the totalitarian state it has at times appeared to be'.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, China scholars like Baogang He have emphasised from as early as the mid-1990s that the 'totalitarian paradigm is no longer appropriate' when it comes to understanding contemporary China.<sup>13</sup> It may not yet be a democracy in the Western sense, and it may still have a questionable reputation when it comes to the issue of human rights, but there are recent advances which suggest that neither is it any longer a traditional totalitarian state.

Now, as the longer term observer might be aware, the idea of democracy is actually not new in China. Numerous waves of democratisation, along with various types of democracy, have swept through China during the past century.<sup>14</sup> But particularly in recent years, with Communism

having 'lost its capacity to inspire the Chinese', as Beijing-based political philosopher Daniel Bell claims it has, it is oddly democracy that has taken yet another foothold in its wake.<sup>15</sup> This is certainly the case if we take the official pronouncements of the Chinese Communist Party seriously. As early as 2007, during the 17th National Party Congress, for example, Party leaders began sending out the clear message 'to expand people's democracy'.<sup>16</sup> This would, they assured, entail a renewed vision for Chinese citizenship that would enable the people, among other things, to 'enjoy democratic rights in a more extensive way' and 'to participate, to express their views and to supervise the administration'. President Hu Jintao affirmed this by stating that in China the people are to become 'masters of the country'.<sup>17</sup> It is the people's right, he declared, 'to be informed, to participate, to be heard, and to oversee'. The Party, as such, would be subjected to a greater level of scrutiny in its exercise of power and in its decision-making capacity. Similarly, the outgoing Premier Wen Jiabao has commented that democracy is a universal value, one that includes 'the three important components: elections, judicial independence, and supervision based on checks and balances'.<sup>18</sup> And while he believes that what is best for China is a form of democracy that best reflects its unique history and needs, Wen openly associates democracy promotion with the type of market liberalism thriving in China, and elsewhere, today.<sup>19</sup> And so, even in a place like China it seems, where one party rule has dominated the political landscape for more than half a century, the democratic impetus has begun to usher in the type of political reforms that one more commonly associates with democracies in the West.

However, despite this rosy outlook, democracy's global ascendancy, especially during the latter part of the twentieth century, has not been without its problems. It has not been without a counter-story, a darker underbelly that is less deserving of the optimism usually associated with democracy. It may be true to say that democracy's appeal is now almost universal. Yet it is also true that nearly everywhere we look there are visible signs suggesting that democracy is under threat. The French sociologist Alain Touraine said it best when he conceded that, though 'one can find the democratic spirit at work' in almost all corners of the world today, 'the risk [democracy runs] of becoming degraded or disappearing' looms ever large.<sup>20</sup>

What is more, the ailments which democracies are now being enervated by, when one manages to catch sight of them, are actually quite

interminable and in some cases symptomatic of democratic politics at large. Being too numerous and varied, the full list of these ailments cannot be catalogued here in any practical way. But it only takes a skim off the top of this pile to get a sense of the full scale of what is going wrong. Indeed, in almost all democracies now, the declining levels of civic participation, which incorporates such factors as the dwindling voter turnout during elections; the increased levels of political repression, even in strong liberal democracies; the absence of grassroots political campaigns for all but the most prominent issues; and the falling numbers of those who actively participate in town hall meetings, civic group events and political parties are becoming more symptomatic of democratic politics as such. All of this, according to International Crisis Group analyst Alan Keenan, is clear evidence of 'democracy's discontent'; a term that both encapsulates democrats fed up with how debased democracy has become as well as the ambit of problems that democracy faces today.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Wendy Brown, well known for her critical assessments of contemporary US politics, particularly the constellation of neoliberal forces that has worked to eviscerate democracy into a form of corporatism, laments just how far elections – the supposed beacon of all democratic politics – have fallen.<sup>22</sup> Less of a frank exchange of ideas between competing parties and representatives with unique political visions for the future than a circus, democratic elections have descended into marketing exercises televised only for their entertainment value. For Brown then, the claim that 'we are all democrats now' has become hard to deny, something which is more a cause for concern than for celebration.

More insidiously, against the backdrop of perhaps the greatest period of democratisation that the world has ever known, Alfred Stepan begins *Democracies in Danger*, his recent book on the state of contemporary democracy, with a sobering reminder: 'Thirty-five years after the Third Wave of democratization began and twenty years after the Berlin Wall came down, many of the new democracies are in danger.'<sup>23</sup> Theoretical and normative presumptions aside, what makes Stepan's account chilling is that it is for the most part based on empirical evidence. Given this, it is significant that so much of our current efforts continue to focus on the 'globalization of democracy' and its notable achievements – especially in the period following the end of the Cold War – while relatively few studies have paid attention to the alternative possibility of so-called reverse waves of democratisation (or de-democratisation) occurring even in contexts where transitions to democratic political configurations have long

since been regarded as successful.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps then it is time that questions be asked and answered – especially by the backers of democracy – as to whether Third and now Fourth Wave democracies have ‘crested’ and are now in the process of triggering an ‘undertow’ capable of destabilising and undermining democracies, both fledgling and mature.<sup>25</sup>

There are a number of cases we can look to for illumination here. However, when it comes to showing how democracy can breed a distinctly anti-democratic undercurrent, even as it strives to consolidate its best and most admirable characteristics, few are as damning as the erosion of America’s democratic culture in the years directly proceeding 9/11. Of course, it should be stated that American democracy is not the exception here. Rather, it is the epitome of how numerous western governments like those in the United Kingdom and Australia – governments which proclaim to be liberal, democratic and representative of the citizen body – have intermittently resorted to emergency measures to stymie public dissent and expedite their own power in order to apprehend and interrogate suspect citizens in the aftermath of terrorist attacks.<sup>26</sup> Under these so-called states of exception, fundamental democratic provisions have been temporarily suspended; justified by political leaders as necessary to ensure the state’s survival, even though they can have the rather insidious side-effect of erasing the at times already shaky distinction between democracy and authoritarianism.<sup>27</sup> In the context of the war on terror that followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US administration under the presidency of George W. Bush curtailed civil rights and censored critical information regarding its wartime intentions and strategy. The mainstream media, especially in the early phases of war, likewise stifled the brand of critical debate fundamental to a vibrant democratic society.

Numerous scholars and policy analysts have already drawn attention to the democratic connotations that attended this brand of censorship and repression, especially during the early phases of the war on terror. Others have thoroughly documented the deception, misinformation and civil rights infringements which characterised the Bush administration’s domestic and foreign policies after 9/11.<sup>28</sup> Because of this, these debates need not be rehearsed at length here; a brief sketch will more than suffice.

As we now know, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Bush administration set out to restore and protect the way of life that had been disturbed. Notably, besides proposals to wage a foreign war,

the US government responded by restricting the access of everyday citizens to crucial information under the Freedom of Information Act and by legislating into law the Patriot Act (2001).<sup>29</sup> Empowered by these emergency measures, the government legitimately began to deny heads of state, the media as well as the American public access to crucial information pertaining to issues of national security. In addition, the government was given extensive powers to invade the privacy of citizens and to apply excessive interrogation techniques to individuals they suspected of having terrorist associations.<sup>30</sup> Such forms of censorship and repression have been common and even warranted during times of war.<sup>31</sup> But there are intrinsic dangers involved. Indeed, it is precisely during times of war that it becomes necessary for political leaders to explore the full spectrum of perspectives and possible solutions to difficult challenges. Yet this is something which cannot be done when democratic debates and public dissent are stifled, as they were in the wake of the war on terror. Rather, by rousing nationalistic sentiments and fuelling an irrational fear of Islamic terrorism, the administration quickly mobilised the American public behind it to wage war in Iraq.<sup>32</sup> Though these measures ultimately proved successful in achieving the immediate goal of securing the state through the onset of a foreign war, the irony was that what was sold primarily as a strategy to showcase the resilience of American democracy in the face of an anti-democratic threat ultimately proved to be detrimental to the health and vibrancy of the democracy's culture.<sup>33</sup>

What all this suggests is that even in so-called strong democracies – the United States, Australia and Britain being prominent examples here – there have been cases of widespread governmental torpor, strongarm executives that police their own citizenry and an appalling lack of political bipartisanship which, put together, have stymied open democratic debate and critical dissenting views. In all these democracies, as in others, Brij Mohan's charge thus has a certain ring of truth:

democratic institutions [are] fraught with ideological contradictions as well as structural anomalies that serve neither true liberty nor the principles of law and order that help establish an ideal civil order. The people, government, and institutions are entangled in a cultural morass that obfuscates the ideals of democracy. As a result, a regressive democracy of unfreedom seems to have become a common experience.<sup>34</sup>

The point to stress is that the ascendant position which democracy finds itself in at our present time is not a claim which can be made



without some quite serious exceptions and qualifications. For one, the contemporary prominence of democracy – and here we should specify that by and large it is the representative and liberal variants of democracy which have found the most favour – is atypical when viewed through a historical lens. Emerging as the *science de l'art social* only after the French Revolution, democratic representation was conceived in order to restructure political franchise around the citizen and their expert representatives, the elected politician and ruler, uniting notions of popular sovereignty and nationalism in the process. Prior to that, thanks to the disastrous end to the Greeks' experiment, democracy had long been considered both impractical, due to its participatory nature, and imprudent, given its preference for participation by all men and not just the wisest and most learned. In contrast to participatory democracy, a 'government by election and representation', as Thomas Paine would later write, should as a matter of course be preferable because it is a government based on 'reason' and not 'ignorance'.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, representative democracy was founded on the belief that political accountability, expertise and knowledge could be combined in the political arena to produce an ordered, just and inclusive society.<sup>36</sup> In line with the broader enlightenment objective to foster equality, rights and progress among humans through the use of rationality, representative democracy became a crucial mechanism by which these ends could be realised. For those citizens of contemporary representative democracies who like to think that theirs is a universal and timeless system of governance, this comes as a reminder that it is not.

Not only that, but notable political thinkers like Ronald Dworkin, Ivo Mosley, Jeffrey Isaac, and Paul Fairfield have all, in different ways, asked probing questions about democracy's current trajectory, especially the trajectory of liberal democracy.<sup>37</sup> For Dworkin, the worry is that American democracy is now 'so debased' that concerns over whether it warrants the 'standing as a genuine democracy' become real and pressing. Mosley concurs. We know that democracy is in trouble, he argues, when it is reduced to 'throwing out one bunch of rogues every few years' all the while insisting on 'more and more regulation and scrutiny of our lives'. Worryingly, the majority of democrats appear to be oblivious to or happily compliant with the demands made of us by our democracies, thinking that these decisions and sacrifices are ours to make and ultimately ours to benefit from. However, when democratic configurations actually make the lives of the majority worse off, spurred on rather than