

Theories of Democracy coedited by Ronald J. Terchek and Thomas C. Conte. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001
Table of Contents and Introduction

Theories of Democracy: A Reader

Edited by

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ABSTRACT:

This collection builds on Robert Dahl's observation that there is no single theory of democracy; only theories. Beyond the broad commitment to rule by the majority, democracy involves a set of contentious debates concerning the proper function and scope of power, equality, freedom, justice and interests. This anthology assembles the works of classical, modern and contemporary commentators to show the deep and diverse roots of the democratic ideal, as well as to provide materials for thinking about the way some contemporary theories build on different traditions of democratic theorizing. The arguments addressed here appear in the voices of authors who have championed influential theories concerning the opportunities and dangers associated with democratic politics. Our goal in drawing these authors together is not to promote a particular way of looking at democracy, but rather to assemble key materials which will enable the reader to carry on an informed discourse on the meaning and purposes of democratic principles and practices.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART ONE:

LIBERALISM AND REPUBLICANISM

A. The Evolving Liberal Tradition

John Locke: *The Second Treatise on Government & Essay concerning Human Understanding*

Tom Paine: *Common Sense*

James Madison: "Federalist No. 10"

Alexis Tocqueville: *Democracy in America*

John Stuart Mill: *On Liberty &*

Considerations on Representative Government

John Rawls: *A Theory of Justice*

B. The Republican Tradition

Aristotle: *Politics*

Niccolò Machiavelli: *The Discourses*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Social Contract*

John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity"

Horace Mann, "The Necessity of Education in a Republican Government"

Robert Bellah, "Community Properly Understood"

PART TWO:

CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF DEMOCRACY

A. Protective Democracy

Friedrich Hayek: *The Political Order of a Free People*

Milton Friedman: "The Role of Government in a Free Society"

B. Pluralist Democracy

Arthur Bentley: *Process of Government*

Robert Dahl: *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy*

C. Performance Democracy

Joseph Schumpeter: *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*

Anthony Downs: "An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy"

D. Participatory Democracy

John Dewey: "Democratic Ends Need Democratic Methods for Their Realization" &

The Public and its Problems

Benjamin Barber: *Strong Democracy*

PART THREE:

CRITIQUES OF CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRATIC THEORY AND PRACTICE

A. The Realist and Neorealist Critiques

Max Weber: *Economy and Society*

Norberto Bobbio: *Future of Democracy*

B. Postmodernist Critiques

Foucault: *Power/Knowledge*

William Connolly: "Democracy and Normalization"

Chantal Mouffe: "Radical Democracy: Modern or Postmodern?"

C. Discourse and Democracy

Jürgen Habermas: "Three Normative Models of Democracy"

Sheldon Wolin: "Liberal/Democratic Divide"

D. Pushing for Inclusion

Anne Phillips: *Engendering Democracy*

Cornell West: *Race Matters*

Iris Marion Young: *Justice and the Politics of Difference*

E. Voices outside of the West

Mahatma Gandhi: “Speech at Muir College Economic Society,” &

Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi

Desmond Tutu: *No Future without Forgiveness*

Aung San Suu Kyi: “In Quest of Democracy”

Adolfo Perez Esquivel: “Conditionality, Human Rights, and Democracy”

Jean-Bertrand Aristide: “The Ten Commandments of Democracy in Haiti”

Introduction

This collection builds on Robert Dahl's observation that there is no single theory of democracy; only theories.¹ Yet however different many of them are from one another, these theories belong to a family, and they share some family resemblances. Most obviously, they reject the idea that one person or a few have any warrant to rule the rest. The reason this is so for most democrats is that they hold that persons are equal in some important ways and all deserve a voice in their governance. Democratic theories also share the view that each member of the political community carries elementary rational capacities that are sufficient to judge the conduct of government. For such judgments to have meaning, democratic citizens are expected to be free in several important respects; they must be free regarding such matters as speech, assembly and conscience. For some, these sorts of freedoms are liberal rights, but for many democrats, these and allied freedoms are valued independently of our liberal inheritance as essential components of an open regime that is accountable to citizens.

Over the centuries, democrats have been proud of the fact that this form of government assures a peaceful transition from one set of officials to another. Public office is not the property of incumbents but theoretically belongs to the citizens who can reclaim it in an orderly, peaceful way. Moreover, democrats hold as an ideal that public power flows from public approval and that the law reflects public preferences. The credibility of these arguments depends upon the existence of choice among candidates and policies. This becomes particularly important as new issues arise that cast previous political settlements in a new light. The logic of the democratic model, therefore, assumes that public officials are responsible for their conduct and accountable to citizens and that present

politics can be challenged. These characteristics of democracy might be taken as some of its minimal features, and, as we shall see, some democrats will want to move beyond this conception.

For these democrats, part of the problem with minimalist conceptions is that they mask the tendencies of all governments, including democratic ones, to become secret and its officials to become manipulative. Moreover, some democrats fear that in practice, conventional forms of participation promote a politics that is likely to become remote from the everyday concerns of ordinary citizens who have an increasingly difficult time registering their views. Another set of complaints about minimalist conceptions of democracy focuses on the many forms of nonpolitical power that are seen invading public space and directing public policy, bypassing citizen input. When this happens, the common good, difficult to achieve under the best of circumstances, becomes even more illusive. Other critics of minimalist democracy want to make democracy more inclusive, not only by drawing more people into decision-making processes but also by expanding the sites of democratic control. These critiques are presented as strengthening democracy from within by extending the logic of democratic organization to new spheres of social experience.

Through its long and turbulent history, democracy has undergone a series of critical reinterpretations. Taken together, these differing interpretations have produced profound disagreements, some of which can be traced to the permanent tension between democracy as an ideal, on the one hand, and as a set of actual public institutions on the other. Yet even within the former sphere, competing conceptualizations of the key components of the democratic ideal and their proper relationship to each other continue to fuel contentious debates. Although all theories of democracy share a vision of government by free and equal citizens who participate in their own governance, it turns out that each of these terms has various meanings. Aristotle's view of democratic government does not mesh with most contemporary theories, such as Robert Dahl's

pluralism, nor with the views of feminist writers like Anne Phillips or the postmodern orientation of William Connolly. For some, democracy is about protecting freedom from a government which favors rulers and their friends at the expense of the rest. For others, democracy should reflect the interests of citizens and remain responsive to the concerns of organized groups. Alternate democratic voices call for a more active government to address the problems of the most vulnerable citizens. Still others see obstacles to full democratic citizenship coming not only from the state but located throughout society in ways which diminish the egalitarian principle of democratic politics and which, therefore, need to be resisted.

The variety of meanings attached to a term like democracy is also evidenced in allied terms such as citizenship, freedom, equality and participation. Although many of these and other terms are used in similar ways in some theories, it is important to notice that these same words often take on distinctive meanings in other theories. Take the idea of citizenship. Aristotle ties it to the ownership of private property, but virtually all twentieth century democratic theorists deny the connection. Friedrich Hayek thinks democratic citizens should most value their freedom and use their democratic resources to resist intervention by the state in what should be private. Yet this position is rejected by most other contemporary theorists who, for all of their different ideas about where to draw the line between the public and private, generally give the democratic state greater latitude than Hayek. Civic republicans and communitarians proceed with the argument that the free citizen can only flourish politically in a community where traditions are strong and civic duty is widely respected. Such an approach, however, troubles liberal democrats who worry that an emphasis on community and duty can displace fundamental rights as the central commitment of a democratic regime. Still other democrats want to extend the scope of citizenship beyond conventional participation, such as voting, to previously nonpolitical areas of life.

One of the primary, if not the primary, characteristics of politics is power. In this context, democratic politics aims at the widest distribution of power among the citizenry. Yet disputes among democratic theorists about what power means and how it can enable or disable full and equal citizenship are legion. Indeed, the very same features of political life that some identify as abuses of power in a democracy, others find to be essential to the emancipation of individuals and an indispensable component of full political equality. For some, the primary site of the abuse of power is located in the state, with its proclivity to interfere with the freedom of its citizens. For other democrats, however, power has myriad locations, and they look at civil society or the market to consider the ways in which nonpolitical advantages and resources are converted into political influence. For this group, democratic government is called upon to resist the demands of concentrated private power, particularly the power of status and wealth. But the question of power takes on still other dimensions in the writings of many modern feminists and postmodernists. As they understand matters, power is not confined to institutional sites, public or private, but circulates throughout society: in the family and race relations, in schools and the media, in the workplace, and even within the seemingly neutral spheres of knowledge, the sciences and technology. Working with this understanding, they move beyond earlier conceptions of the state as the center of contestation and extend their democratic impulse to other spheres of activity, many of which have traditionally been considered to operate below the threshold of democratic politics.

Democratic theories also depart from one another in what they expect from citizens. For civic republicans and communitarians, the character of its citizens determines the character of the republic. If citizens are civically virtuous, the republic can be expected to thrive, but if they are self-involved or lethargic, we should anticipate a politics of fragmentation and corruption leading toward decay. Others find that citizens must prize their liberty and be ever vigilant against efforts to involve

the state in more areas of private and social life. Still others hold that a democratic form of government, if properly ordered, does not depend on virtuous or restrained citizens. What is needed is a diffusion of power and group competition. The first is needed to avoid any inordinate concentration of power by a single group and the latter to assure political opportunities to organize with like-minded citizens to influence public policy. Yet others want citizens who not only speak but also listen to divergent positions and who are open to finding common solutions to common problems.

But differences in democratic theory do not stop here. One of the most contentious issues has to do with the role of interests in a democracy. Why should interests be so important in politics? Socrates puts the negative case about interests in poignant and blunt terms. His *Republic* is built around a theory of justice where all of the parts cohere harmoniously. But the search for justice is undermined when those who rule put their interests ahead of the good of the whole. For this reason, Socrates wants his philosopher kings and queens to do without family (that is, spouses and children of their own) and without private property. As he understands matters, such attachments distract rulers from searching for justice and so, he reasons, interests need to be banished from politics. Even though civic republicans reject Socrates' strictures regarding the family and property, they retain his hostility to interests as a driving force in politics. And so do many other contemporary critics of liberal democratic practice. For these authors, politics cannot be primarily about serving individual interests but must attend to what is common. When viewed through this lens, real democrats will resist moves to use public power to serve the interests of some at the expense of the whole. These critics find that interests corrupt political language and make agreement about a common good difficult, if not impossible. For their part, supporters of interests in democratic politics find that interests are an inescapable and necessary part of political life, and efforts to silence

or thwart them threaten to disarm the many against those who already enjoy a preponderance of power.

Such debates about power, equality, freedom, justice, and interests are the subject matter of this collection. They appear in the voices of those who have championed influential theories concerning the opportunities and dangers associated with democratic politics. Their writings are offered as contributions regarding the value of democracy and the diverse ways that it is understood and practiced. Our goal in drawing these authors together is not to promote a particular way of looking at democracy but rather to assemble key materials which enable the reader to carry on an informed discourse concerning the meaning and purposes of democracy.

In this collection, we have assembled the works of classical, modern and contemporary commentators on democracy. We have included some classical texts to show the deep but diverse roots of the democratic commitment as well as to provide materials for thinking about the way some contemporary theories build on different traditions of democratic theorizing. However, we do not organize the texts chronologically but rather collect them under several different and distinctive theories to highlight the many ways that principled democrats have thought about the subject. The texts in this collection include many of the major contributors in various theories of democracy and serve as representative voices of those approaches to democratic government. In spite of their many differences, however, they share a common dedication to the idea that a democratic politics, for all of its variability and problems, must be the politics of any good regime.

¹ *Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 1.