

Interpretation

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“Like a cloak embroidered with every kind of ornament, so this city, embroidered with every kind of character, would seem the most beautiful” (*Republic* 557c). The rich offerings in *Democracy and the History of Political Thought* recall this passage from the *Republic*, but the content goes beyond embellishments and affords the reader an opportunity to think deeply about democracy. The twenty-five essays, ordered chronologically, discuss the writings of major philosophical, political, and religious figures on democracy. Among the topics that I will address in this review are the people and their character, the public versus the private interest, democracy in the city and the principle of freedom, the Athenian development of democracy and the principle of equality, and the shift in political thought with the advent of Christianity and modern thinkers.

A study of democracy necessarily has the people as a focus. The essay on Edmund Burke, titled “The Dependence of Democracy on Community,” begins with the admission that while Burke is not generally associated with the advocacy of democracy, he “contends for the desirability of a ‘popular’ element in government” (247). The popular element depends on “circumstances of time and place, those circumstances including most particularly the health of the sense of community binding a society together with shared manners, political traditions and laws, and a common sense of what merited honor and shame” (262). A similar theme in the essay on Cicero quotes Scipio, who defines the republic as a “thing of the people” and further distinguishes the people as not “random or haphazard” but “a group of people who share a sense of justice and common benefit.” The explanation continues: “the people are

not drawn together by mutual weakness, but rather they are brought together by love of their own kind” (108). This sentiment is taken a step further in the essay on Augustine: “in order to see the character of a people, what it loves must be considered. If it is not a fellowship of a multitude of beasts, but of rational creatures, and is united through sharing in an agreement about what it loves, then no matter what it loves, it is not unreasonable to call it ‘a people.’ It is a better people if it agrees in loving better things; a worse one if it agrees in loving worse things” (122).

Augustine’s distinction between the better people and the worse raises a question about the character of the people, which Montesquieu argues is the animating principle of democracy. His definition of virtue includes love of the laws and the homeland. “This love requires constantly preferring the public interest to one’s own” (220). Montesquieu clarifies the connection between virtue and the public interest with the observation that “in a democracy subjects of the law are also in charge of its execution” (220). Averroes, too, recognizes that a democracy “perishes rapidly” if it is not “strengthened by virtue or honor” (142). There is, however, a sharp contrast between Montesquieu’s reference to the public and Averroes’s introduction of the idea that “the household constitutes ‘the primary intention’ for whose sake the democratic city exists” (136). Such an emphasis drives a different discussion of property, commerce, laws that protect the household, and fulfillment of natural human desires. The outward focus seen in the abovementioned thinkers is shifted inward as Averroes argues that “in the absence of a skilled ruler or prevailing political dogma, most people relish the freedom to absorb themselves in the ends of their own households” (139). The people are thus turned away from politics, which weakens and undermines the city when events such as war occur.

Aristotle recognizes the natural formation of the household, but unlike Averroes for whom it is the end, the household contributes to the formation of villages and finally the city. “The city comes to exist for the sake of ‘life,’ but continues to exist for the sake of ‘living well’” (93). Aristotle’s classification of regimes, which distinguishes between various forms of government, includes democracy. The essayist explains, “Aristotle identifies democracy as the regime that honors freedom and arranges the life of a political community around this good. In honoring freedom alone and above all, democracy is an imperfect regime, for in distributing authority in accordance with freedom rather than virtue, democracy fails the criteria of a correct regime” (89). The principle of freedom, however, results in a self-contradiction in the regime:

“the underlying principle and aim is anarchical and thus antithetical to any regime.” Aristotle’s critique is that “democracy ‘defines freedom badly’” (91).

In contrast to Aristotle’s discussion of democracy as a regime, Herodotus’s *Histories* offers an account of a people becoming a political power. He begins with the founding of the Athenian democracy by Solon, “a ‘wise’ man who made laws for the Athenians at their request” (42), to the tyrannies of Pisistratus and Deioces, and finally to Cleisthenes who “took the common people (*demou*), previously ‘deprived of all rights,’ into partnership” (46). This chronicle also recounts the movement from a divine support of the regime, beginning with Solon, to a patriotic support, resulting from Cleisthenes’s changes. The latter achieves the following: “the Athenians support the democracy because they believe the regime is ‘theirs’” (47). Herodotus attributes this support to it being Athenian and because it is characterized by *isegorie*, the equality of speech, which is explained as all sharing equally in deliberation. The prominent place of the people in a successful democracy renders deliberation an essential practice, but there is a vulnerability. Among the threats to speech and deliberation in a democracy are demagogues. The essay on Thucydides includes examples of Spartan, Athenian, and Syracusan demagogy and how Pericles addresses the “political pathologies that gave rise to demagogy” (65).

Another principle of democracy is equality, which, like freedom, presents challenges. Herodotus recognizes that human beings are difficult to govern because they are jealous of their equality, yet circumstances may require one to lead or rise above others. The author of the essay on Homer sees the effort of “measuring one person, act, deed, and object against another as we try to equalize what cannot be made equal...become in Homer’s poem a melancholic warning about a democratic optimism built on principles of equality” (23). The discussion of events related to the battle in book 9 of the *Iliad* between Agamemnon, Diomedes, and Nestor raises a question against the backdrop of equality: “What standard of measurement allows us to affirm the predominance of one over the other?” (26). The essay on the role of Judah in the Joseph story in the book of Genesis raises a similar question with respect to a family, specifically, “whether the patriarchy will continue particularly amid a contentious playing field of headstrong brothers who are acutely sensitive to their equal standing in the family” (9). The solution to the dilemma is twofold: Judah recognizes his own limitations but knows that the task of the leader is to preserve the family so that they may fulfill their obligations to the next generation; the brothers, acting together, must think of themselves

as equal parts, even when they are not always up to the task of fulfilling their duties. The *Iliad* and the Joseph story may not be the first selections that come to mind when discussing equality, but the questions raised by their respective essayists speak directly to the topic.

The breadth of this volume's study of democracy has the advantage of presenting a range of views on specific topics and decisive shifts in political thought. Students of the history of political thought have a basis of comparison and direction toward primary sources for an in-depth study of democracy. For example, the advent of Christianity generates markedly different perspectives. Augustine rejects the Platonic distinction between the few and many and replaces it with Paul's distinction in 1 Corinthians 3:2. Aquinas includes in his analysis that democratic free judgment is necessary to accepting and understanding the kingly rule of God and his commands, even if it is not present in the regime. A departure from classical political philosophy and the introduction of new questions and ways of thinking are present in the works of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and subsequent thinkers. The rich offerings, including new modes and orders, in Machiavelli's *Prince* and *Discourses* are informed by his insight into human behavior: "politically ambitious human beings are moved not by a desire to serve the common good or to prove themselves to be the most virtuous individuals, but by their own desire to command, if not oppress" (161). The essayist on Hobbes notes his insistence on turning away from regimes and looking to "the indirect questions arising out of the theory of sovereign representation" (177). Examples from Hobbes's *Leviathan* and *De Cive* show why he is identified as the inventor of "the politics of modernity" (178) and its effect on the study of democracy.

The remaining essays are too numerous to discuss, but I list them to recognize the editors' efforts to present a comprehensive study of democracy. Essays on Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Tocqueville are part of core political thought, but the editors also included essays that one would not expect. These include Kant on punishment, Hegel on art as a solution to a defect in contemporary civil life, Marx on recasting the relation between economics and politics, and Heidegger on the modern doctrine of equal rights and related topics. Essays on Hamilton, Madison, and Jefferson are welcome additions in the collection because of these statesmen's direct involvement in America's founding.

I conclude this review with a look at the essays on Plato and Strauss. The two essays address different topics: the action and major themes in Plato's *Republic* and Strauss on democracy, technology, and liberal education. The

interlocutors in the *Republic* design a city in speech, but the essayist recasts the effort as a city in dialogue. This is seen in the contrast between the wise philosophers in the city in speech and Socrates's inquiry: "He rules not by force, but by giving arguments. He seeks to persuade. He asks for his interlocutors' consent to the direction of their conversation as well as for their contributions" (69–70). The discussion proceeds with "persuasion, consent, and participation" (70). Strauss's discussion of modern democracy concerns the advent of the malady of mass democracy and the dehumanization of man, which results from "the emancipation of technology, of the arts, from moral and political control" (389). Strauss argues that liberal education, an education that "broadens and deepens" the soul, counters these destructive tendencies. These two essays serve as a conclusion for two reasons: dialogue and liberal education speak to good practices that support and sustain democracy and Plato and Strauss were keenly aware of the consequences of failure.

This review began by invoking the image of a richly embroidered cloak. It is an apt metaphor to describe the array of topics in *Democracy and the History of Political Thought*, but the second half of the sentence, "so this city, embroidered with every kind of character, would seem the most beautiful" (*Rep.* 557c) tempers the rich imagery. A careful reading of the essays in this volume may contribute to removing this conditional reference and should the readers heed the essays' lessons and warnings, democracy may likely be the more beautiful.

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Words from languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. Foreign expressions that have not become part of English should be accompanied by translation into English.

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