

Interpretation

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Why is democracy an “inevitable” political regime? Where does its psychological, moral, and existential force lie? What are its weaknesses, both in resilience and political efficacy, as well as regarding the ends of human life? To a large extent, *Democracy and the History of Political Thought* realizes that present-day political science is unable, or unwilling, to properly answer these questions. In order to understand our present-day political regime, we need old teachers, even if most of them never actually experienced democracy in their lifetimes.

It is very hard to do justice to so accomplished a volume on the subject of democracy in the history of political thought in a short review. Not only are the contributors extremely knowledgeable about their subjects, but the volume also covers a great deal of the Great Tradition of political thought. A few general considerations must suffice, although the book deserves a review that would delve deeply into the details of each chapter, some of them path-breaking—such as the chapter on Aristotle.

From the point of view of the Great Tradition, until the eve of the French Revolution the merits and demerits of democracy were usually considered by having aristocracy—the rule of the best men—serve as the standard. Being Platonic in its foundation, the Tradition was guided by the inclination to examine democracy—or any existing political regime—by taking the aristocratic point of reference. This created a big problem, for aristocracy was not an actual, existing regime. It was a philosopher’s regime in the sense that it

was postulated, founded, and, as it were, put in motion by words or speeches. An existing regime was valued or devalued according to a fictionalized point of comparison.

It is interesting that democracy in the words of the philosophers did not at all times correspond to its historical, concrete reality. It could be more of an abstraction, as the chapter on Plato makes us realize, where Mary Nichols focuses on Socrates's description of democracy in the *Republic*. Still, working with systematic comparisons, the Tradition made political science a genuinely *comparative* science. That is, I believe, a very important point to make not only as far as the history of political thought goes, but also as regards the political science of the future and its study of democracy in our day and age.

There are two exceptions to the claim that the starting point to the study of democracy is Platonic. They are very interestingly put into consideration in this volume. There is the biblical exception, with its reflection not only on the political experience of the people of God but also on the political dynamics and relations of the great characters and prophets. We get a glimpse of that wisdom in the chapter on Judah in the Joseph story in the book of Genesis, as J. Davis Alvis guides us through a reflection on political leadership personified in Judah as a specific virtue different from human virtue *simpliciter*.

The second exception is the Greek prephilosophical reflection on democracy, that is, the poetic reflection in Homer and the political thinking of the “historians”—Herodotus and Thucydides—none of them being “political philosophers” by vocation, but all three being crucial in order to understand Athenian democracy's origins and action. The chapters on Herodotus by Ann Ward and Thucydides by Steven Forde show the first democracy's close alliance with another political form: empire. Democracy in Athens produced a naval victory of truly world-historical significance at Salamis. By defeating a mighty Persian Empire, Athens began building its own empire. It radicalized its democracy as it enlarged and deepened its empire, and one would not develop without the other, as these two chapters clearly show. Nevertheless, the whole conception of *knowing* the different political regimes by comparing them began with none other than Herodotus in the so-called Persian debate. Also, Thucydides made a systematic comparison between the warring cities of Sparta and Athens—a comparison of cities that was always a comparison of their respective regimes.

I have to admit that to suggest that aristocracy has been the standard for studying democracy is not the most fortunate formulation. For it might seem

to imply that the democratic living reality has been totally passive in this secular exercise in political philosophy. But that implication would be wrong. Democracy has been since the beginning—since Plato and Aristotle—a *challenging* regime. It has been there challenging the coherence and value of the standard itself and of the human aspiration to contemplate the best of all regimes devoid of a popular element. Democracy was always there showing the fatal contradiction of a just and beautiful regime that would give no regard to the popular claims, needs, and contributions. As *Democracy and the History of Political Thought* shows, democracy was always *there*—first in the direct observation of the Athenian experience and, after the definitive fall of Athenian democracy, in the pages of the since-departed political philosophers and historians who had reflected on it and in the approximated experiences of popular government provided by ancient Rome and medieval and Renaissance free cities. Hobbes, for instance, experienced a civil war where republican elements were present, but he also resorted to Thucydides’s *Peloponnesian War*, which he translated into English and which he read as a sort of manifesto *against* democracy. After the American and French Revolutions, political philosophy could once again see democracy with its own eyes, as Tocqueville did.

The Tradition has also examined democracy against the background of the conflict between politics and philosophy. That comes to light most obviously in the chapter on Hobbes by William Mathie, in which Hobbes’s theory of representation is analyzed according to the relation between oratory, the demands of private conscience, the dangers of sedition, and science or philosophy’s solution to that problematic relation.

The chapters on Aristotle by Stephen A. Block and Machiavelli by Catherine H. Zuckert allow us better to understand where the true force of democracy lies, in spite of the world of differences that we find between the fourth-century BCE Stagirite and the Renaissance Florentine. Democracy based on equality and individual freedom gets its strength and arguably its superiority to any of the alternatives by being the regime directly founded on each one’s desire to be the cause of one’s own good.

To be sure, a number of difficulties arise once we set our minds to think about “democracy.” For one thing, what we now recognize and associate immediately and self-evidently with democracy—representative government, separation of powers—were in fact nondemocratic elements, or at least not strictly democratic elements, introduced to correct democracies’ natural and dangerous movements. The chapters on Hamilton by Adam M. Carrington,

Madison by Jerome C. Foss, and Jefferson by Lee Ward put these difficulties under the spotlight.

One final point that is not impertinent in a collective book of this kind. Do the authors in this book have anything in common? Susan Shell's chapter seems to be the one which deviates the most from the general purpose of the book: to learn from what each great political philosopher had to teach *specifically* about popular government. Shell takes the opportunity to revisit Kant's philosophy of punishment in order to produce what we may call an indictment of America's current practice of punishment. But it is also an interpretation of America's practice of punishment as being more republican than is the case with other present-day liberal democracies around the world. It could also be said that by engaging with its practice of punishment, though not exactly with the penitentiary system, Shell proceeds in Tocquevillean fashion to reach for the core of the particular American version of democracy. In the final analysis, what seems to be a deviation ends up not being a deviation at all.

But to return to the question: What common thread—implicit or explicit—may bring unity to the book as a whole? I submit that the answer to this question is given by Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*. The exact quotation appears in Peter Lawler's excellent chapter on the question of the democratic (and American) soul. My claim is that our authors in *Democracy and the History of Political Thought* share a common concern about our democratic age. Tocqueville says: "man did not give himself the taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal. Those sublime instincts are not born of a caprice of his will; they have their immovable foundation in his nature; they exist despite his efforts. He can hinder and deform them, but not destroy them." For Tocqueville, democratic man flirts with pantheism or materialism at his own peril. Our authors' concern is, then, about our "hindering" and "deforming" in man his "taste for the infinite and the love of what is immortal."

In the last two chapters, on Heidegger by Mark Blitz and Strauss by Timothy Burns, the same concern emerges about the strength of the soul of late modern man at the hands not of pantheism and materialism, but of modern technology and democracy. With their own very different outlooks, Heidegger and Strauss deal with the "death of God" and the vanishing of religious spirituality and wisdom in Western man's life. Burns makes this point with admirable subtlety, relating it to Strauss's proposal for a liberal education. But one must wonder that both philosophers shared also a historical

interpretation of the origins of modern democracy as coincident with the birth of secular modern philosophy (Descartes in the case of Heidegger, Machiavelli in the case of Strauss). Heidegger and Strauss chose to dismiss Christianity's role, both Catholic and Protestant, in the formation of modern democracy. They dismissed Christianity's role in the development of the theory of natural subjective rights (e.g., in the work of Francisco Vitoria and Bartolomé de las Casas in the early sixteenth century, and Francisco Suarez one generation later), as well as in the growing appeal to a contractarian conception of political obligation (e.g., in the French Huguenot literature during the religious civil wars in France in the late sixteenth century). For Heidegger and Strauss, democracy is inflexibly taken to be the conscious work of philosophers without a trace of the unintentional work of "priests and poets."

GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

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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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