

Introduction

Democracy and Social Justice

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In the wake of the Arab Spring it may seem perverse to ponder the rights and wrongs of democracy: however imperfect, surely it is at least the least bad system of government yet devised. And yet democracy, or what is described as democracy, has been, and continues to be, more often imposed on peoples than freely chosen. Iraq and Afghanistan are not the only examples. That, surely, suggests a tension, if not a paradox. Nor is that the only tension around democracy. On the one hand, to take just one example, democracy is what distinguishes Israel from its neighbours (or more recently, from most of its neighbours), regardless of who is democratically elected and what they do; on the other, however, when democracy is exercised in Gaza and produces a Hamas government, the Palestinians of Gaza are punished for having made the wrong choice. Two interrelated questions have therefore to be faced, even if they cannot be definitively answered. First, what actually is it about democracy that makes it valuable; or what amounts to very much the same thing, are the qualities generally assumed to inhere in democracy, or to be absent from it, in fact inherent in it, or, as the case may be, absent from it? Second, just what is to count as democracy and who is to decide what counts? These two questions are of course interrelated in complex ways, as well as being difficult even to approach, let alone to answer.

Perhaps it is on account of their difficulty that these questions are rarely addressed directly, writers understandably preferring to deal with the minutiae of theories of democracy rather than with the more taxing matters of the principles at stake in theorizing about democracy. Perhaps. Or perhaps not. I rather think that that is not the whole story, nor even what is most important about all too many contemporary treatments of democracy. The real problem, it seems to me, runs deeper and it is this: since we—whoever and wherever “we” are—are all democrats now, to attempt to subject democracy to serious analysis is to cast doubt on what we ourselves believe and thus, in turn, on who we are. For it could turn out that in the final analysis we are not all democrats, or that our different conceptions of what counts as democracy, let alone our different convictions about who should decide what counts and on what sorts of ground, are so different that we cannot tell whether or not we are in fact democrats—let alone whether we ought to be.

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It is in the spirit of attempting at least to face some of these underlying issues that the following essays have been brought together. They are all very different in the specificities of their particular concerns; and different, too, in their responses, whether explicit or implicit, to some of the difficulties adumbrated above. There is no particular line being advocated here. What they do all have in common, however, and what is being advocated in bringing them together is that willingness to face, rather than to avoid, the critical underlying issues. Both individually and collectively, then, the essays represent at once a conviction that democracy neither can nor should be taken for granted, whether normatively or structurally, and an attempt to begin to uncover some of what democracy does in fact take for granted.

In the actually existing world, a democracy is assumed to be one with a property-owning democracy: indeed, the “property-owning” element of that reality may on occasion be thought to trump whatever notion of democracy may inhere within it. Mark Devenney’s essay, in “insisting that a properly political theory must contend with the politics of property,” asks us to remember, first, that democracy is indeed a political concept and not the name of some set of natural properties and, second, that any notion or practice of democratic politics must therefore deal with the question of property, and deal with it as also a specifically political construct. Vivienne Matthies-Boon reminds us of an issue all too infrequently addressed: is democracy—or, perhaps, should it be—inherently cosmopolitan? And if so, if “democracy in one country” is no more sustainable than “socialism in one country,” does that not too easily legitimate a Trotskyist neoconservatism? Habermas’s struggles to avoid “being appropriated by precisely the camp he opposes” provide an important lesson for us. Gideon Calder turns to look inside, arguing that, while “democracy is crucially about inclusion,” it cannot be democracy itself which provides a solution to the problem of who is to be included and on what terms. That fundamental issue is, so to speak, a pre-democratic one—which suggests that democracy names a means of putting into practice normative decisions made elsewhere. Nonetheless, and this is what Keith Sutherland is concerned to have us think about, the particular form that such a means takes will in turn impact on the extent to which, and the manner in which, those initial norms are instantiated. Starting with Madison’s “functional distinction between ‘parties’ (advocates for factional interests) and ‘judgment’ (decision-making for the public good),” he urges us to abandon our party political form of democratic decision-making in favour of having randomly selected citizens making these judgements, having collected the requisite argumentative evidence from the various factions (parties) concerned. Finally, we are invited to reconsider our too easy assumption that democracy offers a way (preferable to the various forms of authoritarian rule that are its alternatives) of avoiding the “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” lives of a Hobbesian state of nature. Through the lens of the so-called war on terror, Mark McGovern argues that terrorism is “a problem of and not for democracy”; that it is the state of exception which historically gives force to, and is paradigmatic of, actually existing democracy—that is, of liberal democracy. Again, it is the political norms out of which democracy historically emerges, rather than anything specific to “democracy itself,” that determine its shape. Nick Mansfield takes this argument one step—or perhaps several steps—further. Far from democracy’s being a paradigm of peace, and whatever particular shape a democracy might historically

take, it is ineluctably rooted in violence, a violence that “springs from its inextricable if denied relationship to revolution, the drive to re-found the political order properly and definitively.” If he is right, then, in short, “democracy is violence.”

Suppose democracy is violent, and, more importantly, that it is violent because it has its roots in revolution. Then, since revolution is the only alternative to actually existing, neo-liberal democracy, does that suggest an infinite pessimism about the possibility of justice (to put far too much weight on a single word); or merely a sobering realism about our chances?