RECOVERING POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

MODERN DEMOCRACY *and the* THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL PROBLEM *in* Spinoza, Rousseau, *and* Jefferson

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Lee Ward

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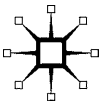

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For Mary Nichols, my friend and teacher

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Palgrave's *Recovering Political Philosophy* series was founded with an eye to postmodernism's challenge to the possibility of a rational foundation for and guidance of our political lives. This invigorating challenge has provoked a searching re-examination of classic texts, not only those of political philosophers, but also of poets, artists, theologians, scientists, and other thinkers who may not be regarded conventionally as political theorists. The series publishes studies that endeavor to take up this re-examination and thereby help reinstill a classical understanding of civic ideals, as well as studies that clarify the strengths and the weaknesses of modern philosophical rationalism. The interpretative studies in the series are particularly attentive to historical context and language, and to the ways in which both censorial persecution and didactic concerns have impelled prudent thinkers, in widely diverse cultural conditions, to employ manifold strategies of writing—strategies that allowed them to aim at different audiences with various degrees of openness to unconventional thinking. The series offers close readings of ancient, medieval, early modern, and late modern works that illuminate the human condition by attempting to answer its deepest, most enduring questions, and that have (in the modern period) laid the foundations for contemporary political, social, and economic life.

In this volume, Lee Ward plumbs the foundations of the seminal arguments that grounded the two most profound innovations in Western political life: the moral and theoretical victory of democracy over other regimes, and the replacement of theocracy by secular governments. He argues that the three thinkers who are the focus of this study, Benedict Spinoza, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Jefferson, were most responsible for planting "democracy" in the term "liberal democracy." Ward shows how each of the three contributed something crucial to the foundational combination of the liberal principle of natural rights with the democratic principle of popular sovereignty. At the same time, Ward argues that the tension among these thinkers in their more optimistic

or more pessimistic readings of human nature has provided much of the unfolding moral dynamic and stress that has moved the development of modern democracy.

Ward argues, additionally, for a deep and novel connection between the three thinkers' cases for *democratic* rule and their cases for *secular* rule. He shows that the three—in contrast to practitioners and theorists of pre-modern democracy—were united in their confidence that rationalist civil theology grounded in a knowledge of nature and of nature's God suffices to provide all the information and inspiration needed to create and to sustain strong and prosperous democratic governments. Ward's introduction, which examines democratic thought and action in classical, medieval, and early modern texts, brings into sharp focus the great novelty of this attempt. He shows that, unlike their ancient and medieval counterparts, the three modern philosophical proponents of democracy were intent on dismantling religious and political authority grounded directly in supra-rational, divine revelation, and aimed to subject religious authority to secular rule. The deepest reason for this modern project, Ward argues, is that these thinkers shared a *theoretical* agenda with other thinkers from the radical enlightenment. Modern democracy came, in the thought of its three leading proponents, to be a key part of the grand modern attempt to solve what Ward, following Leo Strauss, calls the "theologico-political problem," or to meet the challenge that theological revelation poses to rational thought. Ward argues that modern democratic change was intended to ground the claims of philosophic or scientific knowledge over and against the claims of revelation and religious orthodoxy.

Ward's analysis puts Spinoza in a new light, revealing him as the intellectual father of liberal democracy for being the first philosopher to argue for democracy rooted in freedom of speech and thought as the best—that is, most natural or strongest—regime, intended to rid the world of "superstition" and to encourage a climate hospitable to scientific and philosophical inquiry. Ward shows us a Rousseau who, despite differences with Spinoza, can be best understood as extending and radicalizing Spinoza's democratic philosophy of power, as a philosophy whose natural theology, whose critique of revelation, and whose populism endowed nineteenth century's republicanism with its democratic and secular soul. Finally, we meet a Jefferson who brings to completion the vision, initiated by Spinoza and elaborated by Rousseau, of vibrant, secularized democratic "culture."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I am grateful to the editors of the *Recovering Political Philosophy* series Drs. Thomas Pangle and Timothy Burns for considering my study for inclusion in this series. Deep thanks are especially in order to Dr. Burns for his thoughtful and careful reading of an earlier version of this manuscript. His insights and constructive criticisms were vital for improving this project. I thank Dr. Michael Zuckert of University of Notre Dame for his support over the years and for providing a philosophically sophisticated reading of Thomas Jefferson that has deeply impacted my own work on this complex figure. My thanks also go to Dr. Peter Lawler of Berry College for his support for my research on Rousseau. Part of the Rousseau chapter was first presented as a paper in the Political Theory Reading Group at the University of Exeter and I thank all of the participants, but especially Dr. Dario Castioglione for his support and insightful remarks. I also thank Chris Cecot for his invaluable work on the index. Finally I wish to thank my editor at Palgrave Macmillan Brian O'Connor for his support for this project and to his editorial assistant Nicole Hitner for her expert advice.

Earlier versions of some of the ideas and arguments in Chapters 1 and 2 can be found in Lee Ward, "Benedict Spinoza on the Naturalness of Democracy," *Canadian Political Science Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (January) 2011: 55–73; Lee Ward, "Benedict Spinoza and the Problem of Theocracy," in *Natural Right and Political Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert* edited by Ann Ward and Lee Ward (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013): 132–151; Lee Ward, "'Gods would be needed to Give Men Laws': Rousseau on the

Modern Republican Legislator," *Perspectives on Political Science* Volume 43, No. 1 (Winter) 2014: 41–51 published by Taylor & Francis Publishing; and Lee Ward, "Rousseau's 'Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar' as Democratic Narrative" in *Socrates and Dionysus: Philosophy and Art in Dialogue*, Ann Ward, editor (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013): 104–121 published with permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing. My thanks go to the editors, publishers, and reviewers of these journals and collected volumes.

I dedicate this book to Dr. Mary Nichols of Baylor University, who has been my teacher and friend for many years. She is everything a thoughtful democrat could aspire to be.

INTRODUCTION: A PRE-HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY

Perhaps the two most important developments in western political life in the modern era are the nearly total replacement of theocracy by secular governments and the (at least aspirational) triumph of democracy over any alternative system of political organization. This book attempts not only to understand these developments, but also to demonstrate the profound connection between them. How did it happen that democracy was transformed from being, as it was for Herodotus, Aristotle, Plato, and Thucydides, one possible and problematic regime type among many to become what John Dewey would describe in the past century in the following terms: "Democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself" (Dewey 1927: 148)? My central claim is that understanding the triumph of democracy requires an appreciation of how modern democracy addresses and contributes to what Leo Strauss famously identified as the "theologico-political problem" (Strauss 1997a: 453).[1] That is to say, the origins of modern democracy differ from that of its ancient namesake most significantly in that modern democrats engaged in a centuries-long struggle against religious authorities and political forces supported by religion armed with the formidable power of divine revelation. Modernity could be neither a return to Athens, nor simply a revived Jerusalem precisely because Jerusalem had so thoroughly effaced the classical tradition of political philosophy in the intervening centuries.

Modern democracy emerged, then, in the context of a bitter struggle against a well entrenched religious foe that laid claim to authority regarding the most important moral, political, and philosophical questions. However, modern democracy as it was theorized by its major figures countered the totalizing tendencies of its reactionary political opponents arguably with its own totalism. Into the conceptual vacuum left by the expulsion of divine will from political life rushed the fortifying and irresistible "will of the people." Popular sovereignty entered modernity

clothed in the resplendent garb of its own metaphysical pretensions as nature reasserted its moral claim in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries against orthodoxies of various kinds. Armed with a sophisticated epistemology and an intellectual self-confidence that belied centuries of neglect of or derision toward democracy, modern democratic philosophers starting with Baruch Spinoza set on the arduous path to demonstrate not only that there is some natural basis for the claims to justice advanced by democracy, but (more audaciously) that democracy is synonymous or co-terminous with nature itself. Or they sought to make democracy what Dewey called the embodiment of the very idea of community. All other regime types are *prima facie* illegitimate, or at least inherently suspect, to the extent to which they depart from a recognizably democratic model.

The focus of this study is three figures that did more than any others to establish and expand the beachhead for democracy that would in time allow it to conquer modern western civilization. To borrow a catchy phrase created to describe very different characters in a very different time, Baruch Spinoza, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Jefferson were the "Three who made a Revolution" (Wolfe 1964). This is not to suggest that these three held the same views on all matters, or even identical reflections on democracy. As we shall see, each had distinct political philosophies and operated in his own unique historical and religious context. Nor do we mean to propose that these thinkers had a direct impact on each other's political theory in a chain of relation extending from Spinoza through Rousseau to Jefferson. Rather our claim is that what these three shared as thinkers and as political actors were confidence in popular government and a concomitant commitment to subject religious authorities to secular rule. On a deeper level, Spinoza, Rousseau, and Jefferson share a fundamentally similar conception of nature and the nature of power. I argue that the continuity these three thinkers demonstrated in their philosophical commitments revealed itself differently in their respective political contexts, and even with respect to the temperament of the individuals involved. On a spectrum, we can see Spinoza as the most abstract and philosophical proponent of democracy, Rousseau as an intermediate figure trying to bridge metaphysics and political theory, and Jefferson as the reflective statesman, a philosophically informed political leader no doubt, but primarily a political actor who brought democracy down from the heavens. We might alternatively conceive of a spectrum reflecting the different practical effects of their democratic faith; it would set Spinoza as the most conservative in comparison to the more populist Rousseau and Jefferson.

This book deals with some familiar topics in an unfamiliar way. There is certainly no shortage of recent studies about democracy, but given

contemporary assumptions about modern democracy's inherent pragmatism, it is perhaps not surprising that attempts to uncover its philosophical foundations in the radical Enlightenment are noticeably few. Likewise, while there is a considerable body of literature investigating the acrimonious relation between religion, on one hand, and modern and post-modern philosophy, on the other, there has been little effort to examine the theological and metaphysical foundations of modern democracy itself.[2] In this regard, a number of recent works stand out as important studies in relation to this book. Jonathan Israel's groundbreaking and landmark works on the democratic Enlightenment published over the last dozen years or so did a great deal to illuminate a major strand of democratic thought originating in Spinoza (Israel 2010, 2006, 2001). It was this radical wing of the enlightenment that, according to Israel, championed not only popular government, in contrast to both monarchy and liberal balanced constitutionalism, but also advanced an argument for nearly complete religious freedom that was much more comprehensive than the relatively tepid arguments for toleration associated with John Locke and his philosophical heirs in the classical liberal tradition. For Israel, this radical democratic wing of the Enlightenment supplied most of the intellectual substance that took form in the French Revolution and produced its legacy in the continental tradition.

Ronald Beiner's magisterial *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (2011) addresses the theological-political question as it emerged from the early modern period through to the twentieth century, from Machiavelli and Hobbes through to Heidegger and Rawls. Beiner persuasively reconstructs the diverse ways in which modern political thinkers grappled with the seemingly ineffable influence of religion on political life by dividing these responses into four main approaches: a civil religion school he associates with Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau; a liberal tradition exemplified by Spinoza, Locke, Mill, and Rawls; the modern theocracy movement of de Maistre and Schmitt; and the proponents of post-modern theism typified by Neitzsche and Heidegger. Finally, Patrick Deneen's *Democratic Faith* wonderfully captures the sense of historical gravity involved in any serious treatment of the intellectual origins of democracy: "After centuries of rejection by thinkers in antiquity, vilification by the medieval schoolmen, suspicion during the humanistic period of the Renaissance, scorn by the Enlightenment 'Founders' of that oldest continuous regime that we call democratic—America—democracy is, almost against all odds, the only regime most living humans now deem worthy of serious consideration, exploration, importation, and, finally faith" (Deneen 2005: xvi). Deneen finds the solution to what he takes to be the malaise and cynical complacency among contemporary

democrats in the works of writers such as Rousseau, Tocqueville, Plato, and Reinhold Neibuhr who allow for a "democratic realism" that accepts both the limiting factors of human nature and the possibility of improvement, even transformation, in government.

While the present work shares several major features and concerns with those of Israel, Beiner, and Deneen, this study is in its range and its configuration quite unique. I consider thinkers who are uniformly democrats, and yet who span centuries and inhabited both the Continental and Anglo-American traditions. Israel powerfully demonstrates the central role of Spinoza in the creation of the modern idea of democracy. However, his analysis is essentially focussed on Europe, and thus has not at this point given an account the importance of the American Republic in giving the formative ideals of democracy life in the modern world. The Eurocentric focus is also characteristic of Beiner's work on civil religion. Moreover, unlike the present study, Beiner examines the relation of politics and religion using categories that are not solely, or even primarily, democratic. Indeed, Beiner extends his analysis to the thinking of fierce anti-democrats such as Nietzsche and Heidegger. Arguably, the hero in Deneen's account of democratic faith turns out to be Rousseau, a central figure in my account as well. However, Deneen is silent with respect to both Spinoza and Jefferson who form the other two-thirds of the triumvirate of this study. In contrast to Deneen's "democratic realism" inspired largely by Rousseau, I argue that the Rousseauean conviction about basic human decency is only one version of the moral underpinning of democracy. For we can see in Spinoza, arguably the founder of modern democratic thought, a much more pessimistic account of human nature, one more akin to Hobbes' claim that we are natural enemies than to Rousseau's thesis of our natural goodness. I will try to show that it was the creative tension between the optimistic and pessimistic readings of human nature that provided much of the moral force in the development of modern democracy from Spinoza to Jefferson.

This book is divided into three parts. In Part I, I examine Baruch Spinoza's role as the intellectual father of modern democracy. He was arguably the first important philosopher ever to endorse democracy in his *Theologico-Political Treatise* not only as a plausible regime, but as the best form of government. Spinoza's argument was based primarily on his metaphysical theory of power relations. Democracy is the "best," that is strongest, regime, because it is the most natural regime. Spinoza revolutionized the state of nature concept inherited from Hobbes and Grotius, and in the process re-conceived the meaning of the state in a form unique to modernity. His democratic politics are also, however, inseparable from his confrontation with religious orthodoxy. The future prospects

for healthy democratic politics required, he thought, dismantling a pre-scientific world view rooted in a superstitious but persistent interpretation of scripture, an interpretation that rejected the laws of nature and imposed an authoritarian cast over political theory and practice. Spinoza's God is an eternal substance that he believed could provide the metaphysical support for the power of the democratic state, itself the most powerful expression of organized social power. Spinoza's democratic state, organized around the twin principles of power and freedom, strives to resolve the theological-political question with a broadly tolerationist policy that would encourage a general intellectual climate of openness to scientific and philosophical inquiry. For Spinoza, the classic struggle between philosophy and democracy is obsolete once religion has been fully suborned to reason.

In Part II we turn to Rousseau who, I shall argue, is Spinoza's rather unlikely heir in the democratic tradition. In many respects Spinoza and Rousseau were very different. Spinoza championed philosophy and science; Rousseau famously distrusted both. Spinoza advocated a policy of complete religious toleration, while Rousseau inclined toward a minimalist civil religion vaguely Christian in character. Rousseau lauded our natural goodness, while Spinoza thought us natural enemies. They were both, however, in their own way committed democrats. Rousseau was as much the scourge of aristocratic privilege and intolerant religious orthodoxy as Spinoza. Moreover, I shall argue that Rousseau's "general will" doctrine, arguably the democratic core of his political theory, shares much with Spinoza's theoretical reflections upon the modern state. Rousseau extended, and in key respects radicalized, Spinoza's democratic philosophy of power, projecting it into areas of life and culture that are relatively autonomous of political institutions and structures. For Rousseau, the decision whether to establish a professional theatre in a community was a crucial political question that would have scarcely concerned Spinoza. Rousseau's democratic politics was, however, in important respects as indebted to radical enlightenment philosophy as was Spinoza. Rousseau was convinced that the theological elements in modernity that were the bequest of over a millennium of Christian civilization made any return to classical republicanism impossible. It is in this context that Rousseau presented the metaphysics of the Savoyard Vicar's natural theology as the basis of a new democratic civil religion. Rousseau's "Spinozist Moment" involved mixing natural theology with a critique of revelation and a strong dose of democratic populism in a volatile combination that would provide to the nineteenth-century a definition of republicanism practically synonymous with democracy.

Part III is devoted to considering Thomas Jefferson, the third member of the triumvirate of thinkers and one who brought democracy down to

Earth from the metaphysical heights of Spinoza's enlightenment system building. I shall argue that this remarkable Virginian's career as active politician and intellectual doyen of the Founding Generation was instrumental to the consolidation of democracy as the legitimating principle of government in the Anglo-American tradition. It was Jefferson who made democratic republicanism the foundation of American constitutionalism, and thus began the gradual departure from the ideas of mixed constitutionalism that Americans inherited from Britain. We shall see that Jefferson's democratic turn in the French revolutionary period bore a resemblance to both Spinoza and Rousseau. Like Spinoza, Jefferson sought to reconstruct political orders on the basis of measurable power relations in nature. Following Rousseau, Jefferson strove to apply democratic egalitarian principles to various aspects of American life beyond simply government in the hopes of inspiring and crafting a lasting democratic culture in the land. Predictably, a key focus of this project for Jefferson related to addressing the theologico-political question. As in the case of the earlier continental democrats, Jefferson concluded that the political sovereignty of the people was incompatible with the traditional influence of revealed religion. As such, he made what I identify as the classic move characterizing each of the founders of modern democracy considered in this project when he put forth an argument that goes beyond mere toleration, and extended his aim to applying a rigorous naturalistic standard of revision to Scripture itself in his famous "Jefferson Bible." In his vision of a democratic polity that rested on the moral foundation of a de-theologized religious dispensation, Jefferson represented the practical culmination of the modern democratic revolution in thinking.

This study will pay particular attention to both the texts and contexts of Spinoza, Rousseau and Jefferson. These thinkers arguably thought more seriously and deeply about democracy than any of their contemporaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is, I will argue, clear from their treatises, tracts, speeches, and letters. They were also, however, themselves products of regimes which, seen not only in the broad sweep of history prior to their time but also in comparison to the heavy preponderance of governments in the world in their own time, were singular and fertile ground for democratic theory and practice. The Dutch Republic of Spinoza's era in the mid-seventeenth century was a unique polity that for decades was an enduring exemplar of government that reflected a measure of popular will after its successful resistance to, and break from, the Spanish Empire. Spinoza's Holland, and Amsterdam in particular, enjoyed a level of political and religious freedom, as well as commercial prosperity, unparalleled anywhere in the world at the time. While the Dutch Republic was far from democratic by contemporary

standards, having as it did many oligarchic features, Spinoza's idealized and democratized version of it sprang from popular elements embedded in the original structure.

In the case of Rousseau, his ancestral home in the Swiss city-state of Geneva was even more emphatically democratic than Spinoza's Amsterdam. In a world of powerful, centralized monarchies Geneva was an idyllic example of alpine democracy. This is not to suggest that Geneva ever actually lived up to an ideal of pure democracy in which the entire body of citizens decide all matters of policy and law. With its reliance on smaller executive committees in the administration of the city, Geneva had its share of oligarchic features as well. However, it was the idea of legislating by the Grand Council—in principle including all male citizens—that would become the touchstone for Rousseau's democratic philosophy, especially his doctrine of the general will. Despite his often difficult, and at times tortured, relation with his hometown, Rousseau never lost a deep admiration for the ideal of popular self-government that Geneva embodied. While Spinoza and Rousseau were both politically active in Holland and Geneva respectively, at least for specific periods of their lives, it is perhaps only fair to observe that their forays into politics and controversy were spectacularly unsuccessful. In this respect, Jefferson and his context are unique among the three figures we will entertain in this book as he enjoyed something about which Rousseau and Spinoza could only ever really dream; namely, real political power. He was also a participant in great events at a time of revolutionary change both in America and France. The development of Jefferson's thinking about democracy was informed by these events, even as his thought contributed and gave form to many of the changes around him in his role as President, Virginia Governor, Secretary of State and unofficial leader of the world's first mass democratic political party. As we shall see, it was the perhaps unlikely soil of colonial Virginia that brought forth the greatest champion of democratic liberty in the age of revolutions.

In order to understand the theological-political problem as it appeared to the early modern democrats, it is important to recall that modern rationalism perhaps best exemplified by Spinoza was intended to ground the claims of philosophic or scientific knowledge over and against the claims of revelation and religious orthodoxy. While Strauss famously identified the "self-destruction of reason" as the "inevitable outcome of modern rationalism," which he saw as a failed attempt to ground properly either the philosophic or the moral life (Strauss 1997a: 30–31),[3] the first modern democrats presented their rationalist premises as an improvement on ancient and medieval moral philosophy, which they believed had never succeeded in grounding reason in the reliable human passions. The

great challenge confronting democracy as far as Spinoza, Rousseau, and Jefferson were concerned had to do with the incompatibility between clerics armed with the authority of revelation, on one hand, and the requirements of sound civic, political life, on the other. For these modern democrats, the central question that the theological-political problem posed was whether a civil religion enforced by an establishment state, or toleration, was the best means to render religion amenable to political self-government. Whereas most early modern thinkers fell into either the civil religion tradition that sought to domesticate religion by putting it under direct political control, or the liberal-tolerationist school that sought to separate religion and politics, Spinoza, Rousseau, and Jefferson each put forth arguments that typically combined both a civil religion and toleration policy (Beiner 2011: 73–83, 87–120).[4] Indeed, I shall argue that the tension between the civil religion and tolerationist alternative to grappling with the problem of religion would be one of the chief characteristics of modern democracy from its very origins. Spinoza, Rousseau and even Jefferson pronounced upon or assumed the relevance of a metaphysical teaching that would lend cosmic support to human ethics and morality, even as they sought to eliminate religious influence over civil government. In this sense, the first modern democrats were all part of the enlightenment movement that sought to transform the way a democratic people conceive of religion and its relation to natural science.

The first modern democrats were also inevitably progenitors of liberal democracy. What we see when we examine the role of Spinoza, Rousseau, and Jefferson is not the rigid and static demarcation between liberal ideas, on one hand, and democratic commitments, on the other. Each of these thinkers, including Rousseau, subscribed to the foundational liberal principles of natural rights and government by consent. The underlying theoretical connection between liberalism and modern democracy is the principle of popular sovereignty, perhaps nowhere as fully illuminated as in the political thought of John Locke. However, as we shall see, Locke is a liberal in contradistinction to a democrat because his theory of individual rights and limited government did not necessarily require an endorsement of democracy as the best form of government. For Locke, or for that matter Montesquieu, individual liberty is best protected by a balanced government that typically includes both democratic and countermajoritarian elements as well. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the early modern democrats in this study is their tendency to view popular government with few constitutional checks as the logical implications of individual natural rights. I shall argue that Spinoza, Rousseau, and Jefferson were the thinkers most responsible for planting democracy in the term "liberal democracy." This process required rehabilitating or

retrofitting an older idea of democracy that had been seriously marginalized in the western tradition of political thought for centuries by the time in the seventeenth century, when Spinoza, Rousseau, and Jefferson came of age in the exotic locales in which some elements of democracy could survive in its semi-natural habitat such as commercial Holland, isolated alpine republics or scattered English colonies in North America. From Spinoza's bold claim that democracy is the most natural (and hence most rational) regime through to Rousseau's insistence that the "general will" of the people is sovereign in every government, and finally Jefferson's application of democratic principles to an extended republic through a mass political party, we shall see a common intellectual nerve that unites the first modern democrats. They are united in the confidence that nature and nature's God provides all the information and inspiration human beings need to create and sustain strong and prosperous democratic governments. However, in order to understand what gave the arguments of the first modern democrats their moral force, and what distinguished their efforts from those that preceded them, it is important to reacquaint ourselves with what democracy meant in pre-modernity.

A Prehistory of Democracy

Democracy existed as a form of government among some ancient Greek cities prior to the emergence of political philosophy in the classical period. As practised in those cities, democracy was characterized by two main features. First, there was an emphasis on equality in the exercise of rule. While Greek democracy was perfectly compatible with slavery (unlike its modern successor ancient democracy had no universalist egalitarian pretensions), ancient democratic practice did emphasize the equal right of male citizens to participate in government through institutional devices such as office selected by lot and with set term limits (Rahe 1992: 188–93). Second, ancient democracy was infused with a spirit of opposition to tyranny. That is to say, democratic regimes including most famously Athens often promoted a deeply engrained folk memory about abuses of former kings and tyrants (Ober 1989: 60–68). In this sense, democracy emerged as a kind of default position in the all-too-likely event of an abuse of power by elites. Thus democratic realism in the ancient world rested in part on suspicion about whether monarchy and oligarchy are consistent with human nature.

Arguably democracy did not become the subject of philosophical contemplation, at least in a written text, until the mid-fifth century BC when the Greek historian Herodotus made reflection on democracy as a form of government an important element of his massive *Histories*.

Ironically, Herodotus' first in-depth discussion of democracy, and the first discussion of democracy simply in the history of political philosophy, occurred in the context of a debate about government engaged in not by Greeks, but by their traditional enemies, the Persians. The context was the turbulent period following the death of the Persian king Cambyses and the brief usurpation by a pretender supported by the Persian clerical elite, the Magi. After a successful coup had overthrown the Magi regime, the seven chief conspirators met to discuss what form of government the Persians should adopt going forward.[5] This was a unique time in which Persian leaders at least were prepared to seriously consider alternatives to monarchy. As Herodotus relates, three of the seven engaged in a debate about the relative merits and vices of monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy. The champion of democracy, Otanes, spoke first and advocated the establishment of majority-rule democracy based on the principle of "equality before the law."[6] The moral force of Otanes' argument derives from his conviction that monarchy and oligarchy have proven untrustworthy, insofar as natural vanity (*hubris*) is bound to corrupt even good individuals if left unchecked. Majority-rule democracy, however, presupposes institutional mechanisms that prevent corruption such as election by lot, trial when one finishes a term of office, and ensuring that all deliberations take place before the full community of citizens who then exercise judgment. Predictably, Otanes' rivals Megabyzus and Darius, speaking for oligarchy and monarchy respectively, countered with the arguments that democracy is basically mob rule and "there is nothing more stupid or more given to brutality," than the mass of people (Herodotus 3.81.205). Depressingly, but also predictably, in Herodotus' account Darius is successful in convincing the majority of the conspirators to establish the Persian monarchy, and after some chicanery manages to have himself installed on the throne.

The Persian debate on government inevitably raises the question of whether Herodotus intended his account to be a defence or a rejection of democracy. Most scholars argue that Herodotus was a partisan either of monarchy or aristocracy (A. Ward 2008: 206n.53). However, Ann Ward persuasively argues that Herodotus' position on democracy is not simply identical to that of Otanes, and thus Herodotus' later praise for the idea of *isegorie* (equal right of speech) in Athens indicates its superiority to Otanes' idea of *isonomia* (equality before the law), which is a notion of freedom that could apply to non-democratic Sparta as well as Athens (Ober 1989: 71–79; Saxonhouse 1996: 33, 39; A. Ward 2008: 97). Otanes' case for democracy presented its advantages negatively as a means to prevent the pernicious effects of tyranny. He did not elaborate on the wisdom or moral superiority of *hoi polloi* versus those of a ruling elite. Nor did he even

attempt, unlike his rivals, to defend his preferred regime on the basis of its superior provision for national security. As Ward once again astutely observes, Otanes' defence of democracy in theory or "speech" is much less compelling than Herodotus' praise for the actions of democratic Athens in "deed," the democratic regime that arguably saved Greece from Persian conquest at the battle of Salamis (A. Ward 2008: 143–58). However, neither the Persian debate nor the *Histories* more generally claims that democracy is the most natural, most rational or the best regime.

The second major account of democracy among the ancients also emerged in the context of an epoch-transforming war. In Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, democratic Athens is one of the two poles in Greek civilization, along with aristocratic Sparta. As is true for Herodotus, most scholars contend that Thucydides was not a partisan of democracy, many even echoing Hobbes' famous judgment that "he least of all liked the democracy" (Saxonhouse 1996: 59). In order to understand Thucydides' attitude toward democracy, it is crucial to reflect on his evaluation of one of its most prominent statesman, Pericles, and the Athenian regime's most important decisions. Pericles' three speeches are the highlight of Thucydides' account of the early stages of the conflict. Pericles dominated Athenian politics in a way unparalleled by his peers. His strategic vision guided the Athenian war aims and undergirded the vision of empire which arguably lay at the root of the war against Sparta and its allies. The historian suggests that so great was Pericles' influence on the Athenian demos that "what was nominally a democracy was becoming in his hands government by the first citizen" (Thucydides 1996: 2.65.9).[7] The wisdom of Pericles' conservative war policy was, Thucydides claims, born out by later events. The inability of the Athenian *demos* and new leadership after Pericles' premature death to sustain his policy clearly was meant to be an indictment against the fecklessness of Athenian democracy rather than a criticism of Pericles. While Thucydides suggests that to some extent, Pericles' greatness was dependent upon the "abundant" resources made available to him by the wealth of the Athenian Empire, he also indicates that his successors at the head of the Athenian state failed with much of the same resources. Whereas Pericles' stature allowed him "to exercise an independent control over the multitude—in short, to lead them instead of being led by them," Thucydides insists that "with his successors it was different. More on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude" (Thucydides 2.65.8, 10).[8] In Thucydides' judgment then one reason for the failure of later Athenian leaders such as Cleon, Nicias, and Alcibiades was that they were unable or unwilling to lead the Athenian demos in a moderate long war strategy.