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Beyond the End of History: The Need for a ‘Radical Historicisation’ of Democracy in International Relations

Christopher Hobson

To properly comprehend democracy’s present and future role in politics, particularly in regards to processes of democratisation and democracy promotion, we must cultivate a more nuanced reading of democracy’s past. Needed is ‘a radical historicisation of democracy’, in Frank Ankersmit’s words, which foregrounds that democracy is a contingent historical fact, necessarily conditioned by its past. This position is contrasted to the standard account of democracy and its history provided by liberalism. Rather than comfortably accepting the current prominence of liberal democracy and the widespread normative agreement on this form of rule, this article instead considers the much longer tradition of thought which regarded democracy as something negative and very distinct from liberalism. In so doing, a sensitive reading of democracy’s past promotes a much more reflexive position, which opens space for considering whether the present state of affairs is actually much less secure and more fragile than many liberal proponents of democracy tend to suggest. At the same time, this approach also points the way towards a more considered case for democracy.

Keywords: democracy, democracy promotion, democratisation, end of history, liberalism

Introduction¹

If you establish democracy, you must in due time reap the fruits of a democracy.

Benjamin Disraeli (1850)

Disraeli’s observation is one that the current British Prime Minister would surely agree with. Where the two would diverge is over what exactly

1. The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Community’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013), ERC grant no. 202 596. All views expressed here remain those of the author. An earlier version of this argument was presented

these 'fruits' are. For the present-day leader, it would no doubt entail a mixture of goods; such as freedom, liberty, stability, a greater level of international peace and a range of other positives that are said to derive from government being based on the consent of the people. Disraeli, however, was not particularly keen on reaping democracy's harvest, which he viewed as consisting of rotten fruit. The above quote continues:

You will in due season have wars entered into from passion and not from reason; and you will in due season submit to peace ignominiously sought ignominiously obtained, which will diminish your authority and perhaps endanger your independence. You will in due season find your property is less valuable, and our freedom less complete.²

For the majority of democracy's past, opinion has generally sided with Disraeli. The now widespread agreement over the normative desirability and political legitimacy of democracy is noticeably different from the historically dominant understanding that regarded it as a dangerous and unstable form of rule which inevitably led to anarchy or despotism.

That a positive dynamic between democracy and liberty exists is now broadly accepted, and liberal democracy has become the pre-eminent form of domestic governance in the post-Cold War international order. Democracy, according to Amartya Sen, is a 'universal value'.³ The increasingly widespread agreement on democracy has led, however, to the historically more prevalent viewpoint – represented by Disraeli's judgement above – being disregarded or lost. As part of this history of forgetting, it is a liberal vision that largely structures our mental horizons of what democracy is and can be. With the final collapse of the people's and one party models of democracy in the 1980s, liberal democracy emerged as dominant, almost by default.⁴ For many observers, though, the defeat of communism did, indeed, signal the vindication of this particular model. Fukuyama boldly proposed that:

to the Department of International Relations, Australian National University in August 2008. As well as the participants at this seminar and the *Millennium* Conference, I would like to acknowledge Raymond Apthorpe, Peter Chambers, Murielle Cozette, John Dryzek, Milja Kurki and the *Millennium* Editors and reviewers for their helpful feedback. Special thanks to John Keane for his ongoing engagement and discussion on these issues.

2. Thomas Curson Hansard, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, Volume 153 (London: Cornelius Buck, 1859), 1245.

3. Amartya Sen, 'Democracy as a Universal Value', *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 3–17. See also: Carl Gershman, 'Democracy as Policy Goal and Universal Value', *The Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations* 6, no. 1 (2005): 19–38.

4. Adam Burgess, 'Universal Democracy, Diminished Expectation', *Democratization* 8, no. 3 (2001): 51–74, 59–63.

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.⁵

In this reading, the majority of democracy's long and rather negative past is downplayed or ignored completely, as a Whiggish narrative of democratic progress and expansion is constructed. This is representative of a more general tendency by liberal scholars to conceive of democracy in universal terms, abstracting democracy from its history and, in so doing, regarding it as something relatively unproblematic and settled.

The argument of this article is that to properly comprehend democracy's present and future role in politics, particularly in regards to processes of democratisation and democracy promotion, we must cultivate a much deeper and more nuanced reading of democracy's past. Needed is 'a radical historicisation of democracy', in Frank Ankersmit's words, which foregrounds that democracy is a contingent historical fact, and far from inevitable.⁶ This position inverts the standard reading of democracy and its history provided by liberalism. Rather than comfortably accepting the current prominence of liberal democracy and the widespread normative agreement on this form of rule, this article instead considers the much longer tradition of thought which regarded democracy as something negative and very distinct from liberalism. In so doing, the approach taken here highlights the historical contingency of the current democratic moment. It is argued that a sensitive reading of democracy's past promotes a much more reflexive position, which opens up space for considering whether the present state of affairs is actually much less secure than many proponents presume. At the same time, it also points the way towards a more considered case *for* democracy.

The argument will proceed as follows: first, democracy's current location in international relations will be considered, focusing on the liberal argument that democracy is universal as a value, and increasing also in practice. Second, it is suggested that the liberal interpretation provides a version of democracy's history that downplays or excludes the vast majority of its past, much of which largely contradicts this progressive account. Building on these observations an alternative reading of democracy's history is presented, one which explores the historically conditioned nature of both the liberal democratic model and democracy's present normative positioning. In the penultimate section, a reconsideration of democracy

5. Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest* 16 (1989): 3–18, 3.

6. Frank Ankersmit, *Political Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 10–11.

in light of this 'radical historicisation' will be undertaken, noting that it points towards a more cautious stance, highly cognisant of the limits and fragility of democracy. In concluding, the consequences of the argument for understanding democracy's role in contemporary politics will be considered.

Democracy at the 'End of History'

A defining feature of the post-Cold War era has been the ideational ascendancy of democracy. Reflecting on this, Larry Diamond observed that democracy 'came during the 1990s to be a *global* phenomenon, the predominant form of government, and the only broadly legitimate form of government in the world'.⁷ Writing as the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, reached a similar conclusion: 'democracy is more widely accepted and practiced today than ever before'.⁸ Continually growing acknowledgment, appreciation and institution of democracy across the globe suggests that it may be truly universal, and has increasingly come to be seen as a mark of a civilised state in the 21st-century international order.⁹ Michael Mandelbaum has recently described this state of affairs in particularly strong terms: 'the most important, and most hopeful, political fact of the twenty-first century is that the rise of democracy is the rule, while the risks its rise poses are the exception'.¹⁰

In the speeches and thought of world leaders, policy makers and observers, democracy is regularly equated with lofty ideals like freedom, liberty and equality. A particularly clear and significant case of this is found in the language of George W. Bush. A representative example of the laudatory manner in which he perceives democracy is seen in this speech on the importance of freedom in the Middle East:

The United States appreciates that democratic progress requires tough choices. Our own history teaches us that the road to freedom is not always even, and democracy does not come overnight. Yet we also know that for all the difficulties, a society based on liberty is worth the sacrifice. We know that democracy is the only form of government that treats individuals with the dignity and equality that is their right. We know from experience that

7. Larry Diamond, 'Universal Democracy?', *Policy Review*, no. 119 (June 2003), <http://www.policyreview.org/jun03/diamond_print.html>, accessed 10/8/04.

8. Kofi Annan, "'In Larger Freedom": Decision Time at the UN', *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 3 (2005): 63–74.

9. Christopher Hobson, 'Democracy as Civilisation', *Global Society* 22, no. 1 (2008): 75–95.

10. Michael Mandelbaum, *Democracy's Good Name* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), xiv.

democracy is the only system of government that yields lasting peace and stability.¹¹

This strong belief that democracy is the form of government most capable of providing the good life for individuals is perhaps one of the few things many would be willing to agree with Bush on. One could continue listing examples, but the basic point, namely, that there has been a remarkable consensus over the normative and political desirability of democracy in the post-Cold War world, is relatively uncontroversial.

The above quote from Bush also reveals a very distinct understanding of the relationship between democracy and history. It is a teleological conception, whereby historical change has an underlying logic or purpose to it, and an ultimate end point can be identified and potentially reached. This understanding is by no means limited to Bush; it has been a hallmark of many liberal scholars and practitioners that actively support and advocate liberal democracy. Fukuyama provides the clearest enunciation of this position.¹² He proposes that, 'there is a fundamental process at work that dictates a common evolutionary pattern for *all* human societies – in short, something like a Universal History of mankind in the direction of liberal democracy'.¹³ While the triumphalist narrative of Fukuyama has been heavily critiqued, it would be a mistake to discount this thesis. Few have agreed wholesale with the argument, but many continue to accept it in a qualified form, with his assertion of liberal democracy's superiority resonating especially widely.¹⁴ Indeed, as Žižek observes, 'it is easy to make fun of Fukuyama's notion of the End of History, but the dominant ethos today is "Fukuyamaian": liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally found formula of the best possible society'.¹⁵

Marks usefully categorises Fukuyama as the standard-bearer of a prominent movement she terms 'liberal millenarianism'. The defining characteristics of this position are: (1) a teleological conception of history, (2) an understanding that this *telos* is liberal democracy, (3) a belief that 'we', the West, have essentially reached this end point of liberal democracy, in comparison to a non-liberal 'they' that have yet to progress, and (4) an overriding sense of optimism and confidence about

11. George W. Bush, 'The Importance of Freedom in the Middle East', 13/1/08, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080113-1.html>>, accessed 25/7/08.

12. Another very clear example is found in the work of Michael Mandelbaum.

13. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), 48.

14. Susan Marks, 'International Law, Democracy and the End of History', in *Democratic Governance and International Law*, eds. Gregory Fox and Brad Roth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 532–66, 534–5.

15. Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008), 421.

democracy's present and future.¹⁶ Marks identifies this perspective with three eminent international legal scholars,¹⁷ but liberal millenarianism extends much further, and is notably found in the works of some of the most prominent thinkers on democratisation, Democratic Peace Theory and democracy promotion.¹⁸ What makes this movement all the more significant is precisely the close links that exist between the academic and policy-making realms when it comes to democratisation and democracy promotion.¹⁹ This has been most recently evidenced in the thinking and practice of the Bush administration and their neo-conservative backers, which placed the promotion of democracy abroad at the heart of their foreign policy agenda. Tony Smith has strongly argued that the liberal millenarian position particularly influential in shaping and giving justification to the 'liberal imperialism' of the Bush Administration.²⁰

For liberal millenarians – academics and policy-makers alike – democracy's merits and universality are taken to be demonstrated both normatively and empirically. In terms of its normative validity, 'democracy', in George W. Bush's words, 'leads to a better life'.²¹ Liberal democracy is seen as the form of government most capable of providing freedom, liberty, stability and equality, amongst other benefits. Robert Dahl comes up with a condensed list of ten desirable consequences of democracy: '(1) avoiding tyranny, (2) essential rights, (3) general freedom, (4) self determination, (5) moral autonomy, (6) human

16. Marks, 'International Law, Democracy and the End of History', 538–9.

17. Thomas Franck, 'The Emerging Right to Democratic Governance', *The American Journal of International Law* 86, no. 1 (1992): 46–91; Anne-Marie Slaughter, 'International Law in a World of Liberal States', *European Journal of International Law* 6, no. 1 (1995): 503–31; Fernando Tesón, 'The Kantian Theory of International Law', *Colorado Law Review* 92, no. 1 (1992): 53–102.

18. Some of the most notable examples are: Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy* (New York: Times Books, 2008), Marc Plattner, *Democracy Without Borders? Global Challenges to Liberal Democracy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), and Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

19. To take an important case, in 2004 Larry Diamond went to Iraq as a senior advisor to the Coalition Provisional Authority, after the American overthrow of the Baathist regime. On the relationship between academia and policy-making in regards to democratisation and democracy promotion, see: Nicolas Guilhot, *The Democracy Makers: Human Rights and International Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); William Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13–72.

20. Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil* (New York: Routledge, 2007). See also: Piki Ish-Shalom, "'The Civilization of Clashes': Misapplying the Democratic Peace in the Middle East", *Political Science Quarterly*, 122, no. 4 (2007–8): 533–54.

21. George W. Bush, 'State of the Union Address', 28/1/08, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080128-13.html>>, accessed 25/7/08.

development, (7) protecting essential personal interests (8) political equality ... (9) peace-seeking, (10) prosperity'.²²

The arguments of Democratic Peace Theory suggest that many of the characteristics and advantages of liberal democracy, notably the emphasis placed on the rule of law, cooperation and the peaceful resolution of political differences, are extended to their international behaviour. These strong normative grounds are closely linked to empirical claims that existing liberal democracies provide these goods, in either absolute or relative terms, at both the domestic and international levels. Moreover, the spread of liberal democracy beyond Western confines is taken as evidence that it is something which transcends cultural boundaries. Cited are opinion polls, such as the Pew Center and Barometer surveys, which indicate that democracy is the preferred form of government in all regions of the world.²³ In this sense, the demand for democracy is seen as universal. Increasingly so is the supply, according to trends mapped in the prominent Freedom House and Polity data sets on democracy. Both show a slow, but nevertheless clear, movement towards democracy across the globe over the last century.²⁴ This trend became more noticeable with the third wave of democratisation, which swept across much of the world from the 1970s to 1990s. The breadth of the third wave is seen as further proof that the desire for, and possibility of, this form of government is universal.²⁵ In this liberal reading, democracy may have emerged from a historically and culturally specific context, but it has transcended those localised beginnings and can be regarded as truly universal in its aspirations, scope and applicability.²⁶

A 'Radical Historicisation' of Democracy

In the dominant liberal millenarian vision universalised is a historically specific understanding of what democracy is and should be, underwritten by a teleological reading of its past that seeks to validate this truth claim. By positioning democracy in such a manner, much of its past is lost or downplayed, as a narrative of linear progress is constructed. Indeed, one of the most significant dimensions of democracy in world politics today is the extent to which the Whig reading of its history, as exemplified

22. Robert Dahl, *On Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 45.

23. Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*, 32–3.

24. For Freedom House, see: <<http://www.freedomhouse.org>> and for Polity, see: <<http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>>, accessed 4/9/08.

25. This is argued by Gershman, 'Democracy as Policy Goal and Universal Value', 20–22; Michael McFaul, 'Democracy Promotion as a World Value', *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2004–5), 147–63.

26. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 51; Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*.

by – though crucially not limited to – the liberal millenarians, has been naturalised, and the basic idea of democracy as a good goes unquestioned. As Ankersmit observes, ‘since we are all democrats (or so one may hope!), we tend to see democracy as the fulfillment of our political destiny and as the political system that will remain with us for the rest of human history’.²⁷ There is, however, nothing fixed or eternal about democracy, or any other method of governing for that matter. In previous epochs it was religious or monarchic conceptions that dominated understandings about the way people were ruled; today these are anachronisms that have long since disappeared from our worldview. In much the same way, there is nothing in democracy’s current positioning to suggest that it will inevitably endure. Even if liberal democracy represents the only viable state form at present – a highly contentious claim – in itself this does not preclude the possibility that non-democratic or post-democratic alternatives will emerge in the future. The liberal millenarian framework, however, is one that restricts our ability to recognise these kinds of changes.

To combat this self-defeating tendency of conceiving of democracy in abstracted, universal terms, needed is a ‘radical historicisation’ of democracy which consciously foregrounds its historically specific and conditioned nature. Ankersmit explains the consequences from adopting this alternative approach:

On the one hand, it obviously entails a relativisation of democracy: we should not see it as the epiphany of the ultimate political Truth, as we so often tend to do. On the other hand, such thinking may stimulate a more realistic attitude toward democracy than customarily is the case, an attitude that may be more beneficial to the cause of democracy than ahistoricist adoration and blind glorification.²⁸

Building on Ankersmit’s insights, it is argued here that such a position is able to better comprehend the contemporary nature of democracy, as it recognises that it is not just liberal democracy which is historically contingent, but also the normative agreement on democracy as being something valuable.

It is time to break free of the liberal straightjacket that constrains our mental horizons for understanding democracy. To demonstrate this central claim, a conceptual history of democracy will be sketched in two parts.²⁹ First, the liberal democratic model will be considered, and, second, the historical development of the present normative consensus

27. Ankersmit, *Political Representation*, 10–11.

28. *Ibid.*, 11.

29. The approach adopted here consciously argues against trying to define or fix democracy’s meaning. As Nietzsche so eloquently put it, ‘only that which has no history is definable’. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 80.

on democracy will be explored. In so doing, this argument is motivated by Quentin Skinner's important suggestion that:

The intellectual historian can help us appreciate how far the values embodied in our present way of life, and our present ways of thinking about those values, reflect a series of choices made at different times between different possible worlds. This awareness can help to liberate us from the grip of any one hegemonal account of those values and how they should be interpreted and understood. Equipped with a broader sense of possibility, we can stand back from the intellectual commitments we have inherited and ask ourselves in a new spirit of enquiry what we should think of them.³⁰

With this in mind, recovering the way the concept of democracy has changed and shifted over time points to there being nothing essential or universal in its present shape and meaning, especially in terms of the strongly positive normative connotations that currently surround it. In addition, it highlights that the liberal model now dominant is not natural, but was born of historical contingencies, and as circumstances change it could be superseded or disappear, if this process has not already begun.

Liberal Democracy: Liberalism and Democracy

I passionately love liberty, the rule of law,
and respect for rights, but not democracy.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1841)³¹

The present ideational dominance of the liberal democratic model and its powerful assertion of universality, backed by the hegemonic power of the United States and other liberal democracies, means it is of great importance to appreciate its historical specificity. Liberal democracy is of relatively recent vintage, emerging in the 19th century in the United States and Western Europe. Before their unlikely marriage, liberalism and democracy were historically distinct and separate doctrines, respectively concerned with liberty and equality. In this regard, liberalism and democracy each took a different emphasis from the banner of the French Revolution – '*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*'.³² Schmitt extends this distinction further to a separation in theory between 'liberal individualism' and 'democratic homogeneity', but notes that 'modern mass democracy

30. Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 116–17.

31. Quoted in Luciano Canfora, *Democracy in Europe: A History of an Ideology*, trans. Simon Jones (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 18–19.

32. Both rest, to a certain extent, on underspecified ideas of '*fraternité*', where some kind of nation or defined group is largely taken as a given. On this, see: Margaret Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996).

rests on the confused combination of both'.³³ This 'confusion' stems from democracy and liberalism sharing the same starting point – the individual – and the associated belief in basic political rights.³⁴ Nonetheless, 'while both liberalism and democracy are individualistic conceptions, the individual of the former is not the same as the individual of the latter'.³⁵ Put crudely, liberalism's individual is essentially atomistic, whereas democracy's individual is more directly societal. The shared emphasis on popular sovereignty and consent represents a point of convergence, but the consequences of the two doctrines can be contradictory. The initial, if somewhat banal, conclusion to be drawn is that the relationship between liberalism and democracy is highly complex, open to multiple variations and interpretations.

Given that liberalism and democracy are – historically and theoretically – distinct, this immediately suggests that liberal democracy is far from being a logical, let alone necessary, form. At first glance the potentially conflicting concerns with liberty and equality would seem to work against the combining of liberalism and democracy. In this regard, Bobbio usefully identifies three possible combinations between the two components that make up liberal democracy: (1) liberalism and democracy are compatible, (2) liberalism and democracy are anti-theoretical, and (3) liberalism and democracy are necessarily interlinked.³⁶ Theoretically, it is the first of these that is the most plausible: democracy and liberalism do share some similar concerns, and thus have the potential to combine, but this is not preordained. This differs, however, from the perspective dominant in liberal scholarship on democratisation and democracy promotion, where it is the third relationship – one of necessity – that largely prevails. Editor of the influential *Journal of Democracy*, Marc Plattner, proposes a 'profound kinship' exists between the two, with the title of his article – 'Liberalism and Democracy: Can't Have One Without the Other' – indicating this position very clearly.³⁷ While acknowledging that they have been historically distinct, Plattner argues that the 'underlying principle of liberalism ... that all human beings are by nature free and equal' allows for a more egalitarian form of democracy than that found previously, and partly because of this, even if the two doctrines were separate in the past, they are now inextricably linked.³⁸ Meanwhile, in Zakaria's argument, against which Plattner

33. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 13, 17.

34. Norberto Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy*, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (London: Verso, 2005), 37–44; Marc Plattner, 'Liberalism and Democracy: Can't Have One Without the Other', *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 2 (1998): 171–80.

35. Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy*, 42.

36. *Ibid.*, 48–9.

37. Plattner, 'Liberalism and Democracy', 173.

38. *Ibid.*, 175.

is reacting, liberalism and democracy are carefully distinguished, but his concern with 'illiberal democracies' is precisely that they are deficient in one of the two 'necessary' components, namely, liberalism.³⁹ The underlying premise remains the same as in Plattner: liberalism and democracy are interlinked, with the debate ultimately being a technical one over 'sequencing'.

Nineteenth-century liberals, in contrast, believed that there was nothing inevitable or normal about this pairing of liberalism and democracy. Rather, it was the second relationship – one of incompatibility – which prevailed in their thinking. Given the tendency by liberals today to naturalise the liberal democratic model, it is instructive reflecting on the concerns of their predecessors, who greatly feared the advent of democracy. While liberals strongly advocated popular sovereignty against monarchy and aristocracy, this support generally did not extend to popular government. This was especially evident during the 1848 Revolutions where liberals soon sided with conservatives against the more revolutionary socialists and communists who were associated with democratic demands. Reflecting on the events of 1848 in Paris, Alexander Herzen acutely identified the halfway position of liberals: 'they want freedom and even a republic provided that it is confined to their own cultivated circle. Beyond the limits of their moderate circle they become conservatives'.⁴⁰ This cautious response emerged from a concern that the levelling instincts of democracy were a great threat to the liberties which had only just been wrestled from monarchs and aristocrats. In this regard, Herbert Spencer announced that, 'the function of Liberalism in the past was that of putting a limit to the powers of kings. The function of true Liberalism in the future will be that of putting a limit to the powers of Parliaments'.⁴¹

The growing sense of democracy's inevitably made liberals all the more worried about understanding, limiting and controlling it. Writing on the subject in the 1860s, Matthew Arnold observed that: 'at the present time, almost everyone believes in the growth of democracy, almost everyone talks of it, almost everyone laments it'.⁴² Indeed, when Tocqueville had earlier travelled to America, it was partly to assess whether the 'rising

39. Fareed Zakaria, 'The Rise of Illiberal Democracy', *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22–43.

40. Quoted in Geoffrey Ellis, 'The Revolution of 1848–1849 in France', in *The Revolutions in Europe 1848–1849: From Reform to Reaction*, eds. R. J. W. Evans and Hartmut Pogge Von Strandmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27–54, 49.

41. Quoted in Jens Christophersen, *The Meaning of 'Democracy' as used in European Ideologies from the French to the Russian Revolution* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1966), 174.

42. Quoted in Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 31.

‘tide’ of democracy would engulf Europe, or if it could be managed.⁴³ The great concern of 19th-century liberals, arising from Cooper and Tocqueville’s accounts of the American experience, was democracy’s perceived susceptibility to the ‘tyranny of the majority’,⁴⁴ whereby the rights of the minority would be sacrificed to the unrestrained will of the majority. Partly on these grounds liberals were against the institution of universal suffrage, seeing it as a grave threat to the basic liberties they held dear. Not only would a widespread franchise facilitate the potential destruction of constitutional barriers protecting individual rights, it would also result in the voices of the enlightened few being drowned out by the uneducated, and thus unenlightened, masses.

At the heart of liberal fears was the belief that in a democracy the liberties of the individual would be sacrificed at the altar of equality. The rights of the minority would be subject to the caprice of the unrestrained majority, which, given the tremendous socio-economic changes taking place, would necessarily be the poorer, less educated working classes. Nineteenth-century liberals widely subscribed to Lord Acton’s (other) dictum that, ‘the effective distinction between liberty and democracy ... cannot be too strongly drawn’.⁴⁵ One of the clearest aims of Lecky’s two volume study, *Democracy and Liberty*, published in 1898, was to demonstrate that ‘democracy is not liberty’.⁴⁶ It is worth quoting Lecky at length, as he provides an excellent representation of the liberal position at the time:

strong arguments may be adduced, both from history and from the nature of things, to show that democracy may often prove the direct opposite of liberty.... Equality is the idol of democracy, but, with the infinitely various capabilities and energies of men, this can only be attained by a constant, systematic, stringent repression of their natural development. Whenever

43. ‘Democracy is like a rising tide; it only recoils to come back with greater force, and soon one sees that for all its fluctuation it is always gaining ground. The immediate future of European society is completely democratic: this can in no way be doubted.’ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, ed. Jacob Peter Mayer (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 67.

44. Tocqueville’s concerns were echoed by James Fenimore Cooper in *The American Democrat*, published in 1838, two years before the second volume of *Democracy in America*. James Fenimore Cooper, *The American Democrat* (Cooperstown: H. & E. Phinney, 1838).

45. This comment was written in approval of the distinction drawn between the two concepts in Sir Thomas Erskine May’s classic, *Democracy in Europe*. Reflecting on the revolutions of 1848, May wrote: ‘from this critical year of revolutions the moral may be drawn that freedom is the surest safeguard against democracy’. Both quoted in Arne Naess, Jens Christophersen and Kjell Kvalø, *Democracy, Ideology and Objectivity* (Oslo: Oslo University Press, 1956), 127–8.

46. William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *Democracy and Liberty*, Volume 1 (London: Longmans, Greed and Co., 1899), 257.

natural forces have unrestricted play, inequality is certain to ensue. Democracy destroys the balance of opinions, interests, and classes, on which constitutional liberty mainly depends, and its constant tendency is to impair the efficiency and authority of parliaments, which have hitherto proved the chief organs of political liberty.⁴⁷

The contradiction in the programme of 19th-century liberals was that the language used to claim and secure constitutions and liberal rights was couched in a universalist manner, which made it difficult to limit indefinitely calls for the extension of basic rights and the franchise. In this sense, the subsequent appearance of liberal democracy was not so much due to most liberals wishing for it. Rather, it emerged in part from a miscalculation in the strategy used to entrench liberal rights, combined with a gradual recognition that the best way to manage democracy's seemingly unavoidable rise was to limit and control it as best they could. As it happened, the advent of extensive, and eventually universal, suffrage did not result in the calamities that many liberals had worried about. Writing at the turn of the century, the author of *Unforeseen Tendencies of Democracy* observed that before universal suffrage 'there were many fears about the bad influence of their [the excluded masses'] vote on the government, but there were no fears that they would not immediately and fully exercise the privilege conferred on them'.⁴⁸ Liberals only became more convinced supporters of democracy once it was demonstrated that it was not the great threat to individual rights it was thought to be, and the extension of the franchise had proven to be relatively palatable. To summarise, there was little preordained in the modern composite 'liberal democracy' that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In considering the historically specific nature of liberal democracy, one must further note that this union was not, by any means, an even one. It may be the case that democracy can be traced back to ancient Greece, but in the modern era it was liberalism that came first, and would structure the subsequent reappearance of democracy. The result has been that in the liberal democratic model which has appeared in the West and is now promoted widely, 'liberalism is its absolute premise and foundation and penetrates and shapes its democratic character'.⁴⁹ This point is fundamental. Even if one accepts the position that democracy and liberalism are necessary partners – which is questionable on both historical and theoretical grounds – the way the two components have been reconciled in the model now prominent was not logically inevitable, but historically determined. Liberalism has shaped democracy, being the dominant partner

47. *Ibid.*, 256–7.

48. Edwin Lawrence Godkin, *Unforeseen Tendencies of Democracy* (Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co., 1898), 60–1.

49. Bhikhu Parekh, 'The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy', in *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East, West*, ed. David Held (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 156–76, 157.

in this relationship. A representative example of this is the institution of the secret ballot: an individual's involvement in the exercise of political power through electing his or her representatives is no longer a communal act, but something private, as individuals are totally atomised in their participation. Within this prevailing model of liberal democracy, liberalism provides the confines within which democracy exists. There is no reason logically speaking, however, why this should necessarily be the case. The composite nature of liberal democracy suggests it is open to various possible formations, depending to some extent on how each of its two parts is understood and incorporated. To begin with, alternate models of liberal democracy could be based on an equal weighting between the two components, or democracy instead playing the hegemonic role. Indeed, it is most likely that different forms of liberal democracy would garner more support and traction in non-Western environments where different conceptions of the individual and community exist.⁵⁰ This is not to mention alternative models of democracy beyond the liberal framework, which likewise could be much more applicable in other settings. The larger point is that even if one accepts the (contestable) proposition that the liberal model represents the most viable form of democracy in the current politico-economic environment, there is still considerable space for difference within it.

By recognising that liberal democracy as found in the West, most prominently in the United States, is a historically contingent and particular form, the teleological and universalist account of democracy that underpins the liberal millenarian position is brought into question. Like all other forms of rule, liberal democracy is a system of government that emerged in a historical context to answer a set of political questions unique to that time.⁵¹ The liberal democratic model that now prevails is one which has emerged from the West over the last centuries and necessarily reflects this heritage. Of particular importance is that this variant, which strongly emphasises the liberties and freedom of the individual, is the result of a specific set of historical contingencies, where liberalism was fighting the prevailing collectivist worldview that had preceded it.⁵²

Liberalism's conception of the individual and society is very distinctive, and one that is different from historically prevalent understandings, even within the West.⁵³ In this regard, Parekh observes that 'different societies define and individuate people differently. They also therefore define freedom, equality, rights, property, justice, loyalty, power

50. *Ibid.*, 172.

51. Ankersmit, *Political Representation*, 92–3.

52. Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Sigmond, *The Democratic Experience: Past and Prospects* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1969), 79–80.

53. Anthony Arblaster, *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 8.

and authority differently.⁵⁴ The Western tradition of liberalism, and thus the liberal democratic model that stems from it, provides one set of answers to these questions. In considering alternate conceptions of democracy within Africa, Bradley notes that it is 'a configuration of governance moulded by the general values, biases, and nuances of a given culture'.⁵⁵ This observation is borne out in the United States and Western Europe, where the specific kind of liberal democracy to emerge there is not natural, but diachronically conditioned. Through a more historically sensitive appraisal of this version of democracy, space is opened up for forms of democracy promotion that are more aware of different cultural and historical contexts. It may be the case that alternate versions of liberal democracy, or perhaps even non-liberal or post-liberal models of democracy, may be better suited to these diverse circumstances. Furthermore, recognising the contextuality of this model points towards examining the differences, or the gap, between the specific circumstances in which it first appeared, and the locales within which liberal democracy is now being practised and promoted.

In highlighting that liberalism and democracy are not a natural or inevitable pairing, as well as the particularity of the liberal democratic model now prominent, this allows for a more complex conception of democracy in terms of its past. In so doing, an even more basic observation, too often lost, comes to the fore: it is not only liberal democracy which is relatively new; the existing consensus over democracy as a good is also remarkably recent, unique to the present age and far from natural or inevitable:

Democracy Before Liberalism

Democracy has always been the naughty boy in the School of Ages, so he has had to bear the blame of anything done wrong, as a king beheaded or a city burnt; but he is getting old enough to defend himself, and will probably give us some new versions.⁵⁶

Harwood's observation nicely represents the change in democracy's meaning and significance which was taking place at the close of the 19th century: a new, liberal version was emerging, as the historically dominant verdict against democracy was slowly being overthrown. This movement proved so successful that the long-standing interpretation of democracy as unworkable and undesirable has been almost totally eclipsed. When considered over the *longue durée*, however, it quickly becomes apparent that the current normative agreement over democracy is a historically rare result. From this perspective the liberal interpretation is inverted. Instead of emphasis being on the inevitable 'triumph'

54. Parekh, 'The Cultural Particularity of Liberal Democracy', 169.

55. Matthew Todd Bradley, "'The Other': Precursory African Conceptions of Democracy', *International Studies Review* 7, no. 3 (2005): 407–31, 407.

56. George Harwood, *The Coming Democracy* (London: Macmillan, 1882), 40.

of liberal democracy, a position Fukuyama still strongly maintains,⁵⁷ it is on the historically dominant narrative of democracy as unworkable, undesirable and antiquated: something that should be permanently consigned to the trash bin of history. Foregrounding this dimension of democracy's past allows us to consider matters from a different perspective, one that is much more attuned to the complexities and fragility of democracy. It leaves us better equipped not only to comprehend the limitations and antinomies in established liberal democracies, but also to appreciate the impact of different historical and cultural contexts on attempts to institute and promote democracy elsewhere. In this reading, the liberal millenarian vision is replaced with a much more cautious perspective, founded in an awareness that for the vast majority of democracy's long life it has been ignored, derided and denounced.

After the fleeting appearance of *dēmokratia* in ancient Greece, democracy effectively disappeared for the greater part of two millennia. Athens, which was seen as the birthplace of democracy and the fullest embodiment of its meaning, seemingly left behind a long list of reasons advising against it: democracy was a violent, chaotic, unstable form of rule where those least capable of ruling wisely exercised power in a wilful and selfish manner. Athens would cast a very long shadow over democracy. When Edmund Burke castigated the French revolutionaries for what he perceived to be their misguided attempt to establish this form of rule, he would recall the Athenian experience: 'until now, we have seen no examples of considerable democracies. The ancients were better acquainted with them.... If I recollect rightly, Aristotle observes, that a democracy has many striking points of resemblance with a tyranny.'⁵⁸ Indeed, the writings of Aristotle, along with Thucydides and Plato especially – all taken as reliable, insightful eyewitnesses to democracy's failings – proved to be very influential in producing negative interpretations.⁵⁹ Even if their thought was much more ambiguous on the matter, it was collectively read as providing extremely strong evidence against democracy. In *History of the Peloponnesian War* it was the voice of Alcibiades that spoke loudest, describing Athenian democracy as an 'acknowledged folly', with Hobbes stating in the introduction to his translation that 'for his [Thucydides'] opinion touching the government of the state ... it is manifest that he least of all liked the democracy'.⁶⁰

57. Francis Fukuyama, 'They Can Only Go So Far', *Washington Post*, 24/8/08, B01.

58. Edmund Burke, *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, Volume 2 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), 94.

59. Jennifer Roberts, *Athens on Trial: the Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

60. Thomas Hobbes, *Thucydides*, ed. Richard Schlatter (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1975), 13–14, 6.89.6.

In considering the Athenian legacy, it is very important to recover the original connotations of the term *dēmokratia*, which have been obscured by the tendency to translate it simply as the people (*dēmos*) exercising power (*kratos*). While *dēmos* can be read as being the whole political community, it was generally understood in a more narrow sense as one class of people: the poor multitude. This interpretation was found notably in authors such as Plato and Aristotle, and would structure the concept of democracy well into the 19th century.⁶¹ *Kratos*, meanwhile, has a forceful and almost violent dimension to its meaning that has been wholly lost. The term *kratos* 'refers to might, strength, imperial majesty, toughness, triumphant power, and victory over others, especially through the application of force'.⁶² This meant, as Keane explains, 'in a *dēmokratia* the *dēmos* holds *kratos*, which was another way of saying that it is prone to act forcefully, to get its own particular way by using violence, either against itself but especially against others'.⁶³ What were thus taken as the defining elements of the Athenian experience – the direct and forceful exercise of power in a small polity by the poor many – formed the backbone of complaints and concerns which condemned democracy to disuse and irrelevance for centuries. Emblematic was the vivid description of democracy provided by a British High Court judge writing in the late 19th century:

It is the poor saying to the rich, 'We are masters now, by the establishment of liberty, which means democracy, and as all men are brothers, entitled to share and share alike in the common stock, we will make you disgorge or we will put you to death.'⁶⁴

This kind of interpretation in part reflected that, from the ancient Greeks onwards, the great canon of Western political thought was almost united in their rejection of democracy. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, the *philosophes*, none spoke of it in directly positive terms. What marked democracy well into the late 18th century was a near universal consensus over it being perceived as something unfeasible and undesirable. At the time, democracy remained not much more than a scholarly and antiquarian idea that had little purchase or relevance in politics.⁶⁵

Considering this overwhelmingly negative perception of democracy, it is not surprising that the American and French Revolutions were not

61. Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'Demos versus "We, the People": Freedom and Democracy Ancient and Modern', in *Dēmokratia*, eds. Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 126; Godkin, *Unforeseen Tendencies of Democracy*, 24.

62. John Keane, 'Does Democracy Have a Violent Heart?', War, Culture and Democracy Project Conference, The University of Sydney, 4–6/7/06, 15.

63. *Ibid.*, 16.

64. James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and Three Brief Essays*, reprinted edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 175.

65. Pierre Rosanvallon 'The History of the Word "Democracy" in France', *Journal of Democracy* 6, no 4 (1995): 140–54.

primarily about democracy, despite the retrospective significance given to them as 'democratic revolutions'.⁶⁶ Democracy still meant *dēmokratia*: a direct form of social rule, inapplicable and inappropriate to the modern context these revolutions were occurring in. In America, the Founding Fathers, well versed in the classics, were at pains to ensure that the United States would not become a democracy. Madison clearly stated the prevailing view in the *Federalist Papers*: 'democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security, or the rights of property; and have, in general, been as short in their lives, as they have been violent in their deaths'.⁶⁷ These failings were seen as stemming largely from the direct nature of Athenian rule, in comparison to the representative republic the Americans sought to institute. The founders of the United States followed in a long tradition of political thought which regarded an unmixed democracy as inappropriate and dangerous. During the American constitutional convention Benjamin Rush reminded his colleagues of this viewpoint: 'a simple democracy has been aptly compared ... to a volcano that contained within its bowels the fiery materials of its own destruction'.⁶⁸ When establishing the United States the founders did not see themselves as instituting a democracy. That the modern world's most fabled democracy actively denied this label little over two hundred years ago offers a stark reminder of just how recently the term has come to signify something positive.

Similarly, the French revolutionaries of 1789 largely avoided the concept of democracy. The classical meaning still dominated the imaginations of those seeking to restore, reform or overthrow the *ancien régime*. Democracy continued to conjure up images of an archaic form of rule found in city-states marked by instability and unrest; something completely inappropriate and impossible for a large, modern nation like France. In this regard, representative is the thought of Abbé de Sieyès, author of the catalysing *What is the Third Estate?* and one of the most central political actors in the first stages of the Revolution. Sieyès still understood democracy as a direct form of rule only possible in a polity of very limited size, leading him to state in unequivocal terms that,

66. See R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Challenge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959) and *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Struggle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964). For an extended discussion on these cases, see Christopher Hobson, *Democracy and International Politics: A Conceptual History* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Australian National University, 2009).

67. James Madison, '10th Federalist Paper', in *The Federalist (The Gideon Edition)*, ed. George Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 42–9, 46.

68. Quoted in Leslie Lipson, *The Democratic Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 45.

'I always maintain that France is not, and cannot be a *democracy*.'⁶⁹ When the Revolution was further radicalised, it was primarily the language of republicanism, and not that of democracy, which prevailed.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, the Revolution was seen by many observers as a seriously misguided attempt to institute a democracy. In his famous polemic, Burke noted that, 'I do not know under what description to class the present ruling authority in France. It affects to be a pure democracy'.⁷¹ During and after the Revolution democracy became closely linked to the excesses of the Jacobins and the Terror. Reflecting half a century later, Giuseppe Mazzini observed that people 'no sooner hear the name of democracy than the *phantom* of '93 rises immediately before them. With them democracy is a guillotine surmounted by a red cap.'⁷² Events in France were widely taken as unnecessary confirmation that democracy was a dangerous, anarchic form inappropriate for modern conditions, one where the base and violent passions of the mob prevailed, until it descended into complete chaos, only to be rescued by a ruler even more absolute than the monarchs of the *ancien régime*. Writing to William Wilberforce, John Jay summed up prevailing sentiment: 'The French revolution has so discredited democracy ... that I doubt its giving you much more trouble.'⁷³

Jay's prediction proved accurate for much of the 19th century: democracy continued to be viewed in largely negative terms, with only a handful of radicals willing to speak of it positively. During the revolutions of 1848, there was a considerable spike in the discussion and usage of democracy, but it was much more closely linked to the radical positions of socialism and communism. Complaining of the events in France, Guizot described democracy as 'the echo of an ancient social war-cry', continuing that:

It is the chaos of our political ideas and our political morality – that chaos disguised sometimes under the word *democracy*, sometimes under that of *equality*, sometimes under that of *people* – which opens all the gates, and throws down all the ramparts of society before it.⁷⁴

69. Quoted in Murray Forsyth, *Reason and Revolution: The Political Thought of Abbé Sieyès* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1987), 138.

70. Despite the common concerns these two doctrines share, it is important to recognise that they are historically distinct. On this point, see: Giovanni Sartori, *Democratic Theory* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 262–3.

71. Burke, *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, 94.

72. Giuseppe Mazzini, *Thoughts upon Democracy in Europe (1846–1847)* (Centro Editoriale Toscano, 2001), 4.

73. Quoted in Regina Ann Morkell Morantz, '*Democracy*' and '*Republic*' in *American Ideology (1787–1840)* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Columbia University, 1971), 149.

74. François Guizot, *Democracy in France*, Third Edition (London: John Murray, 1849), 19, 35.

Democracy retained the menacing connotations of old, threatening social unrest and turmoil. Notably, in the famous *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels stated that, 'the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy'.⁷⁵ As discussed above, democracy was later reconciled with liberalism, but at this time, democracy was further stigmatised by being much more closely associated with socialism and communism. The classical interpretation of democracy as a social form of rule was reiterated, only now it was the growing working classes that warned against its institution.

Even when Woodrow Wilson was attempting to 'make the world safe for democracy',⁷⁶ it was far from being fully accepted – in either institutional or normative terms – by the very countries fighting in democracy's name. The Entente Powers reconciled themselves to Wilson's democratic war aims very gradually and grudgingly. Arthur Ponsonby, one of the founders of the Union of Democratic Control, established in Great Britain in 1914 to pressure for the extension of democracy to the realm of foreign affairs, feared that the Great War would strengthen anti-democratic forces at home. He worriedly wrote that, 'democracy may have to fight over some of the old ground again before it can hope to advance further'.⁷⁷ Ponsonby's fears were not without foundation, given that the British embrace of democracy at the end of the 19th century was a hesitant and incomplete one.⁷⁸ Indeed, it was not until 1918 that all men over the age of 21, as well as women over 30, were granted the right to vote in Great Britain.

Reflecting the limited normative purchase democracy had secured were these comments by Sir William Ridgeway, a noted Cambridge classics professor, published in *The Times* in 1915: 'a modern world filled only with democratic States would be like a stagnant pond in some shady spot in which no higher animal forms could live but overflowing with all the lower and baser forms of life'.⁷⁹ Nonetheless, with Wilson memorably framing the Allied war aims in terms of democracy, followed by their subsequent victory and the near universal extension of the franchise in many democracies, as well as it being instituted in some places for the first time, the nor-

75. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The Manifesto of the Communist Party', 1848. <<http://www.newyouth.com/archives/classics/marxengels/communist-manifesto.html>>, accessed 27/8/08.

76. Woodrow Wilson, 'The World Must be Made Safe for Democracy', in *A Day of Dedication: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Albert Fried (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 308.

77. Arthur Ponsonby, *Democracy and Diplomacy* (London: Methuen & Co, 1915), 110–11.

78. Jon Roper, *Democracy and its Critics: Anglo-American democratic thought in the nineteenth century* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 21; Canfora, *Democracy in Europe*, 101–3.

79. Quoted in Ponsonby, *Democracy and Diplomacy*, 111.

mative and political rehabilitation of democracy in the West was advanced considerably. 'After 1919 democratic values were increasingly accepted as a kind of ideological equivalent to the coin of the realm', Mayall observes, 'even if circumstances prevented it from being minted in most parts of the world.'⁸⁰ This is not to deny that the subsequent rise of fascism posed a fundamental challenge to democracy, nevertheless it was in the early decades of the 20th century that democracy took on the positive evaluative dimension that it has yet to lose in the West to this day.

What this brief genealogy of democracy indicates is quite how recent and unlikely the current normative consensus over democracy is. It was not until the 1840s that democracy had clearly been rehabilitated in American political discourse,⁸¹ and it would take at least another half-century for other major Western liberal democracies to start following suit in discursive and institutional terms. It was only with Woodrow Wilson giving democracy pride of place during World War I that it fully emerged as a positive political concept, even if contestation over its meaning and value has since continued. Seen in this light, which shows the historical durability of the unflattering and negative interpretation of democracy, it is remarkable how quick liberals are to view it in an ahistorical, universal manner. It is also worth noting, though, that far from corresponding to Gallie's now commonplace description of democracy as an 'essentially contested concept',⁸² democracy has been for most of its life essentially *uncontested*. For the greater part of two millennia there was a very high level of consensus over democracy, and this was wholly negative: it was considered a dangerous, unstable, violent and antiquated form of rule. Democracy was long dismissed and derided as a foolhardy adventure that could only end in disaster. It is only in the last two centuries that the 'descriptive' and 'evaluative' dimensions of democracy have been contested, challenged and changed.⁸³

Democracy's Futures Past?

In essence, a 'radical historicisation' of democracy is based on a recognition of 'how brief and slight the impress of democracy upon the course of human history' has been.⁸⁴ This approach enables a much more reflexive position, with an acknowledgement of the vicissitudes of history and

80. James Mayall, 'Democracy and International Society', *International Affairs* 76, no. 1 (2000): 61–75, 64.

81. Morantz, 'Democracy' and 'Republic' in American Ideology.

82. W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964), 157–91.

83. For a discussion on the 'descriptive' and 'evaluative' dimensions of concepts, see Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics. Volume 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 145–57.

84. John Hobson, *Democracy and a Changing Civilisation* (London: John Lane and the Bodley Head, 1934), 1.

the frailties of democracy informing how we appreciate the role it plays in international politics. By recognising the relatively short historical agreement on democracy as something possible and desirable, it promotes both humility and caution, in contrast to the overly optimistic and confident attitude that defines liberal millenarianism. In this sense, the argument here shares some commonalities with Reinhold Niebuhr's classic, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*.⁸⁵ What Niebuhr sought to do was separate the larger idea of democracy from the specific liberal form with which it has been so closely identified over the last century. In the foreword, Niebuhr explains that:

The thesis of this volume ... grew out of my conviction that democracy has a more compelling justification and requires a more realistic vindication than is given it by the liberal culture with which it has been associated in modern history. The excessively optimistic estimates of human nature and of human history with which the democratic credo has been historically associated are a source of peril to democratic society; for contemporary experience is refuting this optimism and there is danger that it will seem to refute the democratic as well.⁸⁶

Without necessarily subscribing to Niebuhr's distinctive brand of Christian realism, one can recognise that by detaching democracy from liberalism, as part of taking a more reflexive approach to appreciating democracy and its history, a more secure foundation for it can be built.

Through inverting the liberal millenarian account of democracy and its past, an important dimension recovered centres on the unstable and uncertain nature of this form of rule. While this has historically been used as an argument *against* democracy, it can be the basis for a more reflective case *for* democracy. In the classical interpretation democracy was seen as especially susceptible to collapse, as there was no protection from the whims of the wilful, passionate, erratic *dēmos*, liable to change their minds as often as the wind changed. An interesting variation on this perspective surprisingly comes from a number of conservative thinkers in the 19th century. Reflecting on Athens, the reactionary Joseph de Maistre still can admit that, 'democracy has one brilliant moment', before carefully qualifying his statement: 'but it is one moment, and it is necessary to pay dearly for it... In general, all democratic governments are only transient meteors, whose brilliance excludes durations.'⁸⁷ Noteworthy is that a thinker such as de Maistre acknowledges positives in the democratic form, discounting it partly on the grounds that it is never able

85. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1945).

86. *Ibid.*, v.

87. Joseph de Maistre, *Against Rousseau: 'On the State of Nature' and 'On the Sovereignty of the People'*, trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996), 159–60.

to be properly institutionalised or stabilised, as the *dēmos* is an inchoate grouping unable to fully manifest itself or its will.⁸⁸ Writing half a century later, Henry Sumner Maine echoed de Maistre's observations, noting that 'of all the forms of government, Democracy is by far the most difficult' and this primarily accounted for its 'ephemeral duration'.⁸⁹ Another conservative that complained of the complexity of democracy was Metternich. He explained to an American friend that, 'democracy, far from being the oldest and simplest form of government, as it is often maintained, is the last of all to have been invented and the most complicated'.⁹⁰ What united both Maine and Metternich was a belief that proponents did not seriously reflect on the problems and difficulties democracy entailed. Maine complained, 'convinced partisans of democracy care little for instances which show democratic governments to be unstable. These are merely isolated triumphs of the principle of evil.'⁹¹ Maine's problem with the emerging representative form of democracy was its complexity, and, moreover, that it could only be achieved in an incomplete and limited sense, as it was not genuinely possible for the *dēmos* to exercise power in a large society, even indirectly.⁹² This contradiction created great potential for instability in Maine's view. For these highly sceptical observers, regardless of any potential benefits democracy may provide, the complexities and difficulties of this form of rule strongly warned against it.

Modern democracy has proven these conservative critics wrong, demonstrating that a stable and lasting form of democracy is possible, with the representative system functioning to institute, construct and mediate the will of the *dēmos*. At the same stage, the people and their will are always approximated, but never fully manifest. While one can make strong normative and historical arguments that representation *is* democratic,⁹³ the 'gap' it introduces between the people and its representatives marks an ongoing tension, if not antinomy, at modern democracy's heart. The result, as Ankersmit explains, is that 'representative democracy is a far more subtle, sophisticated, and therefore also a far more vulnerable political system than we tend to believe'.⁹⁴ Undoubtedly, this

88. It is in this sense that de Maistre defined democracy as '*an association of men without sovereignty*'. *Ibid.*, 142.

89. Henry Sumner Maine, *Popular Government: Four Essays* (London: John Murray, 1886), 87–8.

90. Quoted in G. de Bertier de Sauvigny, *Metternich and his Times*, trans. Peter Ryde (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1962), 39.

91. Maine, *Popular Government*, 20–1.

92. *Ibid.*, 89.

93. Christopher Hobson, 'Revolution, Representation and the Foundations of Modern Democracy', *European Journal of Political Theory* 7, no. 4 (2008): 465–87; Nadia Urbinati, *Representative Democracy: Principles and Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Ankersmit, *Political Representation*.

94. Ankersmit, *Political Representation*, 230–1.

vulnerability is multiplied by the complexities of (post-)modern society. For instance, the grave and extensive challenges posed to current democracies by globalisation have been well detailed.⁹⁵ Notable is the manner in which these changes have further exacerbated problems in regards to questions of representation, accountability, access and the power people have in existing democracies. Given the huge array of challenges and dilemmas that even the most well established and secure democracies are now struggling with, the historically long-standing concerns with democracy's fragility and lack of permanence do not seem completely out of place. In this regard, notable commentators such as Crouch and Wolin have suggested that we may be entering a 'post-democratic' era, while John Keane's major new study on democracy is ominously titled, *The Life and Death of Democracy*.⁹⁶ Within the liberal millenarian vision, however, the underlying teleological conception of history limits how democracy is conceived of, preventing the possibility of seriously engaging with these kinds of issues, and, most basically, considering whether the future of democracy may end up being more like most of its past. Instead, liberals cling vainly to a narrative of linear democratic progress and expansion, despite already significant, and still growing, evidence to the contrary.

Conservative sceptics warned against democracy because its complexities suggested it was bound to fail. Liberal millenarians, meanwhile, tend to comfortably assume a linear, progressive expansion of democracy will continue. Neither position is satisfactory: one too pessimistic, the other too confident. What can be taken from the conservatives, though, is a recognition that any form of democracy is very difficult to institute and maintain. This suggests humility and reflexivity where democracy exists, and great caution if seeking to promote or extend it elsewhere. The complex nature of democracy prevents it from being easily transported or imposed.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the culturally specific and historically conditioned nature of liberal democracy means that it is not something that necessarily can or should be exported. At the same time, these challenges are most certainly not enough to dismiss this unique form of rule. Liberals are on much stronger ground in pointing to modern democracy's com-

95. The literature is vast, but a key starting point remains David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

96. Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); Sheldon S. Wolin, *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (forthcoming).

97. This has increasingly been recognised in the more critical post-conflict reconstruction literature. For example, see: Roland Paris, 'International Peacebuilding and the "Mission Civilisatrice"', *Review of International Studies* 28, no. 4 (2002): 637–56; Oliver Richmond, 'The Problem of Peace: Understanding the "Liberal Peace"', *Conflict, Security & Development* 6, no. 3 (2006): 291–314.

parative successes at providing basic human goods. Liberal millenarians, however, have been too quick to see these achievements more in absolute than relative terms.

History points towards there being nothing natural or inevitable about the present importance we attach to democracy or the manner in which we practice it. While things may stay the same, the past suggests that democracy's meaning and value will alter again in the future, as it has done previously. For instance, in much the same way that the current reconciliation between liberalism and democracy is due to historical circumstances, there is potential that in the future liberals may again separate themselves from democracy, if it is felt that this regime type no longer protects and supports basic liberal rights. In the meantime, the ongoing tensions which arise from the combining of liberalism and democracy in the model of liberal democracy now dominant are not ones that can be easily overcome, with the pressures of globalisation and (post-)modern society having great potential to further exacerbate these fault lines. Indeed, how present-day democracies deal with these significant challenges facing them, combined with how prudently and successfully they seek to promote this form of rule abroad, will help to shape and influence the way democracy is understood and valued in the future. Simply put, by removing the liberal blinkers that continue to inhibit the way we conceive of democracy, we can see that even if a level of democracy has been achieved in some places, this cannot be taken for granted, or presumed to be something that will necessarily continue into the future. If anything, history suggests the opposite is much more likely. And through recognising this, it allows for a perspective much more attuned to the gravity of the difficulties that democracy now faces, and thus better equipped to deal with these challenges.

Conclusions

It has been argued that the contingency and contextuality of democracy has been lost in the progressive reading of its history which now dominates our mental horizons. This constructed historical narrative plays an important role in shaping contemporary practices. Alternative versions of democracy are foreclosed, as the liberal model is seen as applicable to all. A remarkable feature that defines most of the literature and practice of democracy promotion and democratisation is the lack of serious consideration on democracy's variations and contestability, with it too often being taken to necessarily mean the liberal subtype. This is combined with a general refusal to consider whether, indeed, the liberal form is the most appropriate version of democracy to be encouraged; presuming that democracy promotion is even something democratic states and the international community should be engaging in. Meanwhile, antinomies and tensions within this specific version of democracy are papered over

or ignored, as it is regarded as an achieved state and a natural condition in the Western core, bolstered by a presumption that this situation will not drastically change in the future. Universalising democracy in this manner, however, tries to depoliticise it by removing from consideration such foundational questions as: 'What is democracy?', 'What can it mean?', 'What kind of democracy is best in each given environment?', 'Are there democratic alternatives to the liberal model?' and most basically, 'Is democracy necessarily the best form of rule?' Instead, history is seen to provide the answer: liberal democracy. Clearly this move is, in itself, deeply political by seeking to legitimate a specific vision of democracy, and, with it, a certain set of actors and policies, while simultaneously limiting the possibilities for different conceptions of democracy.

Through the liberal millenarian framework stable liberal democracies, having reached 'the end of history', are regarded as morally superior, with increasing calls that this self-designated status should give them special rights in international society. To take an important example of this thinking, in the United States there has been wide-ranging support for the formation of a 'league' or 'alliance' of democracies. One of the major proposals of the recent Princeton Report on US National Security was the creation of a 'Concert of Democracies', which would be 'a new global institution dedicated to the principles underpinning liberal democracy, both as a vehicle to spur and support the reform of the United Nations and other global institutions and as a possible alternative to them'.⁹⁸ In a similar vein, Buchanan and Keohane suggest that if the United Nations Security Council proves unworkable, a 'democratic coalition' should be granted special privileges in determining the use of force in international politics because of their 'comparative moral reliability'.⁹⁹ In these prominent proposals liberal democracies are taken as more legitimate due to their comparative or absolute moral 'goodness'. Underwriting these claims is a teleological conception of history: 'post-historical states' that have achieved liberal democracy are more advanced, and thus more entitled to special rights and privileges than those 'still stuck in history'.¹⁰⁰ In part, what this article has sought to show is quite how unjustifiable the historical grounds for arguments such as these are.

By moving beyond 'the end of history' and towards a 'radical historicisation' of democracy, an alternative vision is forged, one that is explicitly more open and more political. In looking forward, we do so cognisant

98. G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Forging a World of Liberty Under Law: U.S. National Security in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, 2006), 25.

99. Allen Buchanan and Robert Keohane, 'The Preventative Use of Force: A Cosmopolitan Institutional Proposal', *Ethics and International Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2004): 1–22, 18–20.

100. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 276.

of what has come before, aware that democracy is not preordained by history, nature or humankind. Democracy is a fragile, uncertain, fluctuating form, and, over the *longue durée*, it has been much more defined by its failures and its impermanence, than the opposite. Both democracy's meaning and the value we now attach to it are neither determined nor fixed. They have changed and shifted diachronically, and this situation will undoubtedly continue into the future. Furthermore, the present pairing of democracy and liberalism is one brought about through specific historical circumstances and there are no guarantees this relationship will continue indefinitely. By adopting a historically sensitive position it leads to a more pluralist appreciation of contemporary democracy and its future possibilities. It suggests that if we value democracy, we must continue to explore, confront and renovate what it means. This is necessarily an ongoing process, one informed by – but most definitely not limited to – historical reflection. In this sense, it also points towards a much broader notion of 'democracy promotion', meaning something that takes place wherever democracy is discussed, debated, challenged and reflected upon in an open, engaged and continuous manner. From this perspective the potential for transcending misplaced self-satisfaction in democracy as being achieved is offered. It is no longer something 'we' have to promote elsewhere. Rather, democracy remains an unstable, precarious and incomplete form, with history providing no assurances that the current democratic moment will last. While past and present successes provide us with a degree of hope; the antinomies, limits and shortcomings that mark even the most secure democracies suggests humility, counselling an awareness of the contingency and potential impermanence of the present normative and political ascendancy of this unique and rare form of rule.

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