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Has democracy had its day?

Electoral politics has had a bad decade

MARK MAZOWER

Nearly a century ago, President Woodrow Wilson famously declared that the United States would enter the First World War to make the world "safe for democracy." Yet what exactly democracy meant had no simple answer then, nor since. Was it a matter of free self-governing nations, as Wilson believed? Or was that mere bourgeois democracy, nothing more than a threadbare veil for parasites, profiteers and warmongers? And there were other versions—social, economic and Christian. Stalin offered People's Democracy, apparently compatible with one-party rule and oversight from the Kremlin. Nazi legal theorists had their own racialised, anti-parliamentary version. These competing conceptions of democracy had one thing in common: they were really arguments about what it ought to be, trouncing actually existing democracies in the name of an ideal.

But had this ideal ever been realised? Some said it had, finding genealogies that stretched back to the dear old ancient Greeks. Americans were especially prone to this historical industriousness and from Wilson's day onwards newly-minted "western civilisation" courses taught generations of young men (and later women) across the country that they had been entrusted with Hellenic ideals of freedom. By the time one more kind of democracy, the so-called liberal version, implanted itself in American discourse (spreading like wildfire from the 1970s onwards), it had become axiomatic that in identifying itself with spreading these values worldwide, the US was remaining true to its founding ideals.

Except that it wasn't. A moment's perusal confirms the absence of any reference to democracy in either the Declaration of Independence or in the Constitution. In colonial America, democracy was hardly encountered at all and when it was, as Francis Dupuis-Déri shows in his timely new history of the word, *Démocratie: Histoire Politique d'un Mot*, it was with extreme ambivalence. The 19th century was when the term began to be used more widely, as a slur as often as something positive, and it appears to have been only after 1900 that it became ubiquitous. Alexis de Tocqueville, in associating the US with democracy, was essentially applying a European—indeed in many ways a peculiarly French—term to the American context. In the process he created a new political myth that obscured the ambivalence of the founding fathers towards the egalitarian nature of their new nation.

This ambivalence is often written off as aristocratic snobbery or the residue of vested interest and wealth. And so it may have been. But it also rested upon an anti-democratic tradition in European thought that was very powerful—much more so than the democratic one. Doubts about democracy's viability go back to Aristotle, who regarded it as inherently unstable. Ancient Greek political thought suspected the wisdom of entrusting decisions to majority voting, and understood society to be made up of different groups whose interests and concerns needed to be harmonised. The difficulty of so doing meant that most constitutional forms would end up collapsing into their opposites: democracy, for instance, would give way to tyranny. Politics was in constant flux. The contrast could not be more striking with the way people think about democracy today. Far from it being seen as an unreliable way of organising the polity, it has become an article of faith that it is the best in both senses—the most effective as well as the most virtuous. Political debate revolves around how to realise this ideal, and thus to reach the End of History. ▶

Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government
by Joshua Kurlantzick (Yale University Press, £20)

The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement
by David Graeber (Allen Lane, £14.99)

Démocratie: Histoire Politique d'un Mot
by Francis Dupuis-Déri (Lux, £20)

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Anti-austerity protests in Greece, May 2010: the fallout from the financial crisis is putting pressure on democracies worldwide

It would be premature to say the hegemony of the democratic idea has now been shaken in western political thought. After the end of the Cold War, the number of democracies worldwide rose sharply, as authoritarian regimes in the third world collapsed. Political scientists started talking about a "fourth wave" of democratisation. Successive US administrations got into the business of democracy promotion and a new GONGO (the fabulously self-contradictory idea of a governmentally organised non-governmental organisation)—the National Endowment for Democracy—was founded in 1983 to support it. With resources that Wilson never imagined in his wildest dreams, American policymakers have since been trying hard to improve their country's national security by spreading liberty around the world.

But the benefits American taxpayers have got for this diplomatic effort are not self-evident. After rising rather strikingly between the late 1970s and the early 2000s, the number of parliamentary democracies has lately begun to contract. And in what we may call the heartlands of actually existing democracy—the US and the European Union—recession, austerity and the collapse of vast swathes of the productive economy have challenged the legitimacy of political institutions. Bank bailouts, growing unemployment and the shifting locus of decision making from elected politicians to unelected federal and international agencies have made many people question not only whether democracy can deliver, but whether what they have is really democracy at all. "Enough with oligarchy, long live democracy" is the rallying cry that forms the title of a 2011 book by French journalist Hervé Kempf, calling for an end to the "puppet theatre" in which financiers pull all the strings.

This global shift has some American foreign policy specialists worried. Francis Fukuyama sounded the alert in an article published early last year in *Foreign Affairs*, warning that democracy worldwide was under threat. Beyond the financial crisis itself, he argued, it was changes in technology and rising inequality that were doing the damage, by whittling away the basis of middle-class prosperity. In a new book *Democracy in Retreat: The Revolt of the Middle Class and the Worldwide Decline of Representative Government*, Joshua Kurlantzick, a former journalist and expert on southeast Asia who is currently at the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations, provides a more detailed elaboration of this argument. He too is alarmed not only that freedoms are being eroded but that polls show middle-class support for democracy falling away.

Kurlantzick notes there are still—in historical terms—a remarkable number of democracies around the world. Yet he sees the current crisis as in some ways more serious than that of the 1930s, with the economic success of China bolstering an authoritarian role model that is already proving attractive elsewhere. Is the "transition" that so many American political scientists laboured to understand over the past two decades finally over?

One feature of this kind of analysis, implicit in Fukuyama's essay and much more explicit in *Democracy in Retreat*, is its embrace of something it calls the middle class. Never rigorously defined, this sounds like code for good, working people who don't want to rock the boat, who have invested in education and property and who want to be allowed to get on and make a decent living for themselves and their families. This category may be opaque but Fukuyama and Kurlantzick make much of it and are keen to succour its members. Workers in the old-fashioned sense—manual labourers who might participate in collective action—are either ignored, or presented as a source of historic revolutionary sentiment and disruption; unions rarely feature positively.

Pinning all your hopes on the middle class, however defined, is certainly going to breed anxiety. The latest opinion polls suggest that, under the pressure of rising debt, the numbers of people who describe themselves as middle class are shrinking. And the historical record makes it abundantly clear (think of fascist Italy or Nazi Germany) that property owners do not necessarily identify democracy as the form of government best suited to defending their own interests.

Books like Kurlantzick's are written for a double audience. There's you and me and the rest of the reading public. And then there are the policymakers in Washington to whom *Democracy in Retreat* offers a list of recommendations to make their promotion of democracy more effective. For Kurlantzick is not only worried about democracy because he admires it in principle. He believes that fostering it is in the national interest of the US. *Democracy in Retreat* thus rests upon the assumption that it is in the power of the US to transform the character of other states, and that it should use this power to so do. What Kurlantzick really fears is that Obama's Washington may now be giving up on expanding global democracy when his administration should instead be aspiring to do the job better.

Yet who says promoting democracy is necessarily in the US national interest? Cold War US policymakers tended to find democrats rather unreliable—especially in South America, Africa and the Middle East. They preferred dictators and strongmen. What if the evidence were indeed to suggest that despotic regimes are as likely, if not more so, to provide stability to American investors or generals than democracies? Or indeed to show that democracies really are more unstable? What if the street violence described in the opening pages of *Democracy in Retreat*—the scene is Bangkok in 2010—is in fact the sign of a functioning democracy, not its opposite? Would Kurlantzick's conclusion then be that Americans should not worry when democracies collapse? In short, the argument that morality and self-interest converge where democratisation is concerned is too convenient to be really plausible. It is only when they diverge that we will be able to see who the real supporters of democracy are.

A little more concern about the state of democracy inside the US itself would also help bring Kurlantzick's book down to earth. He recognises that the financial crisis has made selling democracy harder and admits that China's rapid economic growth has allowed it to emerge as an alternative, but like most advocates of democracy promotion he is better on other people's constitutional failings than on those back home. What the rule of law—beloved phrase—actually means in practice is not examined here; there is no mention of the corruption of policy created by the power of lobbyists in Congress, the dysfunctionality of the current standoff with the White House, the extent to which the American media really does manage to ensure transparency or the nature of the relationship between Wall Street and Washington.

To these loud silences, David Graeber's new book, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement*, offers a bracing corrective. Graeber is an anthropologist and author of the successful 2011 book *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. He is also ▶

a self-proclaimed anarchist who took a leading part in the Occupy Wall Street movement, the chief subject of *The Democracy Project*. For Graeber, things are relatively simple: the entire American system is rotten through and through. He gives a good account of the oddities of the democracy promotion idea, a how-to manual for other would-be activists and a serious analysis of the way the Zuccotti Park sit-ins morphed into a major social movement like Occupy Wall Street. But his real target is the functioning of what passes for democracy in America today, the impact of the dramatic changes to American society and the rise of a debt economy in the past 40 years. In response, his aim is to imagine a genuinely democratic alternative.

To this end Graeber offers what he presents as democracy's real history—not the bogus cliché-ridden one that looks back to the Greeks, but a radical lineage originating with the revolutionary mob, with pirates and the micro-communities of colonial-era America. His book is thus in part a counter-history, albeit one that really takes off only in 1994 with the Zapatista uprising in Mexico. But what is the significance of this history? Were Occupy Wall Street and the other occupations and demonstrations that swept the world in 2011 further stages leading to the eventual triumph of this tradition? Graeber has no difficulty demonstrating the conflicted and deeply ambivalent relationship that American politics has always had with the idea of democracy. But showing that the form of global democratic culture he wants is the way of the future is a tougher call.

Some have written off Occupy Wall Street, arguing that its results were negligible. But, says Graeber, the point of Occupy was not to push specific policies, still less to effect an instantaneous revolution, but instead to demonstrate that there is another way to do things. The example it provided may have indirect effects in expanding people's sense of the possible. Freedom, as he puts it, is contagious. It is an old and familiar kind of argument, one advanced in the past by idealists ranging from Peter Benenson, founder of Amnesty International, to the peace activists of the 1840s, who campaigned against war-mongering European monarchs—all of whom saw the demand for results as opening the door to the worst sort of pragmatism.

It is a little disconcerting, given his belief in the power of example, to find how harsh Graeber can be about some of his fellow radicals. One of the weaknesses of movements like Occupy—aside from the pride they have in not making specific demands, or having actual leaders—is their endless fractiousness and moral one-upmanship. The world is always letting one down. Mainstream liberals are a disappointment of course, and most of the unions and the journalists turn out to be sell-outs too. As for the Trots in the International Socialist Organisation or the Workers World Party apparatchiks, the less said about them the better.

Some of the most interesting passages in Graeber's book are the most concrete—his coverage of the tactics of assembly and organisation that will be well-known to activists but unfamiliar to others. They describe how Occupy's assemblies were organised, and in particular how a kind of deliberative democracy evolved that aimed not at vote-taking but rather the creation of consensus among people averse to platforms, microphones and all the apparatus of hierarchical politics. Someone talks, pausing between sentences which are repeated loudly by others around him or her, and then further transmitted onwards, before the next sentence emerges. Consensus itself is the ultimate goal.

The proclamation of the Second Republic, Paris, February 1848, by Henri F Philippoteaux: these 19th century debates are still with us

What happened when consensus proved impossible is not discussed; maybe it never did. There are brief references to the presence of undesirables, people who either cannot behave as thoughtfully and decently as the rest or whose political views put them outside the pale, and who are summarily asked to leave. But the prevailing assumption is that freed from the tyranny of misinformation and repressive institutions, most people will embrace this way of doing things and be willing to make it work. A fog of false consciousness suffocates ordinary Americans, but once lifted the ideal of consensual unity is achievable, and Occupy Wall Street showed it.

But this unity has its limits too. In the face of police brutality, Occupy Wall Street was strikingly non-violent. Yet if one believes that the existing political system is entirely illegitimate, then one is essentially pitting one claim to sovereignty—that of the 99 per cent supposedly embodied in Occupy—against another—that of the 1 per cent, defended by the power of the state. Behind the pacifism, in short, a kind of invisible war was being waged. Graeber talks about setting up "liberated spaces," and there are times when occupation seems more than a metaphor. For instance, he discusses what the movement might learn from the battle for Sadr City, and from the work of the Iraqi militias faithful to Moqtada al-Sadr

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in defending their neighbourhoods of Baghdad in 2008 against the Americans and Iraqi government forces. Resistance against a foreign occupier is thus elided with struggling against one's own government.

If Occupy was indeed waging a struggle for the highest of prizes, it is even more notable that its strategy was to have no strategy, to make no demands, but simply to exist for as long as possible. Its rhetoric, and the scale of ambition, are novel and attractive in a society where for nearly half a century now any radical assault on the status quo has seemed doomed to fail amid a sea of apathy. But there is no real analysis of why this one might actually succeed or even what success might mean in this context.

Kurlantzick's mainstream liberal democracy and Graeber's direct democracy seem to occupy opposite poles of the democratic spectrum, but they share one thing: an inability to reckon with social and political differences. If we think of politics as concerned with the management of conflict, then both are fundamentally anti-political. Both talk in terms of political unities—embodied for Kurlantzick by a mythical middle class, for Graeber, by a utopian consensual assembly. Neither admits that social conflict will always form part of any functioning political system. Neither considers how to strengthen the institutions that turn conflict into part of a political process; Kurlantzick assumes their efficacy, Graeber their destructiveness and the need to do away with them.

For a more nuanced debate sensitive to the institutional dimensions of democracy, we should turn to France. In recent decades, the historian Pierre Rosanvallon and a cohort of younger historians have dug deep into the history of the debates about democracy that gripped the country from the 1820s onwards. This period remains especially important because it was in the aftermath of Napoleon's defeat that France tried to figure out how to chart a new course between the tainted legacies of the ancien régime, on the one hand, and revolution, on the other. Where did democracy fit into the new order, and what kind of democracy, if any, was best suited to the pursuit of the ideal of popular sovereignty? Was it now kings who spoke for the people, or the national assembly, or some combination of the two? The eventual symbiosis of republicanism and democracy was basically constructed only at the end of the 19th century. As a new study by Guillaume Sacriste demonstrates, constitutional lawyers—a new professional group—did most to help by explaining to the citizens of the Third Republic why representative institutions such as parliaments were valuable, why direct democracy was an avenue to demagoguery and why parliamentary debate and expert oversight were positive means of arriving at the common good.

To be sure, this republican synthesis was very much of its time. Today attitudes have changed dramatically. The idea in particular that governing should really involve impartial discussion among men of independent judgment could not endure the experience of the 20th century. Above all, financial markets ▶

dominate politics in a way that was unimaginable a century or so ago, making the virtues of calm deliberation harder to attain than ever, prioritising the short term and creating a sense of constant flux and crisis. Even so, as a way of thinking about the nature and problems of democracy, the debates of 19th-century France remain invaluable. As opposed to what we might call the anti-political thinking of Kurlantzick and Graeber, they offer—in the hands of the historians mentioned above—a reminder of the ideological and institutional challenges for anyone concerned with making democracy workable today.

One of modern democracy's basic ambivalences is over the supposed heroes of yesteryear—the lawyers. It was they who made democracy normal in the eyes of most French citizens. Today, on the other hand, the rule of law looks like more of a double-edged sword. The breathtaking complexity of legal codes like that of the US makes it hard to idealise the rule of law when its practice offers such scope for abuse. And then there is the rise of constitutional lawyers, who have increasingly acquired such sweeping powers—within states, and internationally in bodies such as the European Court of Justice—as to make parliaments subservient. Some constitutional courts, such as that of Spain, have been making policy, or at least subjecting it to review, to a degree unheard of in the past. In April it was the turn of the Portuguese court to rule that elements of the government's austerity programme were unacceptable legally. While some denounce this development as essentially undemocratic, others have defended giving lawyers such powers on the grounds—as in the German case—that an independent judiciary is itself a bulwark against dictatorship. The fundamental ambiguities of the notion of popular sovereignty and its relationship with the rule of law, familiar to 19th-century France, thus remain with us still.

> "The financial crisis and gridlock in Washington have shaken the west's claim to ideological primacy"

The other major challenge is the sharp rise in social and economic inequality. Rosanvallon's most recent book asks what would be needed to move towards a "society of equals." How do we make the value of solidarity a feature of our politics once more? The unravelling of collective bodies and collective action since the 1970s, and the triumph of a kind of liberal individualism, he argues, will need to be reversed, even though the institutions that were once the vehicles for this—labour unions, civic associations and so on—seem in a parlous state. Easier said than done. Yet as Kurlantzick notes, nostalgia for the dictatorships of yesteryear constitutes an urgent challenge to democrats to redress the disintegration of society, and the insecurity this has produced.

It is as if we are forcing ourselves to learn the lessons of the past century all over again. In the Great Depression that followed the 1929 Wall Street crash, old-style liberal capitalism—with its pursuit of austerity for the sake of monetary stability—undermined parliamentary democracy. Some societies shifted left, others sharply right, and those that retained, or later recovered, a functioning democratic system did so by abandoning liberalism more or less entirely. Instead they adopted models of government that emphasised solidarity between citizens—like the New Deal in the USA and the emergence of managed capitalism and social democracy in postwar Europe—at the expense of entrepreneurial freedom. Exchange controls and high income taxes were commonplace; expanded state spending on welfare and education were broadly acceptable to right and left alike.

The Thatcher-Reagan revolution changed everything, including the nature of democracy. Voters signalled their desire to shift power away from organised labour and to strike a new bargain with the state on welfare, pensions and health. And because democracy was the regnant form of government, it fell to its guardians to respond to the challenge of the growing demographic slowdown across the developed world. With ageing populations, past generosity has become unaffordable. With rising youth unemployment, the intergenerational character of these claims on resources has become more evident and more intractable. The profound nature of these challenges was obscured for a time by the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s, this seemed to show democracy's superiority over communism and to confirm that the world's welfare lay in spreading it as widely as possible. But after the exhilarating years that followed the fall of the Soviet Union, democracy has had a bad decade. The US failed to install a thriving democracy in Iraq, and the financial crisis in much of the western world has shaken its claim to ideological primacy. Now the eurozone crisis and gridlock in Washington raise the question of whether democracy as a political system can solve the problems of countries which most loudly identify themselves with democratic values.

One should not exaggerate the extent of this crisis. In the US and Europe, for instance, the still vivid memory of the alternatives constitutes one of the major blocks to any backsliding. And free elections certainly mean something to those who have recently acquired them. A US recovery may give this debate a more cheerful cast. But it is clear that those who want democratic values to flourish now have not only to argue for them rather more vigorously than before, but also to explain what they believe democracy really is, what institutions it should nourish and what kinds of freedom it serves. P