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**DEMOCRACY
AND ITS CRITICS**



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INTRODUCTION



From ancient times some people have conceived of a political system in which the members regard one another as political equals, are collectively sovereign, and possess all the capacities, resources, and institutions they need in order to govern themselves. This idea, and practices embodying it, appeared in the first half of the fifth century B.C. among the Greeks, who though few in number and occupying but a tiny fragment of the world's surface exerted an exceptional influence in world history. It was the Greeks, and most conspicuously the Athenians, who brought about what I want to call the first democratic transformation from the idea and practice of rule by the few to the idea and practice of rule by the many. To the Greeks the only thinkable site of democracy was, of course, the city-state.

That extraordinary conception of rule by the many all but vanished for long periods of time; and only a minority of the world's people have ever sought and successfully managed to adapt political reality in some significant measure to its demanding requirements. Yet that early vision has never wholly lost its ability to charm the political imagination and foster hopes that the vision of an ideal but nonetheless attainable polity might be more fully realized in actual experience.

At about the same time that the idea of rule by the many was transforming political life in Athens and other Greek city-states, it also took root in the city-state of Rome. It is of the utmost relevance to our understanding of democracy that the pattern of the political institutions of the Roman Republic continued to reflect the original mold of the small city-state long after Romans had burst through the bounds of their city to begin their conquest of the Italian peninsula and eventually much of Europe and the Mediterranean. A thousand years after the republican government was superseded by Caesar and Augustus, popular government reappeared among the city-states of medieval and Renaissance Italy.

But the city-state was made obsolete by the nation-state, and in a second demo-

cratic transformation the idea of democracy was transferred from the city-state to the much larger scale of the nation-state. This transformation led to a radically new set of political institutions. It is this new complex of institutions that taken together we commonly refer to as "democracy."

Is a third transformation now within reach? Even if it is, ought we to make an effort to achieve it? These questions guide the discussion in this book. To answer them we need to understand not only why democracy is desirable but also what its limits and its possibilities are. If we overestimate the limits we shall fail to try, and if we underestimate them we shall probably try—and fail. One could easily fish out innumerable historical examples of both.

Today, the idea of democracy is universally popular. Most regimes stake out some sort of claim to the title of "democracy"; and those that do not often insist that their particular instance of nondemocratic rule is a necessary stage along the road to ultimate "democracy." In our times, even dictators appear to believe that an indispensable ingredient for their legitimacy is a dash or two of the language of democracy.

It may seem perverse that this historically unprecedented global expansion in the acceptability of democratic ideas might not be altogether welcome to an advocate of democracy. Yet a term that means anything means nothing. And so it has become with "democracy," which nowadays is not so much a term of restricted and specific meaning as a vague endorsement of a popular idea.

An important cause of the confusion over what democracy means in our present world is that it has developed over several thousand years and stems from a variety of sources. What we understand by democracy is not what an Athenian in the time of Pericles would have understood by it. Greek, Roman, medieval, and Renaissance notions intermingle with those of later centuries to produce a jumble of theory and practices that are often deeply inconsistent.

What is more, a close look at democratic ideas and practices is bound to reveal a considerable number of problems for which no definitive solution seems to exist. The very notion of democracy has always provided a field day for critics. Critics are roughly of three kinds: those fundamentally opposed to democracy because, like Plato, they believe that while it may be possible it is inherently undesirable; those fundamentally opposed to democracy because, like Robert Michels, they believe that, while it might be desirable if it were possible, in actuality it is inherently impossible; and those sympathetic to democracy and wishing to maintain it but nonetheless critical of it in some important regard. The first two might be called adversarial critics, the third sympathetic critics.

My aim in this book is to set out an interpretation of democratic theory and practice, including the limits and possibilities of democracy, that is relevant to the kind of world in which we live or are likely to live in the foreseeable future. But I believe that no interpretation of this kind can be satisfactory unless it deals fairly with the major problems posed by both the adversarial and sympathetic critics of democracy.

What the critics often focus on are problems that advocates of democracy tend to neglect, or worse, to conceal. What might loosely be called democratic theory—a term about which I shall have something more to say in a moment—depends on assumptions and premises that uncritical advocates have shied away from exploring, or in some cases even openly acknowledging. These half-hidden premises, unexplored assumptions, and unacknowledged antecedents form a vaguely perceived shadow theory that forever dogs the footsteps of explicit, public theories of democracy.

By way of illustration, and to anticipate the argument ahead of us, let me mention a few of the key problems concealed in the explicit theories that make up part of the shadow theory of democracy. Many of these problems were present at the creation. Take, for example, the elementary idea of "rule by the people." To designate their new conception of political life and the practices it gave rise to in many city-states, toward the middle of the fifth century B.C. Greeks began to use the word *demokratia*. Although the root meaning of that term is simple enough, even self-evident—*demos*, people, and *kratia*, rule or authority, thus "rule by the people"—the very roots themselves raise urgent questions: who ought to comprise "the people" and what does it mean for them "to rule"?

What properly constitutes "the people" is doubly ambiguous and has frequently been a source of controversy. The first ambiguity is in the notion of "a people": what constitutes "a people" for purposes of democratic government? The Greeks took it for granted that the Athenians, the Corinthians, the Spartans, and the residents of the other numerous Greek city-states each constituted "a people" that was entitled to its own political autonomy. By contrast, although the ancient Greeks saw themselves—the Hellenes—as a distinct people with their own language and history, they did not regard themselves as "a people" in the political sense of a group of persons who, rightly considered, should govern themselves in a single democratic unit. Greek democracy was not, in fact, *Greek* democracy; it was Athenian, or Corinthian, or whatever. Although the city-state mentality may seem quaintly parochial today, the same issue is still with us. Why should Americans constitute "a people" and their neighbors the Canadians and the Mexicans separate peoples? Why should there be a political boundary between, say, Norway and Sweden, or Belgium and Holland, or French-speaking Swiss and French-speaking French? Or put the question another way: are people in local communities within a nation-state entitled to a measure of self-government? If so, what persons, on what matters? No doubt questions like these transcend "democratic theory." But that is precisely my point. Advocates of democracy—including political philosophers—characteristically presuppose that "a people" already exists. Its existence is assumed as a fact, a creation of history. Yet the facticity of the fact is questionable. It is often questioned—as it was in the United States in 1861, when the issue was settled not by consent or consensus but by violence.

The assumption that "a people" exists, and the further presuppositions of that assumption, thus become a part of the shadow theory of democracy.

The second ambiguity is nested in the first. Within "a people" only a limited subset of persons is entitled to participate in governing. These constitute *the* people in another sense. More properly, they are the citizens or citizen body, or as I shall often say here, the *demos*. Who ought to be a member of the *demos*? This question has always been troublesome to advocates of democracy. Democratic advocates, including as we shall see in chapter 9 many of its most celebrated theorists like John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, have often proposed an explicit public theory of the *demos* that is remarkably discordant with their half-hidden, or sometimes wholly concealed, assumptions, which lurk unacknowledged in the shadow theory, from where, however, they are plucked by the external critics of democracy to be displayed as witnesses to the alleged self-contradictions in the democratic idea.

Again, historical experience lends concreteness to the abstract question of the *demos*. As we shall see in the next chapter, even at the height of Athenian democracy the *demos* never included more than a small minority of the adult population of Athens.¹ Although Athenian democracy may have been extreme in its exclusivity, it was in no sense unique. From classical Greece to modern times some persons have invariably been excluded as unqualified, and until this century, when women gained the suffrage, the number of persons excluded has exceeded—sometimes as in Athens by a wide margin—the number included. Such was the case in the first modern "democracy," the United States, which excluded not only women and, of course, children, but most blacks and native Americans as well.

While the exclusions are invariably said to be justified on the ground that the *demos* includes everyone *qualified* to participate in ruling, the hidden assumption dispatched to the shadow theory of democracy is that only some people are competent to rule. But the adversarial critics of democracy gleefully expose this hidden assumption and convert it into an explicit argument in the antidemocratic theory of guardianship. The idea of guardianship, which is probably the most beguiling vision ever created by the adversaries of democracy, not only was espoused by Plato in democratic Athens but has appeared throughout the world in a variety of disparate forms, of which Confucianism and Leninism, different as they are, have influenced by far the greatest number of people. The adversarial critics compel us to scrutinize in the full light of day the assumptions about political competence hidden in the shadow theory.

Another assumption that usually reposes unnoticed in the shadow theory (except when critics of democracy, both adversarial and sympathetic, force it into the open) is the question of scale. Just as the Greeks took for granted that the proper scale of democracy, or for that matter any decent political system, was necessarily extremely small—a few tens of thousands of people—so since the late eighteenth century advocates of democracy have generally assumed that the natural locus of democracy is the nation-state or, more generally, the country. In adopting this assumption, what often goes unacknowledged is how profoundly the historic shift

in scale, from city-state to nation-state, has transformed the limits and possibilities of democracy. The transformation is so profound that if a fifth-century Athenian citizen were suddenly to appear in our midst he (being a citizen of Athens, it would necessarily be he, not she) would probably find what we call democracy unrecognizable, unattractive, and undemocratic. To an Athenian of Pericles' day, what we regard as democracy would probably not look like democracy at all, mainly because of the consequences for political life and political institutions of the shift in scale from the small, more intimate, and more participatory city-state to the gigantic, more impersonal, and more indirect governments of today.

One consequence of the change in the scale of democracy is to magnify the already significant utopianism of the democratic ideal. The public theory of democracy tends to assume that today's large-scale democracy can retain all the advantages of large scale and still possess the virtues and possibilities of small-scale democracy. And the public theory tends to neglect the limits of both. Thus the problem of scale is mainly relegated to the shadow theory.

A final illustration. Considered as an actually existing or real-world entity, democracy has been variously conceived of as a distinctive set of political institutions and practices, a particular body of rights, a social and economic order, a system that ensures certain desirable results, or a unique process of making collective and binding decisions. The central conception I adopt in this book is the last. As we shall see, this way of thinking about democracy—as the *democratic process*—by no means excludes the others and in fact has strong implications for the others. Yet any conception of democracy as a process will and I believe should cause concern. Critics, not only the adversaries but those who are sympathetic to "rule by the people," contend that a process of collective decision-making, no matter how "democratic," cannot be justified unless it produces—or at least tends to produce—desirable results. These critics thus cast the familiar problem of process versus substance in the setting of democratic ideas and practices. Although the problem itself has become fairly prominent in discussions of democratic theory, proposed solutions to it (and nonsolutions) usually depend on assumptions in the shadow theory.

The issues I have mentioned—we shall encounter others as we proceed—are I hope sufficient to illustrate my point. To develop a satisfactory theory of democracy will require us to excavate the assumptions in the shadow theory, subject them to critical examination, and try to recast the theory of democracy into a reasonably coherent whole. In identifying and exploring the assumptions on which to build a coherent democratic theory, the arguments of critics of democracy, both adversarial and sympathetic, are invaluable.



The two millennia since the idea and institutions of democracy were explicitly developed by the Greeks have added enormously to what is relevant to democratic theory and practice. Yet the use of the term "democratic theory" to designate a particular field of inquiry, analysis, empirical description, and theorizing is fairly

I like to think of democratic theory as if it were like a very large three-dimensional web. Much too large to take in at a single glance, the web is constructed of interconnected strands of differing elasticities. While a few parts of the web are composed of rigidly connected strands (that is, strictly deductive arguments), other parts are more loosely held together, and some connections are very tenuous indeed. Like one well-known model of the universe, the web appears to be finite but unbounded. As a result, when you make your way along a strand of argument, you do not come to a definite edge that marks a distinct and conclusive limit to the unbounded universe of democratic theory. Follow out an argument to what you think might be the end, and you find yourself pursuing yet another strand. And so on, indefinitely I fear.

Venturing still further eastward to (4) we might begin to explore the institutions

Table 1. Some Aspects of a Theory about the Democratic Process (Domain: Associations that satisfy the requirements of (2) below)

The argument is more explicitly philosophical: assertions as to values, epistemology, "human nature," etc.		The argument is more explicitly empirical	
(1) Philosophical grounds (justifications) for the assumptions of (2)	(2) Characteristics of an association sufficient to require the democratic process (3)	(3) Criteria specifying a fully democratic process	(4) Institutions required in order to satisfy (3) at the levels historically achieved by certain concrete associations 4.1. Very small demos 4.2. Small demos 4.3. Large demos 4.31. . . . 4.321. . . . 4.32. Variations in the institutions of polyarchy
(6) Other valid grounds and criteria, not (1) and (2)	(7) Critique and evaluation 7.1. The extent to which the institutions of (4) fail to meet the ideal criteria of (3)—e.g., incomplete democratization 7.2. Defects by other criteria (6)		(5) Conditions that facilitate the development and persistence of (4) 5.1. . . . 5.2. . . . 5.3. Conditions that facilitate the institutions of polyarchy 5.31. Effects of variations in conditions (9) Conditions that would facilitate (8)
More critical		Less critical	

^aDeliberately ambiguous: may mean necessary to, sufficient for, or increase (significantly) probability of . . .

that the democratic process would require in order to operate. An assembly of citizens? A representative legislature? Evidently the institutions required would vary depending on circumstances, particularly the scale of the society. Still further eastward on our journey, at (5) we could investigate the conditions that would facilitate the development, and the continuing existence, of the institutions that are necessary to a democratic order.

You may have noticed that by now we seem to have moved into a part of democratic theory where we intend our inquiry to be almost entirely empirical, and it may look like a long distance back to the philosophical northwest corner where we started. Yet none of the terrain we have explored lies outside the bounds of democratic theory.

To complicate matters further, at this point we might want to explore the historical origins of democratic institutions and of the conditions that make these institutions possible. Here our flat, two-dimensional map might be better represented as three-dimensional, as a cube, perhaps, with time—history—as the third dimension. Notice, though, that insofar as historical experience is necessary to an explanation, we still remain within the domain of democratic theory—empirical theory, if you like, but surely a part of the finite but unbounded web of democratic theory.

Suppose we move in another direction. Advocates of democracy sometimes appear to believe that the values of democracy constitute the complete universe of value: if you could have a perfect democracy, they imply, then you would have a perfect political order, maybe even a perfect society. But this is surely too restricted a vision. Democracy is only a part, though an important part, of the universe of values, goods, or desirable ends. By proceeding toward (6) in the southwest corner we could begin to explore some of these other values—efficiency or distributive justice, for example. You might suppose our exploration has now moved us right off the map of democratic theory; yet these other goods or values could give us grounds for criticizing even a perfect democracy, if it failed to achieve these substantive ends. We are, therefore, still on the map, still moving along the boundless web of democratic theory.

Perhaps I can now leave further explorations of the map to the reader. Our brief tour will have sufficiently shown, I think, that democratic theory is not only a large enterprise—normative, empirical, philosophical, sympathetic, critical, historical, utopianistic, all at once—but complexly interconnected. The complex interconnections mean that we cannot construct a satisfactory democratic theory by starting off from an impregnable base and marching straight down the road to our conclusions. Although strictly deductive arguments have a place in democratic theory, their place is necessarily a small one, and they are embedded in crucial assumptions with which strictly deductive argument does not concern itself and probably cannot handle successfully. Consequently, I will not often use a favorite word of deductive theory—"rational"—nor ever indulge myself in its favorite assumption of perfect rationality. However, I shall often say that it is "reasonable"

to believe so and so, and I try to show why it is reasonable. Whether it is so, the reader will have to judge.

As I explore one part of the complex, interconnected web of democratic theory in this book, I shall have to ignore the other parts momentarily, though I may nod in their direction to acknowledge that they await our exploration in due time. In the path I have chosen, however, there is a certain logic, or at least, if I may say so, a reasonableness. While what I set out here is in no sense a strictly deductive theory, the argument is cumulative, and the later chapters depend heavily on the argument of the earlier chapters.

Chapter 1

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The First Transformation: To the Democratic City-State

During the first half of the fifth century B.C., a transformation took place in political ideas and institutions among Greeks and Romans that was comparable in historical importance to the invention of the wheel or the discovery of the New World. The change reflected a new understanding of the world and its possibilities.

At its simplest, what happened was that several city-states, which from time out of mind had been governed by various undemocratic rulers, whether aristocrats, oligarchs, monarchs, or tyrants, were transformed into systems in which a substantial number of free, adult males were entitled as citizens to participate directly in governing. Out of this experience and the ideas associated with it came a new vision of a possible political system, one in which a sovereign people is not only entitled to govern itself but possesses all the resources and institutions necessary to do so. This vision remains at the core of modern democratic ideas and continues to shape democratic institutions and practices.

But modern democratic ideas and institutions consist of far more than this simple vision. And since the theory and practices of modern democracy have resulted not only from the legacy of popular government in ancient city-states but also from other historical experiences, both evolutionary and revolutionary, they are an amalgam of elements that do not fully cohere. As a result contemporary democratic theory and practice exhibit inconsistencies and contradictions that sometimes result in deep problems.

To help us understand how the amalgam we call "democracy" came about, I am going to describe four of its most important sources. In doing so, I shall also indicate some problems that will require attention in later chapters.

These four sources are classical Greece; a republican tradition derived more from Rome and the Italian city-states of the Middle Ages and Renaissance than from the democratic city-states of Greece; the idea and institutions of representative government; and the logic of political equality. The first is the subject of this chapter.

A GREEK PERSPECTIVE

Although the practices of modern democracy bear only a weak resemblance to the political institutions of classical Greece, our ideas, as I suggested in the introduction, have been powerfully influenced by the Greeks, particularly the Athenians. That Greek democratic ideas have been more influential than their institutions is ironic, since what we know of their ideas comes less from the writings or speeches of democratic advocates, of which only fragments survive, than from their critics.¹ These range from mild adversaries like Aristotle, who disliked the power that he thought the expansion of democracy necessarily gave the poor, to Plato, an outright opponent who condemned democracy as rule by the unfit and advocated instead a perennially appealing system of government by the best qualified.²

Because we have no Greek equivalent in democratic theory to Locke's *Second Treatise* or Rousseau's *Social Contract*, one cannot provide chapter and verse on Greek democratic ideas. That *demokratia* involved equality in some way was not in doubt. But exactly what sorts of equality? Before the word "democracy" gained currency, Athenians had already referred to certain kinds of equality as desirable characteristics of their political system: equality of all citizens in the right to speak in the governing assembly (*isegoria*) and equality before the law (*isonomia*) (Sealey 1976, 158). These terms remained in use and evidently were often assumed to be characteristics of "democracy." But during the first half of the fifth century when "the people" (the *demos*) steadily gained acceptance as the sole legitimate authority in *ruling*, the word "democracy"—rule by the people—also seems to have gained ground as the most appropriate name for the new system.

While much of the character of Greek democratic ideas and practices remains unknown and may forever elude us, historians have uncovered enough evidence to allow a reasonable reconstruction of the views an Athenian democrat might have advanced in the late fifth century B.C.—in, say, 400 B.C. This convenient date is a little more than a century after the reforms of Cleisthenes had inaugurated the transition to democracy in Athens, a decade after the restoration of democracy following its overthrow in 411, four years after the brief, cruel, and oppressive rule of the Thirty Tyrants had been replaced by democracy, and one year before the trial and death of Socrates.

A democrat, being Greek, would have adopted certain assumptions that appear to have been widely shared among Greeks who thought about the nature of political life and, in particular, about the polis—shared even by antidemocrats like Plato or moderate critics like Aristotle. We might therefore imagine our Athenian strolling through the Agora with a friend to whom he is expounding his views.

The Nature of the Polis³

We know, of course (our Athenian is saying), that only in association with others can we hope to become fully human or, certainly, to realize our qualities of excellence as human beings. The most important association within which each of

us lives, grows, and matures is, naturally, our city—the polis. And so it is with everyone, for it is our nature to be social beings. Although I have once or twice heard someone say—perhaps only in order to provoke a discussion—that a good man might exist outside the polis, it is self-evident that without sharing the life of the polis no person could ever develop or exercise the virtues and qualities that distinguish men from beasts.

Yet a good man requires not just a polis but a good polis. Nothing is more important in judging the quality of a city than the qualities of excellence it fosters in its citizens. It goes without saying that a good city is one that produces good citizens, promotes their happiness, and encourages them to act rightly. It is our good fortune that these ends are harmonious; for the virtuous man will be a happy man, and no one, I think, can be truly happy unless he is also virtuous.

So it is also with justice. Virtue, justice, and happiness are not enemies but companions. Since justice is what tends to promote the common interest, a good polis must also be just; and therefore it must aim at developing citizens who seek the common good. For one who merely pursues his own interest cannot be a good citizen: a good citizen is one who in public matters aims always at the common good. I know that in saying so I appear to raise an impossible standard, one we often fail to meet in Athens as in all other cities. Yet there can be no better meaning of virtue in a citizen than this: that in public matters he looks always to the good of the polis.

Because one aim of the city is to produce good citizens, we cannot leave their training to chance or only to their families. Our life in the polis is an education, and life in our city must so form us that we aspire inwardly toward the common good of all. Thus our outward actions will reflect our inner natures. Civic virtues must also be strengthened by virtues in the constitution and laws of the city and by a social order that makes justice attainable. For excellence would be impossible if one had to act wrongly in order to be a good citizen, or if in order to act rightly one had to be a bad citizen.

I think then that in the best polis, citizens are at once virtuous, just, and happy. And because each seeks the good of all, and the city is not divided into smaller cities of rich and poor, or of different gods, all citizens can live together in harmony.

I do not mean that everything I am saying is true of Athens or any other actual city. Instead, I mean it as a model we observe with the eye of our mind when we praise our city for its virtues or criticize it for its faults.

What I have been saying is of course no more than we all believe. Even young Plato would not disagree. To be sure, I have sometimes heard him talk cleverly, claiming to represent Socrates, about how silly it is to expect ordinary people to rule wisely and how much better Athens would be if it were governed by wise philosophers—such as he fancies himself, I suppose. Yet I think even one who despises democracy as he does would agree with me so far. It is what I am now going to say that he would quarrel with, joined, I do not doubt, by some of the others who forever criticize democracy for its shortcomings, such as Aristophanes

and, needless to say, all those Athenians who gave their support to the Thirty Tyrants.

The Nature of Democracy

The polis we democrats strive to attain (our Athenian democrat might continue) must first of all be a good polis; and to be a good polis it must possess the qualities I have just described, as we all believe. But to be the best polis it must also be, like Athens, a democratic polis.

Now in order for citizens to strive for the common good, in a democratic polis, we need not all be alike, or have no interests of our own, or dedicate our lives only to the polis. For what is a polis if it is not a place where citizens may live a full life and not be subject at every waking moment to the call of civic duties? That is the way of the Spartans. It is not ours. A city has a need for shoemakers and shipmakers, carpenters and sculptors, farmers who tend their olive groves in the countryside and physicians who tend their patients in the city. Each citizen may aim at some things that are not the aim of others. The good of one of us, then, need not be exactly the same as the good of another.

Yet our differences must never be so great that we cannot agree on what is best for the city, that is, what is best for all and not merely for some. That is why, like any good polis, a democratic polis must not be split into two cities, a city of the rich and a city of the poor, each city looking to its own good. Not long ago I heard Plato speak of this danger, and though he is no friend of our Athenian democracy, on this, at least, we agree. For such a city will be cursed by conflict, and civil strife will overwhelm the public good. Perhaps it was because two cities had been growing within Athens, and the wealthier few came to hate the city governed by the many who were poor—or so the wealthy thought them to be—that the city of the more wealthy invited the rule of the Thirty Tyrants.

A democracy must also be of modest size, not only so that all citizens can meet together in the assembly and thus act as rulers of the city, but also in order that all citizens may know one another. To seek the good of all, citizens must be able to apprehend the good of each and thus be capable of understanding the common good that each shares with the others. But how could citizens come to understand all they have in common if their city were so large and their demos so numerous that they could never know one another or see their city whole? The Persian empire is an abomination, not merely because it is a despotism but because, being so huge that it dwarfs every person within its limits, it can never be anything other than a despotism.

Even Athens, I fear, has grown too large. It is said that our demos now comprises some forty thousand citizens.⁴ How can we know one another when we are so many? Citizens who neglect the meetings of the Assembly, as many now do, fail in their duties as citizens. Yet if every citizen were ever to attend the Assembly, we would be too numerous. Our meeting place on the hill of Pnyx would not hold us all, and if it could, out of forty thousand none could speak except a few orators, yet what orator possesses so stentorian a voice as to be heard by so many?

Like an athlete who in growing fat loses his swiftness and agility and can no longer participate in the games, the enormity of our demos is ill-suited for democracy.

For how can a city be a democracy unless all its citizens can assemble often in order to exercise their sovereign rule over the affairs of the city? I have heard some Athenian citizens complain that it is an excessive burden to trudge up Pnyx hill forty times a year, as we are expected to do, starting our meeting in the early morning and staying often until darkness falls, especially when some of us must make our way here from the distant parts of Attica the night before and make our way back to our farms the night after. Yet I do not see how we could get our business done with fewer meetings, and sometimes even so we need extraordinary sessions.

But it is not only through the Assembly that we in Athens rule over our city. We also take our turn in administering the work of the city—in the Council, which prepares the agenda of the Assembly, in our citizen juries, in the almost countless boards of magistrates. For us, democracy is not simply making important decisions and laws in the Assembly, it is also serving in office.

So a polis would not truly be a polis, and it could never be a democratic polis, unless both its citizen body and its territory were no larger than ours—and better yet that it be not quite so large. I well know the danger: that we are vulnerable to defeat in war by a large state. I do not mean other city-states like Sparta, but monstrous empires like Persia. Well, that risk we must run, and as the Persians well know, in alliance with other Greeks we have been their match and more.

Although we may need allies in times of war, even then we do not forgo our independence. Some say that we and our allies might form a permanent league, in which we could choose fellow citizens to represent us in some kind of council that would decide on matters of war and peace. But I do not understand how we could yield authority over us to such a council and still remain a democracy or even a true polis. For we should no longer be able to exercise sovereign power, in our own assembly, over our own city.

Thirty years ago my father was among those who attended the funeral of those who had fallen in the war with Sparta, and there he heard Pericles, who was chosen to give the eulogy for the dead heroes. So often did he later tell me what Pericles had said on that day that even now it is as if I myself had been there.

Our constitution, Pericles said, does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if to social standing, advancement in public life depends on reputation for ability, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, for if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition. The freedom we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. Far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes or even to indulge in those injurious looks that cannot fail to be offensive. But all this ease in our private

relations does not make us lawless as citizens. Our chief safeguard against lawlessness is our respect for the laws, particularly those protecting the injured, whether they are actually on the statute book or belong to that code which, although unwritten, yet cannot be broken without acknowledged disgrace.

Our public men, Pericles said, have, besides politics, their private affairs to attend to, and our ordinary citizens, though occupied with the pursuits of industry, are still fair judges of public matters. Instead of looking on discussion as a stumbling block in the way of action, we think it an indispensable preliminary to any wise action at all.

In short, said Pericles, as a city we are the school of Hellas (Thucydides 1951, 104–06).

The Vision in Summary

The democratic ideal described by our hypothetical Athenian is a political vision so lofty and charming that a modern democrat can hardly fail to be attracted by it. In the Greek vision of democracy, the citizen is a whole person for whom politics is a natural social activity not sharply separated from the rest of life, and for whom the government and the state—or rather, the polis—are not remote and alien entities distant from oneself. Rather, political life is only an extension of, and harmonious with, oneself. Values are not fragmented but coherent: for happiness is united with virtue, virtue with justice, and justice with happiness.

Nonetheless, two things must be said about this view of democracy. First, as a vision of an ideal order it should not be mistaken for the reality of Greek political life, as it sometimes is. As befits a eulogy for the fallen dead in a great war, even Pericles' famous funeral oration was, like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address on a similar occasion, an idealized portrait. I shall say something about the reality in a moment. Second, one cannot judge the relevance of that vision for the modern (or postmodern) world unless one understands how radically different it is from democratic ideas and practices as they have developed since the eighteenth century.

In the Greek view, as we have just seen, a democratic order would have to satisfy at least six requirements:

1. Citizens must be sufficiently harmonious in their interests so that they can share, and act upon, a strong sense of a general good that is not in marked contradiction to their personal aims or interests.
2. From this first requirement, a second follows: they must be highly homogeneous with respect to characteristics that would otherwise tend to produce political conflict and sharp disagreements over the public good. In this view, no state could hope to be a good polis if its citizens were greatly unequal in their economic resources and the amount of leisure time available to them, or if they adhered to different religions or spoke different languages or differed significantly in their education or, certainly, if they were of differing races, cultures, or (as we say today) ethnic groups.
3. The citizen body must be quite small, ideally even smaller than the forty to fifty thousand of Periclean Athens. The small size of the demos was necessary for

three reasons: It would help to avoid the heterogeneity and hence the disharmony that would result from extending the boundaries and thereby including, like Persia, people of diverse languages, religions, history, and ethnicity, with almost nothing in common. It was necessary also in order for citizens to acquire the knowledge of their city and of their fellow citizens, from observation, experience, and discussion, that would enable them to understand the common good and to distinguish it from their private or personal interests. Finally, the small size was essential if citizens were to assemble in order to serve as the sovereign rulers of the city.

4. Fourthly, then, citizens must be able to assemble and directly decide on the laws and decisions of policy. So deeply held was this view that the Greeks found it difficult to conceive of representative government, much less to accept it as a legitimate alternative to direct democracy. To be sure, from time to time leagues or confederacies of city-states were created. But genuinely federal systems with representative governments failed to develop, in part, it seems, because the idea of representation could not compete successfully with the profound belief in the desirability and legitimacy of direct governments with primary assemblies.⁵

5. Citizen participation was not limited, however, to the meetings of the Assembly. It also included actively participating in the administration of the city. It has been estimated that in Athens over one thousand offices had to be filled—a few by election but most by lot—and nearly all these offices were for one-year terms and could be occupied only once in a lifetime. Even with the relatively "large" demos of Athens, every citizen was almost certain to occupy some office for a year, and a large number would become members of the highly important Council of Five Hundred, which determined the agenda for the Assembly.⁶

6. Finally, the city-state must, ideally at least, remain fully autonomous. Leagues, confederacies, and alliances might sometimes be necessary for defense or war, but they must not be allowed to preempt the ultimate autonomy of the city-state and the sovereignty of the assembly within that state. In principle, then, each city must be self-sufficient, not only politically but also economically and militarily. Indeed, it must possess all the conditions required for a good life. But to avoid too heavy a dependence on foreign trade, a good life would necessarily be a frugal life. In this way, democracy was linked to the virtues of frugality, not to affluence.

Each of these requirements stands in stark contradiction to the realities of every modern democracy located in a nation-state or country rather than a city-state: Instead of the tiny demos and territory presupposed in the Greek view, a country—even a small country—comprises a gigantic body of citizens spread over a territory vast by Greek standards. As a consequence, citizens are a more heterogeneous body than the Greeks thought desirable. In many countries, in fact, they are extraordinarily diverse: in religion, education, culture, ethnic group, race, language, and economic position. These diversities inevitably disrupt the harmony envisioned in the Greek ideal; political conflict, not harmony, is the hallmark of the modern democratic state. And of course the citizens are far too numerous to assemble: As everyone knows, not only at the national level but usually also at

regional, provincial, state, and municipal levels, representative government, not direct democracy, prevails. Nor do citizens, on the whole, occupy the administrative offices, which nowadays are typically in the hands of full-time professionals who make a career of public administration. Finally, in all democratic countries it is taken for granted that units of government small enough to permit something like the participation envisioned in the Greek ideal cannot be autonomous but must, on the contrary, be subordinate elements in the larger system; and far from controlling their own agenda, citizens in these small units at best exercise control over a narrow range of matters whose limits are set by the larger system.

So profound are the differences, then, that if our hypothetical Athenian citizens were somehow to appear in our midst, he would surely contend that a modern democracy is not, after all, a democracy. However that may be, confronted by a radically different world that offers a radically different set of limits and possibilities, we are entitled to wonder how much if any of the Greek vision of democracy is relevant to our times or a conceivable future. I shall touch upon this question in later chapters.

LIMITS

It is reasonable to conclude, as many have, that government, politics, and political life in Athens and very likely in numerous other democratic city-states as well were, at least when viewed from a democratic perspective, greatly superior to the innumerable nondemocratic regimes under which most people have lived throughout recorded history. Even if the democratic city-states of classical antiquity were but tiny islands in the vast sea of human experience, they nonetheless demonstrated that human capacities far exceed the sorry standards displayed in the dismal performance of most political systems.

Yet we should not allow that impressive achievement to blind us to its limits. Without much doubt there were the usual gaps between the ideal and the reality of political life that all too human qualities invariably cause. What *was* that reality? The answer, alas, is that to a great extent we do not know and probably never shall know. Only shards of evidence exist.⁷ These provide information mainly about Athens, which was only one, though far and away the most important, of several hundred democratic city-states. Because classical scholars, like physical anthropologists who recreate a whole primate from the fragment of a jawbone, are compelled to reconstruct Greek democracy from very scanty evidence, their interpretations and evaluations are necessarily highly subjective.

Yet there is ample evidence for concluding that the political life of the Greeks, as of other peoples then and later, was markedly inferior to political ideals. It would scarcely be necessary to make this point if it were not for the influence of the view of some classical historians that in his unswerving devotion to the public good the Athenian citizen set a standard for all time.⁸

So far as one can make out from the fragmentary evidence, politics in Athens as in other cities was a tough, hard game in which issues were often subordinated to

personal ambitions. Although political parties in the modern sense did not exist, factions based on ties of family and friendship evidently played a powerful role. The supposedly superior claims of the common good yielded in practice to the stronger claims of family and friends.⁹ Factional leaders were not above using the process of ostracism by a vote in the assembly in order to banish their opponents for ten years.¹⁰ Outright betrayal of the state by political leaders was not unknown, as in the famous case of Alcibiades (Thucydides 1951, 353–92).

Although (in Athens, at least) citizen participation in public administration was exceptionally high by any standard, it is impossible to determine the general level of political interest and concern among citizens or the extent to which participation varied among the different strata. There are grounds for believing that only a rather small minority of citizens attended the meetings of the Assembly.¹¹ How representative of the entire demos this minority was, it is impossible to say. Doubtless leaders would try to ensure that their supporters turned out, and Assembly meetings may often have been largely attended by such followings. Since in much of the fifth century these followings consisted of coalitions of groups based on ties of kinship and friendship, the assemblies would probably not have tended to include poorer and less well connected citizens.¹² In all likelihood, most of the speeches in the Assembly were made by a relatively small number of leaders—men of established reputations, excellent as orators, who were acknowledged leaders of the demos and therefore entitled to a hearing.¹³

It would be a mistake, then, to assume that in the democratic city-states, Greeks were significantly less concerned with their private interests and more actively devoted to the public good than are citizens in modern democratic countries. Conceivably they may have been, but the conclusion is not warranted by the evidence.

However, it is not the merely human failings exhibited in political life that seem important to me but rather the limits that were inherent in the theory and practice of Greek democracy itself—limits that, to the continuing discomfiture of writers who uphold Greek democracy as establishing the proper standards for all time, modern democratic theory and practice had to break out of. Although one might object that to appraise Greek democracy by standards other than those relevant in its own time is inappropriate, the fact is that we cannot determine how relevant that experience is to our own time except by using standards appropriate to us.

From a contemporary democratic perspective, one crucially important limit on Greek democracy, in both theory and practice, was that citizenship was highly *exclusive* rather than *inclusive* as modern democracy has become. To be sure, Greek democracy was more inclusive than other regimes of the time; and democrats who saw their regime in comparative terms no doubt believed it, rightly, to be relatively inclusive, a judgment they would have expressed in the already commonplace division of regimes into rule by the one, the few, and the many. Nonetheless, in practice a demos of “the many” excluded many. Yet so far as one can tell, Greek democrats did not see the exclusiveness of their democracies as a grave defect. Indeed, insofar as they saw the alternatives as rule by one or the few,

democrats may literally not have seen how many persons were in fact excluded from "the many."

In both theory and practice, Greek democracy was exclusive in two senses: internally and externally. Within the city-state, a large part of the adult population was denied full citizenship: the right to participate in political life, whether by attending meetings of the sovereign assembly or by serving in public offices. Because the population of Athens is a highly conjectural matter, percentage estimates are unreliable and vary wildly. But not only were women excluded (as of course they continued to be in all democracies until the twentieth century), but also long-term resident aliens (*metics*) and slaves. Since the requirement for Athenian citizenship from 451 onward was that both parents must be Athenian citizens themselves, citizenship was for all practical purposes a hereditary privilege based on primordial ties of kinship (though full citizenship was a privilege inheritable only by males). Consequently no metic or his descendants could become citizens, despite the fact that many metic families lived in Athens for generations and contributed greatly to its economic and intellectual life during the fifth and fourth centuries (Fine, 1983, 434). Although metics were without the rights of citizens and in addition were also prohibited, in Athens at least, from owning land or a house, they had many of the duties of citizens (435).¹⁴ They engaged in social, economic, and cultural life as artisans, traders, and intellectuals, possessed rights protected in the law courts, were sometimes wealthy, and evidently enjoyed a certain standing.

Not so the slaves, who were not only denied all rights of citizenship but were denied all legal rights whatsoever. Legally slaves were no more than the property of their owners, wholly without legal rights. The extent and depth of slavery in classical Greece is a subject of profound dispute (cf. Finley 1980 and Ste. Croix 1981), but the democratic city-states were in some substantial sense slave societies. Where even poor citizens had some protection against abuse by virtue of their rights as citizens, and where metics had some protection from mistreatment by their freedom to move elsewhere, slaves were defenseless. Although some slaves became freedmen through manumission by their masters, in Greece (unlike Rome) they became metics, not citizens.¹⁵

Greek democracy was also, as we have seen, exclusive rather than inclusive *externally*. Indeed, among *Greeks* democracy did not exist: It existed, and in the views of Greeks could only exist, among members of the same polis. So deeply held was this view that it fatally weakened attempts to unite various cities in larger entities.

That democracy was exclusive rather than inclusive among the Greeks was not unrelated to a second important limit in their theory and practice: They did not acknowledge the existence of *universal* claims to freedom, equality, or rights, whether political rights or, more broadly, human rights. Freedom was an attribute of membership—not membership in the human species but membership (that is, citizenship) in a particular city.¹⁶ "The Greek concept of 'freedom' did not extend beyond the community itself: freedom for one's own members implied neither

legal (civil) freedom for all others resident within the community nor political freedom for members of other communities over whom one had power" (Finley 1972, 53). Even in a democratic polis, "freedom meant the rule of law and participation in the decision-making process, not the possession of inalienable rights" (78).¹⁷

Thirdly, then, as a consequence of the first two limits, Greek democracy was inherently limited to small-scale systems. Although the small scale of Greek democracy provided some extraordinary advantages, particularly for participation, many of the advantages of a large-scale political system were beyond its reach. Because the Greeks had no democratic means of extending the rule of law beyond the small compass of the city-state, in their external relations the city-states existed in a Hobbesian state of nature where not law but violence was the natural order of things. They found it difficult to unite even against external aggression. Despite their military prowess on land and sea, which enabled them to fend off the numerically superior forces of the Persians, they could combine their forces for defensive purposes only feebly and temporarily. Consequently the Greeks were finally united not by themselves but by their conquerors, the Macedonians and the Romans.

Two millennia later, after the focus of primordial loyalties and political order had been transferred to the far larger scale of the nation-state, the limitation of democracy to small-scale systems was seen as an irremediable defect. The theory and practice of democracy had to burst the narrow bounds of the polis. And while the vision of the Greeks was not wholly lost to democratic thought, it was replaced by a new vision of a vaster democracy extended now to the giant compass of the nation-state.

Chapter 2

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Toward the Second Transformation: Republicanism, Representation, and the Logic of Equality

Despite the extraordinary influence of classical Greece on the development of democracy, modern democratic ideas and institutions have also been shaped by many other factors, of which three are particularly important: a republican tradition, the development of representative governments, and certain conclusions that tend to follow from a belief in political equality.

THE REPUBLICAN TRADITION

By the republican tradition I mean a body of thought, far from systematic or coherent, that traces its origins less to the democratic ideas and practices of classical Greece described in the last chapter than to the most notable critic of Greek democracy: Aristotle. Moreover, as an embodiment of its political ideals republicanism looks not so much to Athens as to its enemy, Sparta, and even more to Rome and Venice. Grounded in Aristotle, shaped by the centuries-long experiences of republican Rome and the Republic of Venice, interpreted in varying and even conflicting ways during the late Renaissance by Florentine writers like Francesco Guicciardini and Niccolò Machiavelli, the republican tradition was reformulated, reshaped, and reinterpreted in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and America. If, during this process, some of the important themes in classical republicanism lost their centrality or were rejected outright, others retained their vitality.¹

Although the republican tradition diverged from Greek democratic thought, and in some respects was antithetical to it, republicanism nevertheless shared several of its assumptions. To begin with, republicanism adopted the view, common in Greek political thought (whether democratic or antidemocratic) that man is by nature a social and political animal; to fulfill their potentialities, human beings must live together in a political association; a good man must also be a good citizen; a good polity is an association constituted by good citizens; a good citizen

possesses the quality of civic virtue; virtue is the predisposition to seek the good of all in public matters; a good polity, therefore, is one that not only reflects but also promotes the virtue of its citizens.

More specifically, like Greek democrats republicans also held that the best polity is one in which citizens are in important respects equal: in their equality before the law, for example, and in the absence of a relation of dependency between one citizen and another, such as exists among masters and servants. Republican doctrine insisted further that no political system could be legitimate, desirable, or good if it excluded the people from participating in ruling.

Despite these similarities however, republicanism was more than a simple reaffirmation of the ideals and practices of Greek democracy. Like Aristotle, in some crucial respects it offered an alternative to democracy as understood by many Greeks. While republican doctrine laid great stress on the fundamental importance of civic virtue, it laid equal or greater stress on the fragility of virtue, the danger that a people or its leaders would become corrupt, and thus the likelihood that civic virtue would so far decay into corruption that a republic would become impossible. In the republican view, a major threat to civic virtue is generated by factions and political conflicts. These in turn tend to result from an all but universal characteristic of civil society: "The people" is not a perfectly homogeneous body with identical interests; it is normally divided into an aristocratic or oligarchic element and a democratic or popular component—the few and the many—each with somewhat different interests. Following Aristotle, one might also add a third component to the few and the many: a monocratic or monarchical element, a leader who might seek to enhance his own position, status, and power. The task of republicans, then, is to design a constitution that reflects and somehow balances the interests of the one, the few, and the many by providing for a mixed government of democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy so constituted that all three components will finally concur in the good of all.

The most obvious constitutional model was of course republican Rome with its system of consuls, Senate, and tribunes of the people. (Rome also furnished the obvious example of the decay and corruption of civic virtue: The rise of civil conflict and the transformation of the republic into Imperial Rome demonstrated how even a great republic could be destroyed.) In the eighteenth century another obvious example was added to the Roman model: the British constitution, which with its marvelously contrived arrangement of monarchy, Lords, and Commons appeared to some republican theorists—notably Baron de Montesquieu—the very epitome of a perfectly balanced system of government.

Thanks to events in Britain and America, the eighteenth century also saw the development of a strain of radical republicanism that was in some respects at odds with the older tradition. If the older view might be called aristocratic republicanism, the newer was more emphatic—and increasingly so—in its emphasis on the fundamental importance of the democratic component in the constitution of a republic. The more aristocratic or conservative strain of republicanism is to be found in Aristotle, in Guicciardini and the *ottimati* of Renaissance Florence, and in

America in John Adams; the more democratic strain in Machiavelli, in the radical Whigs of the eighteenth century, and in Thomas Jefferson.

In the aristocratic republican view, even though the people, the many, ought to have an important role in government, because they are more to be feared than trusted their role ought to be a limited one. To aristocratic republicans, perhaps the most difficult constitutional problem is to create a structure that will sufficiently restrain the impulses of the many. The proper function of the people is not to rule, as they did in Athens, but rather to choose leaders competent to perform the demanding function of governing over the entire polity. To be sure, since leaders are obligated to govern in the interests of the community as a whole, and the people are naturally an important element of the community, properly qualified leaders would govern in the interests of the people; but they would not rule exclusively in the interests of that single element, important as it necessarily must be. For, accepting the essential legitimacy of the interests of the few and the many, to aristocratic republicans the public good requires a balancing of these interests.

In the emergent democratic republicanism of the eighteenth century, by contrast, the element most to be feared is not the many but the few, not the people but the aristocratic and oligarchic elements. Indeed, the confidence of republicans in the prospects of good government rests in the qualities of the people. What is more, the public good does *not* consist in balancing the interests of the people with the interests of the few: the public good is nothing more or less than the welfare of the people. The constitutional task, therefore, is to design a system that will somehow overcome the inevitable tendency toward the preponderance of the few or the single despot and his hangers-on.

While aristocratic and democratic republicans agree that concentration of power is always dangerous and must always be avoided, their solutions to that problem diverge. Aristocratic or conservative republicans continue to emphasize the solution of a mixed government that balances the interests of the one, the few, and the many, and thus seek to reflect those interests in the monarchy, the aristocratic upper chamber, and the lower house for the commons. To democratic republicans, however, the idea of representing different interests in different institutions is increasingly more dubious and unacceptable. The difficulties in the older theory of mixed government become particularly evident in America. In the absence of an hereditary aristocracy, who are the specially worthy few? Presumably they comprise a "natural aristocracy," an idea dear even to democratic republicans like Jefferson. But how are the natural aristocrats to be identified? And how is it possible to ensure that they will be chosen to perform their proper role in governing? For example, should they be permitted to choose their own kind to compose an upper house of the legislature, where they would constitute a functional equivalent in a democratic republic to the House of Lords in Britain? As the framers of the American Constitution discovered in 1787, the problem is for all practical purposes without solution. In a democratic republic, the framers concluded, the interests of "the few" do not entitle them to their own second chamber. And it would be even less acceptable to protect a "monarchical interest" by locating it in

the executive. For surely the chief magistrate of a republic can scarcely be counted legitimately as a separate and special interest in the community.

Because of the intractability of solutions to the problem of designing a mixed government for a democratic republic, republicans, though by no means always perfectly clear on the matter, in effect replaced the ancient idea of mixed government with the newer idea, made famous by Montesquieu, of a constitutional and institutional separation of powers into the three main branches: legislative, executive, and judicial. It became an axiom of republican theory that the concentration of these three kinds of power in a single center was the very essence of tyranny and that they must therefore be located in separate institutions, each serving as a check on the others (Montesquieu [1748] 1961, bk. 11, chap. 6; Hamilton, Jay, and Madison, no. 47). Although the notion of balancing conflicting interests by no means disappeared (it was, for example, central to James Madison's view), the constitutional task was to ensure a proper balance among the three main functions or "powers" of government.

Like Greek democratic theory and practice, the republican tradition passed on to later advocates of democracy some unresolved problems. Of these, four were closely interrelated. First, as democratic republicans in the eighteenth century began to discern, the concept of interest or interests in orthodox republicanism was much too simple. Even if some societies were once stratified into the interests of the one, the few, and the many, that was no longer the case. How then were interests in more complex systems best understood, and, if need be, represented or "balanced"?

Second, how could a republic be designed to handle the conflicts that a diversity of interests seemed to make inevitable? After all, despite all the high-flown talk about civic virtue and balance of interests, in practice conflict was a pronounced, one might say normal, aspect of political life in earlier republics. Were political parties, which appeared in rudimentary and rather durable form in eighteenth-century Britain, somehow to be banished from public life in order to ensure public tranquility? If so, how—without destroying the essentials of republican government itself?

Third, if republican government depends on the virtue of its citizens, and if virtue consists in dedication to the public good (rather than one's own interests or those of some particular part of the "public"), then is a republic really possible, particularly in large and heterogeneous societies like those of Britain, France, and America? The orthodox republican answer was simple: republics could exist only in small states (Montesquieu 1961, bk. 8, chap. 16). But if so, then the republican tradition was irrelevant to the great task to which democratic republicans were firmly committed: democratizing the large nation-states of the modern world.

Fourth, then, could republican theory—and democratic ideas more generally—be applied on the scale of the nation-state? Just as with Greek democratic ideas and institutions, so with the republican tradition the attempt to adapt democratic republicanism to the requirements of large-scale societies required a far-reaching transformation. As democratic republicans discovered in the course of the eigh-

teenth century, a part of the answer to the problem of scale was to be found in institutions that hitherto had little place in democratic or republican theory, and not much in practice: the institutions of representative government.

REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

As we have seen, the Greeks rejected the notion that a large-scale political system could be desirable and never created a stable system of representative government. Nor did the Romans, despite the ever increasing expansion of the republic in both territory and citizens (Larsen 1955, 159–60). No matter how far from Rome a citizen might be, the only democratic institutions open to him were the assemblies held in Rome for electing magistrates and passing laws. Yet how could a Roman be a good citizen if, for all practical purposes, he could not attend the assemblies in Rome and therefore could not fully participate in public life? As more and more citizens lived at too great a distance for them easily to make the journey to Rome, the assemblies were gradually transformed (in fact if never in theory) into “representative” bodies; but, to use a later expression, for most citizens representation was “virtual” rather than actual, and it was badly though somewhat haphazardly biased in favor of those who could manage to attend.² (For details, see Taylor 1961, 50–75; Taylor 1966, 64–70.) Nor was representation a concern of the republican theorists of Renaissance Italy, who largely ignored the problem of how a citizen in a large republic like Rome could participate effectively, and in a realistic sense equally, with his fellow citizens. In any case they left the problem unsolved.

Thus from classical Greece to the seventeenth century, the possibility that a legislature might properly consist not of the entire body of citizens but of their elected representatives remained mainly outside the theory and practice of democratic or republican government—difficult as this fact may be for a contemporary democrat to understand.

An important break from the prevailing orthodoxy occurred, however, during the English Civil War, when the Puritans were compelled in their search for a republican alternative to monarchy to raise many of the most fundamental questions of democratic (or republican) theory and practice. In the course of elaborating their demands for a broader franchise and a government responsive to a broad electorate, the Levellers in particular foreshadowed the future development of the democratic idea, including the legitimacy—indeed the necessity—for representation. Yet the complete assimilation of representation into the theory and practice of democracy was still more than a century away. Even Locke, who expressed the view in the *Second Treatise* that the consent of the majority (specifically to taxes) might be given “either by themselves or their representatives chosen by them” (chap. XI, para. 140, p. 380), had little to say about representation and its place in democratic or republican theory.³ And Rousseau’s insistence in the *Social Contract* that representation was impermissible (bk. 3, chap. 15) was perfectly in line with the traditional view.

In actual practice, representation was not invented by democrats but developed instead as a medieval institution of monarchical and aristocratic government.⁴ (See, for example, Mansfield 1968.) Its beginnings are to be found, notably in England and Sweden, in the assemblies summoned by monarchs, or sometimes the nobles themselves, to deal with important matters of state: revenues, wars, royal succession, and the like. In the typical pattern, those summoned were drawn from and were intended to represent the various estates, with the representatives from each estate meeting separately. Over time, the estates diminished to two, lords and commoners, who were of course represented in separate houses (an arrangement, as we just saw, that created a problem for eighteenth-century radical Whigs, who found it difficult to explain why a second chamber was necessary in a democratic republic).

In the eighteenth century, writers began to see what the Levellers had seen earlier, that by joining the democratic idea of rule by the people to the non-democratic practice of representation, democracy could take on a wholly new form and dimension. In *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748) Montesquieu wrote admiringly of the English constitution and declared that, since it was impossible in a large state for the people to meet as a legislative body, they must choose representatives to do what they could not do themselves. Although as I just mentioned Rousseau subsequently rejected this view in the *Social Contract*, his flat rejection in that work was inconsistent with both his earlier and later writings, where he accepted representation as legitimate (Fralin 1978, 75–76, 181). Within a few generations of Montesquieu and Rousseau, representation was widely accepted by democrats and republicans as a solution that eliminated the ancient limits on the size of democratic states and transformed democracy from a doctrine suitable only for small and rapidly vanishing city-states to one applicable to the large nation-states of the modern age.

To those steeped in the older tradition, the union of representation and democracy sometimes seemed a marvelous and epochal invention. Thus by the early nineteenth century, a French writer much admired by Jefferson, Destutt de Tracy, insisted that both Rousseau and Montesquieu were obsolete: “Representation, or representative government, may be considered as a new invention, unknown in Montesquieu’s time . . . Representative democracy . . . is democracy rendered practicable for a long time and over a great extent of territory” (De Tracy 1811, 19). In 1820 James Mill proclaimed “the system of representation” as “the grand discovery of modern times” in which “the solution of all difficulties, both speculative and practical, will perhaps be found” (Sabine 1964, 695). Within a few years, what De Tracy, James Mill, and James Madison had correctly seen as a revolutionary transformation of democracy was taken for granted: it was obvious and unarguable that democracy must be representative.⁵

The transformation of democratic theory and practice that resulted from its union with representation has had profound consequences. Although we shall consider these more fully in later chapters, it may be helpful to mention several of them here. The most important consequence, as everyone was aware, was that

popular government need no longer be confined to small states but could now be extended almost indefinitely to include vast numbers of persons. Thus the idea of democracy, which might have perished with the disappearance of city-states, became relevant to the modern world of nation-states. Within the far larger domain of the nation-state, new conceptions of personal rights, individual freedom, and personal autonomy could flourish. Moreover, important problems that could never be solved within the narrow limits of the city-state—and these grew ever more numerous as interdependence increased—might be dealt with more effectively by a government capable of making laws and regulations over a far larger territory. To this extent, the capacity of citizens to govern themselves was greatly enhanced.

Yet the change in democracy resulting from its union with representation created its own problems. An entirely new and highly complex constellation of political institutions, which we are only beginning to understand, superseded the sovereign assembly that was central to the ancient conception of democracy. These institutions of representative democracy removed government so far from the direct reach of the demos that one could reasonably wonder, as some critics have, whether the new system was entitled to call itself by the venerable name of democracy. Further, the older idea of monistic democracy, in which autonomous political associations were thought to be unnecessary and illegitimate, was transformed into a pluralist political system in which autonomous associations were held to be not only legitimate but actually necessary to democracy on a large scale. On the large scale of the nation-state, a diversity of interests and interest groups came into existence. And these diverse groups were by no means an unmixed blessing. Where in the older view factionalism and conflict were believed to be destructive, political conflict came to be regarded as a normal, inevitable, even desirable part of a democratic order. Consequently the ancient belief that citizens both could and should pursue the public good rather than their private ends became more difficult to sustain, and even impossible, as "the public good" fragmented into individual and group interests.

Thus a conflict was created, one still with us to which we must return in later chapters, between the theory and practice of representative democracy and earlier conceptions of democratic and republican government that were never wholly lost.

THE LOGIC OF POLITICAL EQUALITY

Modern democratic governments have not been created by philosophers or historians familiar with Greek democracy, the republican tradition, or the concept of representation. Whatever independent influence ideas like these may have had, and however complex the interplay of ideas and action may be, we know that democratic theories are not self-fulfilling.

It is obvious, however, that the emergence and persistence of a democratic government among a group of people depends in some way on their *beliefs*. Thus if a substantial majority, or possibly even a substantial minority, were opposed to the idea of democracy and preferred an alternative—rule by a monarch or an aristocra-

cy, say—then such a group would be most unlikely to govern itself democratically. Conversely, among a group whose members believe that they are all about equally well qualified to participate in the decisions of the group, the chances are relatively high that they will govern themselves through some sort of democratic process. How such a belief might come about among the members of a group I am not prepared to say. In some times and places, however, three circumstances occur that favor beliefs in the democratic process. Certain persons constitute a fairly well-defined group or association. The group is, or its members believe it will become, relatively independent of control by outsiders. Finally, the members of the group perceive themselves as about equally qualified to govern, at least in a rough and ready sort of fashion. This final aspect of their beliefs might be more specifically and a bit more abstractly described as follows. The members believe that no single member, and no minority of members, is so definitely better qualified to rule that the one or the few should be permitted to rule over the entire association. They believe, on the contrary, that all the members of the association are adequately qualified to participate on an equal footing with the others in the process of governing the association.

I am going to call this idea the Strong Principle of Equality.⁶ In chapters 6 and 7 I shall show how the Strong Principle might reasonably be justified. The important point here is that if the members believe that the Strong Principle is valid, then they are likely to hold certain further beliefs that tend to follow from this principle. These further beliefs have to do with the kind of government within the association that would be consistent with the Strong Principle. As we shall see in chapter 8, only a democratic government would be fully consistent. I do not mean to imply that most people are highly logical in political matters. But working out the gross implications of the Strong Principle is well within the reach of ordinary human beings, as a wealth of human experience testifies. For repeatedly throughout human history groups of people have seen the implications and attempted to bring about a political order that would be more or less consistent with the principle.

These historical experiences reveal two important features of the Strong Principle. First, belief in something like the principle, and the development of at least a rude democratic process, have often come about among people who had little or no acquaintance with Greek democracy or the republican tradition or the eighteenth-century discovery of representation. Unnumbered tribal associations developed rude forms of democracy without any knowledge of these Western ideas. The local trade clubs (or unions) that appeared in England in the eighteenth century adopted practices of simple, direct democracy, which later developed into representative systems—all without benefit of theoretical knowledge.⁷ And after all, in 500 B.C. the Greeks themselves had no known precedents to draw on. At about the same time, the Romans were beginning the transition from kingship to an aristocratic republic, independent of Greek influence. Later, the further democratization of the republic came about primarily because the plebes (and their leaders) insisted that they were sufficiently qualified to participate and acted to bring about their inclusion, that is, they insisted in effect that the Strong Principle applied to plebes as

well as patricians. The origins of the Viking Ting, a judicial-legislative assembly of freemen, are lost in time but clearly were independent of external influences. The creation of the Althing in Iceland in 930 and the development of a quasi-democratic constitutional system unique in Europe for its time were offshoots of Norwegian Viking settlers who, it is safe to say, knew nothing of Greek democracy, Roman republicanism, or political theory or philosophy in a formal sense. What they did know, or believe, is that they were essentially equal in their qualifications for participating in government. So, too, with the democracies in the Alpine communities that took the first steps toward the formation of the Swiss Confederation. It is doubtful that in overthrowing the monarchy and creating a republic, the seventeenth-century English Puritans, Levellers, and Commonwealthmen were nearly as much influenced by Greece, Rome, or the republican tradition—though of course they were familiar with and made use of the institution of representation—as they were by their Christian beliefs, according to which all men were not only equal in the eyes of God but equally qualified to understand the word of God, to participate in church government, and by extension to govern the Commonwealth.⁸ In 1646, Richard Overton, a Leveller, wrote in a tract entitled *An Arrow Against All Tyrants*:

For by natural birth all men are equal . . . and as we are delivered of God by the hand of nature into this world, every one with a natural innate freedom and propriety . . . even so we are to live, every one equally . . . to enjoy his birthright and privilege, even all whereof God by nature hath made him free. . . . Every man by nature being a king, priest, prophet, in his own natural circuit and compass, whereof no second may partake but by deputation, commission, and free consent from him whose right it is (Woodhouse 1938, 69).

It was ideas like these that the Puritans took with them when they fled to the New World.

These and other historical experiences reveal another important point about the Strong Principle: It need not necessarily be applied very broadly. On the contrary, more often than not it has been interpreted in a highly exclusive way. As we saw, the male citizens of Athens did not believe that the Strong Principle applied to the majority of adults in Athens—women, metics, and slaves. In Venice, so much admired by republican theorists from Guicciardini to Rousseau, the nobles extended the principle only to themselves, a tiny minority of the Venetian population. In fact, because the Strong Principle does not specify its own scope, its implications are as powerful for aristocrats as for commoners. The principle could equally well apply to a democracy with universal suffrage and to aristocratic institutions like the House of Lords or the College of Cardinals.

Thus whenever members of a group or association come to believe that the Strong Principle pretty much applies *to themselves*, then the imperatives of logic and practical knowledge will strongly tend to lead them to the adoption of a more or less democratic process *among themselves*. We might describe the “democracy” that results as democratic with respect to its own demos, but not necessarily

democratic with respect to all persons subject to the collective decisions of the demos.

Once again, we encounter a problem that was not satisfactorily solved by any of the important sources of democratic theory and practice described in this chapter. Even if all persons who are adequately qualified to participate in making collective decisions ought rightfully to be included in the demos, and the demos ought to make collective decisions by means of a democratic process, what persons *are* adequately qualified and therefore ought to be included in the demos? As we shall discover, just as democracy in its origins did not provide a conclusive answer to this question, so too the major justifications that have been offered for modern democracy fail to answer it satisfactorily. Clearly, then, one of our first tasks, which we undertake in chapter 9, is to find a satisfactory answer.