Democracy and Dictatorship

The Nature and Limits of State Power

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Introduction: Democracy and the Decline of the Left

by John Keane

The decline of the Left

What does it mean to be on the Left today? Few questions are so theoretically and politically significant – and so utterly perplexing. Only the origins of the term ‘Left’ seem uncontroversial.

It is well known that the idea of the Left is a child of the French Revolution – a metaphorical extension of the seating plan of the 1789 French Estates General, which became divided by the heated debates on the royal veto, with the ‘third Estate’ sitting to the King’s left and the nobility to his right. It is also common knowledge that the idea of the Left played a critical role in nineteenth-century politics. It heightened the perception of the body politic as a broken continuum, as permanently divided by competing attitudes towards social change and political order. In opposition to the foot-dragging conservatism of the Right, with its haughty belief in the need for strict order and social control, Leftists were progressives. They optimistically embraced a faith in science, rationality and industry. They proclaimed their love of liberty and equality, and appealed to the essential goodness and sociability of human nature. The Left sympathized with the downtrodden. It despised the rich and powerful. It denounced parliamentary democracy as
a bourgeois institution. It battled for a world freed from the evils of capitalism, material scarcity and unhappiness.

Since the First World War, this classical image of the Left has been crumbling slowly. The Left has become more cautious about modernity. It is less magnetized by the myths of scientific-technical progress and, especially within its green fringes, it has become openly hostile to industrialism; by contrast, it is the Right, from Mussolini to Thatcher, which has abandoned its former nostalgia and circumspection, and pressed home revolutionary or reformist policies based on a deep faith in scientific and economic modernization. In the same period, the levelling image of the Left has been damaged badly by its association with the cruel Stalinist programme of destroying liberty, equality and solidarity by means of cunning, violence, blood and terror – in Spain, in the Moscow trials, the Hitler–Stalin pact, Katyn and the military invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia. In consequence, the Left has become widely identified with the mastery of the skills of the lion and the fox, with the passion for political power and the wholesale politicization of personal and social life.

The Left's founding image of international class solidarity and opposition to state violence has also taken a severe beating. The rise of national communist regimes (as in Yugoslavia, China and Vietnam) has demonstrated that Leftism is not synonymous with selfless internationalism. Severe tensions among these regimes – the Maoist denunciation of Soviet 'revisionism' as a right-wing betrayal of communism is a dramatic case in point – and the more recent outbreak of war between these states (as in Indochina) have served to reinforce the image of the Left as a purveyor of self-interested power politics – as a mirror image of its right-wing opponents.

In recent years, the meaning of the term 'Left' has fallen into deeper disarray, especially in the countries of the West. It has become a muddled label which often obscures more than it clarifies. The appearance of the New Left at the end of the 1950s is one source of this trend. The willingness of many Left governments and parties after 1945 to embrace the 'mixed economy' and their more recent fascination with market mechanisms, the profit motive and small business has further blurred its distinctively 'left' qualities. Matters have been worsened by the confused reaction of trade unions, once considered the 'natural' heartland of Left support, to the failure of Keynesian reflationary policies. This confusion has been multiplied by deindustrialization, the growth of a new underclass and the emergence of more 'flexible' technologies, production methods and consumer styles. The western Left's loss of direction can also be traced to its nostalgic defence of centralized state bureaucracy and outdated techniques of management and planning. The conventional belief on the Left that state planning and fixing of markets plus selective nationalization plus spending money equals socialism has come unstuck. And the consequent tendency of some parts of the Left to display more pride in the past than faith in the future has been exacerbated by its intellectual torpor – its bad habit of submitting to the hypnotic powers of the Right, of repeating clichés and making politics through conventional labels.

The writings of Norberto Bobbio, Italy's leading political thinker, are an important reaction to this deep impasse of the Left. His work is pathbreaking because he sees the demand for more democracy as the key to a successful redefinition of the Left. What does democracy mean in this context? Bobbio's unusual 'liberal socialist' understanding of the term has been shaped by his early experiences in the liberal intellectual milieu of Turin in the 1930s, his deep involvement in the anti-Fascist Resistance, his subsequent intellectual and journalistic dialogues with the Italian Left, especially the PCI, and his current role as Life Senator and independent franc-tireur within Italian parliamentary politics. Against the backdrop of such experiences, Bobbio insists – in the face of its twentieth-century vulgarization – that the concept of democracy is not elastic. It is not a word which can be made to mean whatever we choose it to mean. Democracy is understood by him as a system of
procedural rules which specify who is authorized to make collective decisions and through which procedures such decisions are to be made. In contrast to all forms of heteronomous government, democracy comprises procedures for arriving at collective decisions in a way which secures the fullest possible participation of interested parties. At a minimum, according to Bobbio, democratic procedures include equal and universal adult suffrage; majority rule and guarantees of minority rights, which ensure that collective decisions are approved by a substantial number of those expected to make them; the rule of law; and constitutional guarantees of freedom of assembly and expression and other liberties, which help guarantee that those expected to decide or to elect those who decide can choose among real alternatives.

Democracy in this sense is a method of preventing those who govern from permanently appropriating power for their own ends. Those exercising power are subject to procedures which enable others to question, rotate or sack them. The distribution of power in democratic systems tends to reflect the outcomes of political contests framed by permanent decision-making rules. Conflict and compromise are therefore institutionalized, and power becomes secular and ‘disembodied’. It is not permanently consubstantial with any particular individual or group – a monarch, for instance – but is exercised instead by flesh-and-blood mortals who are subject to removal and are accountable to others, in accordance with the rules of the democratic game.

Bobbio argues that in general the present-day Left has either muddled or no clear ideas about the importance and nature of the rules of democracy, and in particular whether to reform or replace them. This leads him to challenge several standard Leftist misconceptions about democracy. For example, Bobbio is adamant that the historical emergence of liberal democratic institutions, such as free elections, competitive party systems and written constitutions, represented a great leap forward in the fight for more democracy. Liberal democratic institutions are not necessarily a device for protecting the class interests of the bourgeoisie. Liberal democracy (to paraphrase Lenin) is not the best political shell for capitalism. Liberal democratic institutions are in fact an indispensable bulwark against the unending arrogance of political actors, a vital mechanism for limiting the scope and haughtiness of state power. A post-liberal democracy is thinkable and desirable, but a non-liberal democracy is a contradiction in terms and in fact.

Bobbio is also adamant that the friends of democracy must reject the bad ‘New Left’ habit of calling for the disappearance of all organization and its replacement by so-called spontaneous action. A democratic polity without procedural rules is not only a contradiction in terms. It is also a recipe for arbitrary decision-making and misgovernment. The friends of democracy must also recognize that the full replacement of representative forms of democracy by participatory, direct democracy – which require (in the case of decisions affecting the whole polity) the public assembly of millions of citizens – is technically impossible in large-scale, complex societies. Direct democracy, the participation of citizens in the agora, is suited only to small states and organizations in which ‘the people find it easy to meet and in which every citizen can easily get to know all the others’ (Rousseau). More controversially, Bobbio argues that the attempt to foist the principle of direct democracy on to representative institutions – for instance, applying a binding mandate to elected parliamentary ‘delegates’ – is undesirable, since it contradicts the principle, indispensable in any parliamentary democracy, that representatives represent general rather than narrowly sectional interests and therefore require some powers to negotiate freely and to act independently of those whom they represent.

Bobbio emphasizes the important point that direct democracy thrives upon consensual decision-making, and that it therefore works best when there are a limited number of alternative policy choices – nuclear power or no nuclear
power, peace or war, or the legalization or criminalization of abortion. Otherwise, the trust, patience and mutual support that are required within self-governing circles are often overburdened with multiple and conflicting points of view, the tensions among which cannot be resolved easily without the presence of intermediaries – that is, without institutions of delegated or representative democracy which 'filter out' and simplify the kaleidoscope of conflicting opinions.

This is not to say that representative, parliamentary democracy is the alpha and omega of political forms. Bobbio recognizes, correctly, that the representative system is constrained and limited by accumulations of social power within civil society. The vast majority of citizens has no say in major decisions concerning economic investment, production and growth. Churches, trade unions and many other institutions of civil society remain insufficiently democratic. Exactly how more democracy within the sphere of civil society might be achieved in practice is unclear from Bobbio's account. He refers only to the need to develop, broaden and reinforce all the institutions from which modern democracy was born. Priority should be given, in his view, to the task of supplementing political democracy with 'social democracy' – extending the process of democratization from the political sphere (where individuals are regarded as citizens) to the civil sphere, where individuals are regarded variously as men and women, entrepreneurs and workers, teachers and students, producers and consumers. Struggles over where citizens can vote should be given as much priority as the struggles in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries over who can vote.

Bobbio emphasizes that in practice this refinement and extension of democracy – broadening the domains where citizens can vote – does not require all individuals to play the role of fulltime political animals. Too much democracy can kill off democracy. The wholesale politicization of life, the attempt to create a society of fulltime, omnicompetent citizens, is in fact antithetical to democracy. It would produce hellish and unworkable results – everything would be defined as political, private life would be swallowed up by the public sphere, human beings would be transformed, perhaps forcibly, into 'total citizens', despite the fact that the growing diversification and complexity of modern societies prevents individual citizens from being in the same place at the same time to make decisions which affect their lives directly or indirectly. Free time would become a thing of the past. The life of the fulltime, omnicompetent citizen would be a nightmare of interminable meetings, endless negotiations and late-night telephone calls. Moreover, according to Bobbio, Europeans are heirs of an historical tradition in which state power is supposed to be limited in favour of non-state spheres, such as religious communities, households, centres of learning and research, and markets.

This historically felt need to limit the scope and power of the state is a central and distinctive feature of Bobbio's attempt to redefine the meaning of Left politics. He views state power as necessary and yet corruptible and dangerous, and as therefore in need of preventive measures and effective defences, such as a plurality of social forces and organizations which run parallel to the state. In Bobbio's view, the enormous problem which faces the Left is to know how to create through its own agency a state apparatus which is efficient without being oppressive or, in other words, which can function effectively as the agent of civil society without at the same time lapsing into a dictatorship.

THE GREAT DICHOTOMIES

This volume of connected essays – a small encyclopaedia of key political terms – is jam-packed with insights which bear on this problem. Consistent with Bobbio's dislike of obscure jargon and emotive slogans – his intellectual temperament is consistently sceptical and democratic and imbued with a sense of the complexity of things – these essays get down to the serious business of carefully analysing
classical, medieval and modern traditions of reflection on the scope and limits of political action. The essays might be described as an exercise in historical semantics — as an attempt to reconstruct the changing meaning through time of certain political keywords. This exercise is evidently infinite in scope. There are always new texts to be read and further illustrations to be developed, and both tasks would in turn modify or amplify the conclusions already reached. Bobbio meets this possible objection by concentrating on a number of key political terms and their opposites — such as the public and the private, civil society and the state, democracy and dictatorship — which hold the key to resolving the problem of how to limit and control the exercise of state power. His choice of certain pairs of concepts (‘great dichotomies’ Bobbio calls them) reveals his deep attachment to the tradition of modern liberal constitutionalism, but it is no less unusual and stimulating for that. It has the advantage of illuminating the origins, shifting meanings and normative implications of each term by comparing it with its partner. In this way, the structure of any given political system or historical era can be better understood by knowing what has been said or written about it. For example, the *differentia specifica* of modern times and its patterns of political thought when compared to its classical and medieval counterparts can be better grasped, and the rough and narrow paths of democratic theory can be better negotiated.

The essays assembled in this volume are invaluable guides in this adventure. To begin with, Bobbio examines the public/private dichotomy. This contrast first entered the history of western political thought for the purpose of distinguishing between what belongs to a group as a collectivity and what belongs to its single members or lesser groupings like households and enterprises. The public/private dichotomy in turn harbours other important distinctions, which Bobbio teases out with skill and patience: for example, the distinction between associations of equals (as in the *polis*) and communities of unequals (as in the *oikos*);

between the public law which is imposed by political authority and the private law which regulates the interaction of private persons in such matters as property, inheritance and marriage; and the distinction between the principles of distributive justice, which guide public authority in the distribution of honours and duties, and the principles of commutative justice, which cover buying and selling, labour contracts and other private individuals and groups considered to be of equal value.

Bobbio points out that the original distinction between the public and the private was ordered hierarchically, in that the public was affirmed as supreme in relation to the peripheral powers of the private. An example is the classic definition of Cicero of the *res publica* as an aggregation of people bonded together by the *utilitas communione*. This primacy of the public over the private was challenged successively, for example, by the diffusion of Roman law, whose principal institutions are property, contracts and the family. This trend was reinforced, ironically, by the development (by Bartolo di Sassoferrato, Jean Bodin and others) of a systematic body of public law during the first phases of development of the modern state. This hastened the questioning of the primacy of the public over the private by triggering disputes about whether the people have forever conceded or only temporarily entrusted power to the sovereign. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the opposition of the private sphere to the public underwent a thorough ‘modernization’. Locke and others argued for the inviolability of property in the lives, liberties and other natural rights of individuals. Even theorists of absolutism like Hobbes considered as unjust the sovereign who violated the property of his or her subjects. And prior to the French Revolution the exponents of political economy radically extended this liberal theory of the primacy of the private over the public. They emphasized the fundamental difference between the sphere of economic relations (understood as an ensemble of relationships among formally equal individuals who are in fact rendered unequal by the division
of labour) and the sphere of political institutions – a distinction which powerfully reinforced the defence of civil society against the state during that period.

The 'great dichotomy' between civil society and the state features prominently in this volume. In today's political vocabulary, Bobbio points out, civil society refers to the sphere of social relations – households, communications media, markets, churches, voluntary organizations and social movements – which are not controlled directly by state institutions. It is widely understood as a defining characteristic of modern life. Civil society and the state are seen as two necessarily separate but contiguous and interdependent aspects of contemporary life. Bobbio emphasizes the novelty of this viewpoint. Well into the eighteenth century, European political thinkers understood civil society as a synonym for a type of political association whose members are subject to laws which ensure peaceful order and good government. This meaning of the term is traceable through Cicero’s idea of societas civilis to the Aristotelian view that civil society (koition politike) is that society, the polis, which contains and governs all others. According to Bobbio, this old custom of treating civil society as coterminous with the state was always under pressure from attempts, recurrent in Christian thought, to distinguish the area of competence of the civil powers from the domain of religious power. It was challenged directly for the first time by German writers (especially Marx and Hegel). For Hegel civil society is a moment in the process of the formation and completion of the State. It includes the market economy, social classes, corporations, and institutions whose transactions are regulated by civil law and, as such, are not directly dependent upon the political state itself. Marx’s interpretation of Hegel’s concept of civil society is by contrast reductive and ultimately distorted, in Bobbio’s view. Marx’s bürgerliche Gesellschaft referred to society in the sense of a class society riddled with bourgeois practices and assumptions. It is a product of an historical subject, the bourgeoisie, which legitimated its struggles against the absolutist state in the language of the rights of man and citizen, which in reality serves only the particular interests of the bourgeoisie.

Bobbio's treatment of the original and subsequent accounts of modern civil society – including that of Gramsci – arguably places too much emphasis on the German case and neglects the reticence of German thinkers about its democratic implications. Bobbio nevertheless correctly underscores the wide range of conflicting meanings of the expression 'civil society' and its counterpart, the state. Bobbio shows that state institutions have often been viewed from a variety of standpoints. They can be treated as an aspect of the history of institutions or treated in terms of the history of political ideas or of normative political philosophy. The theme of the state can also be approached through the distinction between sociological and legal doctrines (a distinction emphasized in Georg Jellinek's General Doctrine of the State (Allgemeine Staatslehre) 1910); that is, the state can be viewed either as primarily a legally produced and legally governed entity or as a form of organization which cannot be dissociated from the ensemble of underlying social relations which condition or determine its functioning.

The historical appearance of the idea of the state in its modern form is attributed by Bobbio to such works as Machiavelli's Prince and Hobbes's Leviathan, where the state is understood as the supreme institutionalized power – the 'machine state' – that can be exercised over the inhabitants of a given territory. The state is defined as the bearer of the summa potestas; whoever has the exclusive power or right to use force on a given territory is considered sovereign. Whether this idea of the state – in contrast to the idea of the Greek polis and the Roman res publica – was entirely novel is a matter of deep controversy. According to Bobbio, some writers – Max Weber is among the most important – see the reality of the modern state, with its monopoly of the means of violence, administration and taxation, as unprecedented. Other writers – Machiavelli's
close reading of Roman history in search of political examples applicable to the states of his time is an example—have been inclined to identify a measure of continuity between the systems of the ancient, medieval and modern worlds.

Theories of the state have also been marked by bitter controversies about the appropriate relationship between sovereign and subjects, rulers and ruled, the state and its citizens. This relationship has been defined by most political thinkers as a relationship between superiors and inferiors. The history of political thought, Bobbio's analysis shows, has been mainly a history written from above. The dominant tradition that runs from Plato’s *Statesman* and Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* to Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and Schmitt’s *Die Diktatur* has represented political power from the standpoint of the rulers. It has sought to justify the power-holders’ right to command and the subjects’ duty to obey by defending various principles of legitimacy. These include the authority of God; the will of the people; nature (as an original force, *kratos*, or as the law of reason or modern natural law); appeals to history; or, as in legal positivism, references to the fact that law is made and enforced by authorities appointed by the political system itself. This dominant tradition has come under fire increasingly in modern times. The entitlements of the governed—the ‘hidden side of the moon’ of western political thought in Bobbio’s words—have come ever more sharply in focus. The natural rights of the individual; the liberty, wealth and happiness of citizens; the right of resistance to unjust laws; the separation of powers; the rule of law; office-holding and law-making subject to time limits; these and other principles have been invoked in opposition to state-centred theories of politics. Such principles are seen to exist independently of political power, which is required both to respect and to protect them. The individual is not seen to be destined to serve the state. Rather, the state must serve the individual so that, as Spinoza put it, even sovereigns who can do anything they want are forced in practice to recognize that they cannot make a table eat grass.

The changing fortunes of the theory of dictatorship, analysed in the last essay in this volume, is an important example of the way in which the entitlements of the governed becomes an ever more prominent theme in modern political thought. From ancient to early modern thinkers (up to Rousseau, Babeuf and Buonarroti) the institution of dictatorship was distinguished by its exceptional and temporary character. ‘Dictator’ was originally the name of the Roman magistrate to whom extraordinary powers were legitimately given in times of war or domestic revolt. Bobbio points out that the idea that dictatorship is required periodically to stabilize an existing order comes under heavy fire in modern times. In this era of great revolutionary upheavals, the concept of dictatorship is extended to include regimes which aim to change the world, to smash the old order, and to establish a brand new regime. The modern idea of dictatorship—Buonarroti’s committee of ‘wise and enlightened’ men who boldly guide the revolution is an example—is further distinguished from its classical counterpart by the insistence that not only the powers of the executive but all state functions should be mobilized in support of dictatorship. During the nineteenth century, the originally positive connotations of the term dictatorship were also dissolved. Marx, Engels and others considered every state to be dictatorial. Dictatorship was denounced as ‘domination’, as a necessary and enduring feature of the exercise of all forms of political power. According to Bobbio, this shift away from a positive to a negative definition of dictatorship is even more marked during the twentieth century. From the time of the fiery debates about the nature of the Bolshevik and fascist regimes, dictatorship and democracy are seen to be antithetical forms of government. Dictatorship is widely regarded with suspicion or disdain. It comes to mean all undemocratic ways of wielding power.
Although Bobbio notes - approvingly - that democracy is today still generally reckoned to be preferable to dictatorship, he is not starry-eyed about its merits and advantages. Certainly, he considers democracy the chief antidote of dictatorship and violent politics, which are potentially inherent in the operation of all modern states. In the final analysis, these states rest on a foundation of armed force. This means not only that the danger of war and the militarization of civil society is omnipresent in the field of inter-state relations, but also that the political leaders of each nation-state continually have access to its irreducibly violent potential. Whenever they are challenged or wish to accumulate further power, political leaders can resort to institutions such as the police and the military, which are deeply antithetical to democracy because they thrive on secrecy, cunning, enforced unanimity and, ultimately, the shout to arms and the crash of hobnailed boots on the pavement.

By contrast, democratic procedures are based on non-violent, open negotiations and revocable compromises, and for this reason Bobbio considers them more 'civilized'. Yet his enthusiasm for democracy is controlled. It does not treat democracy as a synonym for the 'good life' (Lipset). A unique feature of Bobbio's defence of democracy is its honest concern with the limits of democracy. He emphasizes several of these limits. While the democratic method is treated as a precious and vital human invention, he insists that it is not always and everywhere a viable mode of decision-making. Bobbio does not repeat the oldest (and old hat) arguments against democracy, for instance that democracy always degenerates into lawlessness and licence, so that the father fears his son and 'the master fears and flatters his pupils and the pupils laugh at their masters and teachers' (Plato). Bobbio instead illustrates his thesis about the limits of democracy with reference to periods of crisis, such as war, violent upheaval and domestic 'states of emergency', in which democratic rules of the game rarely apply. (Whether they can or should be made to apply is a different problem, left untreated by Bobbio.) In such periods, social and political outcomes are determined by self-interested calculation and bloody struggles for power over others. The basic rules of democracy seem to be an unaffordable luxury.

Bobbio also sees the democratic method to be threatened by a number of irreversible historical trends. For example, the extension of the suffrage and the growth of social demands on the liberal democratic state have forced it to expand its functions and services and - the Weberian roots of Bobbio's argument are here strongly evident - to administer these services through a constantly expanding bureaucratic apparatus which is structured hierarchically and not democratically. Bobbio further claims that the number of problems requiring technical expertise and professional solutions is rising, and that this reduces the applicability of the democratic principle that everyone can decide everything. Inevitably, government by technicians spreads. Citizens' (potential) sovereignty is whittled away in favour of qualunquismo, the apathy and indifference of private beings who are interested only in cultivating their gardens. Finally, Bobbio laments the undemocratic and atomizing impact of the mass media. He points out that democracy presupposes the free and full development of the faculties of individual citizens, and yet he claims that this requirement is violated daily by the manipulative appeals of the press and broadcasting media, which diminish the space reserved for informed judgements by stimulating convictions based on either fleeting emotions or the passive imitation of others - all in the name of 'popular choice'. The abstract principle of popular sovereignty is thereby translated into reality in debased form.

Bobbio's account of the limits of democracy is arguably incomplete and less than convincing. There is much evidence that the 'irreversible' historical trends alleged by Bobbio are in fact highly contingent developments. Bureaucratic organizations certainly tend to reduce their members and clients to mere objects of administrative control, but they
also typically stimulate the growth of independent public spheres by depending on a measure of initiative from their members and by feigning acceptance of the principle of mediating conflicting interests through controversy, open discussion, compromise and consensus. Bobbio's defence of the principle of government by technicians is also questionable. Complex organizations cannot operate automatically, that is, guided only by technical knowledge and procedures. Human skill, improvisation and collective judgements are essential for preventing them from regularly malfunctioning in unexpected and often dangerous ways. The introduction of the most advanced machine systems (such as computers and robots) into complex organizations further increases the number of open-ended and unstructured problems, which cannot be solved by technical expertise alone but only with the co-operation of those who work directly with these new information technologies. And the astonishing capacity of these technologies to alter flexibly both the range of products and rhythms of work can be managed only through collective human decisions at the point of production. Finally, the emphasis placed by Bobbio on the atomizing and depoliticizing effects of the mass media is one-sided. It neglects the serious political controversies which have erupted in recent decades between the supporters of state-regulated and market-regulated press and audio-visual media; and it neglects the ways in which most citizens - as the remarkable growth of video piracy and the illegal use of descramblers suggest - today retain a native (if undeveloped) capacity to select, reinterpret, criticize, or - like tortoises - shield themselves completely against the appeals of the mass media.3

Bobbio's examination of the limitations of democracy is also arguably incomplete. There are quite a number of weaknesses inherent in the democratic method - they range from old doubts about democracy's lack of philosophical self-confidence to new concerns about the inability of democratic procedures to resolve such dilemmas as that between the growing power of human control over nature and the growing need of the human species to give institutional recognition to our fundamental dependence upon nature itself - and its friends need urgently to discuss them, if only to defend democracy against its harshest critics. Admittedly, this is a controversial undertaking. Some democrats insist that to interrogate the democratic method is to erode its credibility and destroy its self-confidence. This conviction is mistaken. The long-term survival of democracy must involve anticipating the objections of its critics, honestly exploring the dilemmas and paradoxes which riddle democratic politics, thereby recognizing that democracy cannot achieve certain things. Democratic theory must state issues it knows it cannot resolve; it must attempt to hold up a mirror, admittedly somewhat clouded, to look at itself in. Bobbio attempts to do exactly this, and his key point is well taken. The democratic method does indeed have clear limits, which should serve as a warning against attempts to build a perfect democracy. Like the behaviour of the daughters of Pelia, who tried to rejuvenate their aging father by hacking him to pieces, attempts to perfect democracy endanger democracy itself.

And yet even though democracy has endemic limits, Bobbio is adamant that the democratic method generally remains superior to all other dictatorial methods of decision-making. Why does Bobbio sympathize with this method - despite the fact that in the history of political thought democracy has had many more enemies than friends? Why does he consider the democratization of the Left - its unconditional embrace of the democratic method - of paramount importance? In short, why is democracy a good thing?

Bobbio discusses several types of responses to these questions, although his list is less complete and more conventional than might be expected. For example, Bobbio emphasizes that the most important feature of democratic procedures is that they enable the approval of decisions of interest to the whole collectivity, or at least a majority of
citizens. This overlooks the key point – still inadequately recognized in democratic theory – that democratic procedures also enable the disapproval and revision of established agreements, and that for this reason they are uniquely suited to complex western societies. Democratic procedures are superior to all other types of decision-making not because they guarantee both a consensus and ‘good’ decisions, but because they provide citizens who are affected by certain decisions with the possibility of reconsidering their judgements about the quality and unintended consequences of these decisions. Democratic procedures increase the level of ‘flexibility’ and ‘reversibility’ of decision-making. They encourage incremental learning and trial-and-error modification (or ‘muddling through’), and that is why they are best suited to the task of publicly monitoring and controlling (and sometimes shutting down) complex and tightly coupled ‘high-risk’ organizations, whose failure (as in Bhopal, Three-Mile Island and Chernobyl) can have catastrophic ecological and social consequences. Democracy is an unrivalled remedy for technocratic delusions. It is an indispensable means of making accountable those who turn a blind eye to the ‘normal accidents’ which plague high-risk systems, and who seek to define acceptable levels of risk by means of technical analyses of probability – or simply by falling back on the childish solipsism that whatever isn’t believed couldn’t possibly be harmful.

Only democratic procedures can openly and fairly select certain kinds of dangers for public attention, carefully monitor and bring to heel those responsible for managing risky organizations, thereby minimizing the possibility of error and reducing the chances of the big mistake. Unfortunately, Bobbio does not consider this unusual line of reasoning. He instead examines three more conventional types of arguments for democracy. The first and weakest of these is the utilitarian argument that democracy is superior to dictatorship because it enables the best interpreters of interests – the interested parties themselves – to sift through various options and to decide for themselves. Aside from the probability that interested individuals and groups confuse their short-term and longer-run interests because they often see no further than their own noses, the utilitarian argument mistakenly assumes that the collective interest is only ever the sum of individual interests. A second and more convincing type of argument, according to Bobbio, is that democratic procedures maximize freedom in the sense of autonomy. Why autonomy is a good thing is unclear from Bobbio’s account; he simply assumes that it is one of those ultimate values which cannot be deduced rationally. If freedom (to paraphrase Rousseau) is obedience to the laws which citizens formulate and apply to themselves then democratic procedures for arriving at collective decisions through the fullest possible participation of interested parties is a natural ally of autonomy.

Finally, and most importantly, Bobbio considers the view that democracy is superior because it remains the strongest antidote to the abuse of power. He endorses Montesquieu’s maxim that those who exercise power always want more of it and for more extended periods. The great advantage of democracy is that it is a type of decision-making procedure which monitors itself through its own agency. A bad democracy is for this reason always better than a good dictatorship. Democracy is a self-reflexive means of controlling the exercise of power, and it is for this reason an indispensable weapon in the fight to interrogate, restrict and to dissolve dictatorial power. Democrats are certainly not exempted from this democratic equation. Democrats seek to alter radically and to equalize the existing distribution of power within and between the state and civil society. They are normally confronted with various acts of sabotage and resistance by their opponents and, hence, faced with the temptation of overcoming such obstacles by accumulating ever more power. The lust for power knows no political affiliation. It is polymorphously perverse. It requires constant correction and eternal vigilance.

This rule applies especially to those who consider themselves as heirs to a socialist version of the classical
Left project. In capitalist society – according to Marx and others – the institutional bases of class power and state power are differentiated. The separation of political and social forms of stratification is seen (correctly) to be a unique feature of the modern bourgeois era. The human species is subdivided for the first time into social classes; individuals’ legal status is divorced from their socio-economic role within civil society; each individual is sundered into both private egoist and public-spirited citizen; and civil society, the realm of private needs and interests, waged labour and private right, is emancipated from political control, and becomes the basis and presupposition of the state. Civil society is also the power base of the leading class, the bourgeoisie, which is the first ‘non-political’ class in human history. Its control of civil society ensures that political power is normally a secondary or derivative phenomenon; the state is an instrument for protecting and managing the political affairs of the bourgeoisie and its allies.

The socialist project aimed to undo this development by abolishing the social power of the bourgeoisie and, hence, destroying the division between civil society and the state. The problem, according to Bobbio, is that state power tends to become dictatorial whenever it ceases to be subject to the countervailing powers of civil society. And that is not the only problem. If socialism means a society in which ownership of the means of production has been transferred from private hands into the laps of ‘society’ – in the twentieth century that has normally meant the state itself – then the abuses of state power are (and have been) much more likely than in a capitalist society. Under socialist conditions, citizens would be exposed constantly to the whims and calculations of a state which simultaneously performed the functions of policeman, administrator, social worker and employer.

Bobbio’s argument here comes full circle. It emphasizes, rightly, that the demand for socialism in the conventional sense is undemocratic; and that the demand for democracy is much more subversive because it calls into question all heteronomous forms of power. This is why Bobbio insists that the democratization of the Left, its militant defence of the democratic method, is of fundamental contemporary importance. He concludes that the Left needs democracy in order to live up to its old promises of greater equality and solidarity with liberty; and that, in view of the systematic failure of the Left to keep these promises, its full acceptance of the democratic method would radically alter the methods, policies and public image of the Left. It would become a synonym for the democratic fight for greater democracy.

While this proposed redefinition of the Left is tentative and its policy implications sketchy, its deep political significance should not be underestimated. Once or twice in each century whole political spectrums break up and undergo massive realignment. We are living through one of these painful and topsy-turvy periods of readjustment, and Bobbio’s writings help to explain why. His arguments expose several key blindspots and muddles of the Left. They help to clarify the advantages and disadvantages of the democratic method. And they deepen our appreciation of the unexpected global upsurge of the democratic revolution at the end of the twentieth century – in Poland and Hungary, Brazil and Argentina, the Philippines and China. Bobbio’s arguments will nevertheless irritate many orthodox Leftists, especially those who continue to defend the primacy of ‘socialism’ and who consequently fail to see that the citizen has problems distinct from those of the worker or consumer, and that political and social democracy cannot be resolved into economic democracy. For those who remain flippancy about the advantages of democracy, or who turn a blind eye to the ways in which contemporary western democracies are fragile, corruptible and often corrupt – those who haven’t yet seen that the middle of the political road is often a dead end – Bobbio’s writings should be compulsory reading. And for smug neo-conservatives, who pronounce the death of the Left by implosion,
these writings should serve as a warning that the imagination of a new democratic Left has begun to stir.

Notes


3. These points concerning bureaucracy, new information technologies and the mass media are elaborated in my Public Life and Late Capitalism, New York and London 1984; Charles Perrow, Normal Accidents, Living with High-Risk Technologies, New York 1984; and my “Liberty of the Press” in the 1990s, New Formations 8 (Summer 1989), pp. 34–52.

Preface

Four pieces are brought together in this volume without any significant changes from when they were first written for the Enciclopedia Einaudi. These are ‘Democracy and Dictatorship’ from Volume IV (1978), ‘Public/Private’ from Volume XI (1980), ‘Civil Society’ and ‘State’ from Volume XII (1981). These are closely connected themes and I apologize to the reader in advance for any inevitable repetitions. The first and the second are presented directly in the form of antitheses, while the third and the fourth deal individually with the terms of another antithesis which is no less crucial in the history of political thought: civil society/state.

One of the guiding principles of the encyclopaedia, the analysis of certain key terms together with their opposites, was particularly congenial to me. In 1974 I had written an article on the classical distinction between private law and public law and I called it ‘The Great Dichotomy’. The antithesis democracy/dictatorship reproduces in ordinary language the philosophical contrast between autonomy and heteronomy that goes back through Kelsen to Kant and which I have often reposed. I had already examined the antithesis civil society/state, historically in the works of Hegel, Marx and Gramsci, and analytically in the Dizionario Politico (published by UTET) under the title ‘Civil Society’.

Dealing with antitheses offers the advantage at the descriptive level of light being thrown on one term by the