

HUMBLE DEMOCRACY?*

**On the Need for New Thinking
about an Aging Ideal**

John Keane

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The Democracy Thing

From the sun-scorched vineyards of Kandahar province in October 2004 came detailed reports of a gathering of a thousand Pashtun tribal elders called to discuss Afghanistan's first awkward steps towards electoral democracy. The *shura*, or assembly, was treated by the organisers with roast lamb and a list of instructions: check that the tents, tables, indelible ink and stationery have been delivered to polling centres, some with addresses like 'beside the Joi Nau stream' or 'near the water station pump'; use tractors and taxis and donkeys to transport voters to those locations; make sure that both wives and husbands can recognise the president's photo on the ballot. 'We show them: here is the ballot, here is Karzai. Don't mark his head or put a line through his symbol – just tick the box', said Ahmed Wali Karzai, a Kandahar businessman and one of several speakers urging the assembly to cast a vote for his brother, Hamid Karzai, the incumbent president and election front runner. 'They don't have a clue what is going on', Ahmed Ali said after the assembly had concluded its business. 'They come to us and say: "Why are we having an election? Everything is going well." Or they say: "We don't need the government. It's done nothing for us. I live in a tent. What do I care about politics?" I tell them – they often frown - it's this democracy thing.'

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This democracy thing: is it a desirable political ideal? Might it be a universal norm, as relevant and applicable to the vineyard people of Kandahar as it is to bankers in Frankfurt and London and cell-phoning businessmen in Mumbai and Delhi, as well as to *dalit* women in that

¹ 'Afghans take first awkward steps towards democracy', *Financial Times* (London), October 9/10 2004.

country who battle for *panchayat* representation, or to the factory workers and peasants of China, the Kurds of Turkey, or even to powerful bodies that operate across borders, like the WTO and the World Bank? Or might it be that democracy is a fake universal norm, just one of those pompous little Western values that jostles for our attention, dazzles us with its promises and - for a time - cons us into believing that it is not a mask for power, a tool useful in the struggle by some for mastery over others?

Most political commentators around the world today dodge such questions. A great normative silence envelopes democracy at the very historical moment – paradoxically – that it enjoys unprecedented popularity. Journalists, citizen activists, politicians and political thinkers commonly note that democracy has in recent decades become, for the first time ever, a global political language. They point out that its dialects are now spoken in many countries on every continent – in India, Taiwan, Egypt, the Ukraine, Argentina and Kenya – and they take heart from think tank reports that sing the praises of democracy using back-up evidence to prove its unstoppable advance. One well-known report speaks of the twentieth century as the Democratic Century. It points out that in 1900 monarchies and empires predominated. There were no states that could be judged as electoral democracies by the standard of universal suffrage for competitive multi-party elections; there were merely a few ‘restricted democracies’ – 25 of them, accounting for just 12.4% of the world’s population. By 1950, with the military defeat of Nazism and the beginnings of de-colonization and the post-war reconstruction of Europe and Japan, there were 22 democracies accounting for 31 per cent of the world’s population; a further 21 states were ‘restricted democracies’ and they accounted for 11.9% of the world’s population. By the end of the century, the report observes, the so-called Third Wave brought the

experience of democracy to Latin America, post-communist Europe and parts of Africa and Asia. Out of 192 countries, 119 could be described as ‘electoral democracies’ – 58.2% of the globe’s population – with 85 of these countries – 38% of the world’s inhabitants - enjoying forms of democracy ‘respectful of basic human rights and the rule of law’ (see Figure 1). So the report finds that the ideal of democracy is now within reach of the whole world. ‘In a very real sense’, runs the conclusion, ‘the twentieth century has become the “Democratic Century”....A growing global human rights and democratic consciousness is reflected in the expansion of democratic practices and in the extension of the democratic franchise to all parts of the world and to all major civilizations and religions.’²

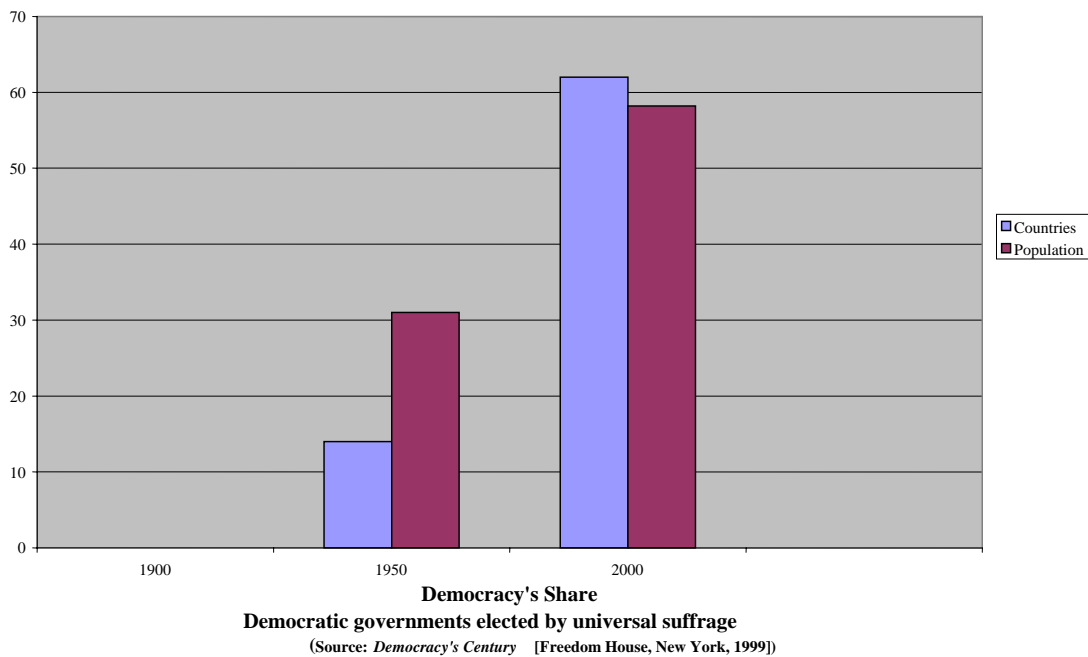


Figure 1

² See the Freedom House report *Democracy's Century. A Survey of Global Political Change in the 20th Century* (New York 1999).

Many quietly draw from reports of this kind the conclusion that democracy has become a *de facto* universal. Although they may spot that democracy is a particular ideal with particular roots somewhere in the geographic region located between ancient Syria-Mesopotamia and the early Greek city-states, they note, with satisfaction, that democracy has triumphed over all other political values. Around the world, it has been embraced *as if* it were a way of life that had global validity – as ‘a universal value that people anywhere may have reason to see as valuable’ (Amartya Sen).

Not everyone agrees. Some commentators, Richard Rorty among them, are quite cynical - more sensitive to the ethical and political problem of why democracy should be considered desirable. Rorty minces no words. He admits that modern representative democracy is a ‘peculiarity’ of ‘North Atlantic culture’. But he is sure that democracy is ‘morally superior’ because it is an ingredient of ‘a culture of hope – hope of a better world as attainable in the here and now by social and political effort – as opposed to the cultures of resignation characteristic of the East.’ So even though democracy is only one norm among others it is self-evidently superior in practice. ‘There is much still to be achieved’, Rorty explained in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* shortly after President Bush had begun to talk war and freedom, ‘but basically the West is on the right path. I don’t believe it has much to learn from other cultures. We should aim to expand, to westernise the planet.’³

Pragmatic reasoning of this kind stands alongside the current ‘democracy promotion’ efforts of the United States and other countries, but such

³ From an interview with Mathias Greffrath and others, ‘Den Planeten verwestlichen!’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (München), 20 November 2001 (translation mine).

reasoning easily gets mixed up in violent power games in devils' playgrounds, as we know from daily reports from democratisation experiments in Iraq, and in Afghanistan, where (by July 2006) new-minted members of the national parliament, most of them men linked to warlords and drug dealers and human rights violators, move around in heavy vehicles, with armed guards fore and aft, dodging daily threats and declared bounties on their bodies (US \$25,000 dead; \$50,000 alive).⁴ And there is plenty of evidence that suggests, especially when talk of the ethical superiority of democracy is backed up by military force, that the outcomes are probably bound to give democracy a bad name – resulting in what has been called 'pushback', of the kind that is happening today in various parts of the Middle East.⁵ The harsh words against American democracy promotion efforts spoken by Lebanese Druze leader and opposition parliamentarian Walid Jumblatt may be read as the writing on the wall of democracy whenever and wherever it blindly or arrogantly supposes itself to be a universally 'good' North Atlantic norm. Describing President Bush as a 'mad emperor' who thinks of himself as 'God's deputy on earth', Condoleeza Rice as 'oil coloured' and Tony Blair a 'peacock with a sexual complex', Jumblatt sarcastically defined democracy as a type of imperial government in which 'their skies are American airplanes, their seas are American fleets, their bases are American bases, their regimes are U.S.-British regimes, their rivers are American boats, their mountains are American commandos, their plains are American tanks and their security is at the service of American interests.'⁶

⁴ Paul McGeough, 'A Nation Built at the Point of a Gun', *Sydney Morning Herald* (July 15-16, 2006), pp. 34-35.

⁵ Thomas Carothers, 'The Backlash Against Democracy Promotion', *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2006)

⁶ Cited in *The Daily Star* (Beirut), number 466[?], February 3, 2003.

Such sweeping attacks on the democratic ideal suggest that the belief that the West has a patent on the universal ideal of democracy is a politically dangerous dogma. It is also philosophically questionable. It begs the ethical question that has important strategic value: what is so good about democracy? To grasp why this is so, allow me to return to Richard Rorty. When pressed further to explain why the Western ‘experiment’ with democracy is desirable, Rorty replies that all forms of universal reasoning should be abandoned because democracy needs no philosophical justification at all. In normative terms, democracy should travel light: rejecting mumbo jumbo, it should whistle its way through the world with an air of ‘philosophical superficiality and light-mindedness’.⁷ The norm of democracy should not be understood as something like an extension of, or a substitute for, the principles once prized by theology. Democratic ideals can stand on their own feet. They are not desirable because they are somehow true to an order that is antecedent to and given to us – a foundational ‘reality’ that is non-contingent, necessary and prior to its particular forms. Democracy should shun dubious philosophical friends. It has no need of them. Indifference towards them is the beginning of democratic wisdom.

It has been said that this line of reasoning about democracy tacitly, by default, supposes the controversial metaphysical claim that there is no prior and independent ethical order. Rorty rightly brushes off that objection by saying that philosophy is both incapable of adducing such an order and, at the same time, that it has no business in dabbling in speculations about its existence or non-existence. Yet one trouble with this conclusion - that democracy has absolute priority over philosophical

⁷ Richard Rorty, ‘The priority of democracy to philosophy’, *Objectivity, relativism, and truth. Philosophical papers*, volume 1 (Cambridge and New York 1991), p. 193.

norms - is not only that it ignores just how much philosophy as we know it has been changed by the democratic experience, but more importantly that it also ignores, conversely, just how much democracy as we experience it today continues to be shaped by grandiloquent philosophical propositions, themes and sentiments. It is not just that the word democracy (as Philip Pettit, John Dunn and others have pointed out) is a thickly evaluative term. Whether we recognise it or not, much thinking about democracy worldwide continues to live under the spell of early modern normative justifications of democracy that have the effect of turning it into a dogma.

First Principles

Any effort to free democracy from these inherited justifications needs to examine them in much more detail and with less wistfulness than Rorty supposes. Their single-mindedness - their stated commitment to a foundational First Principle - is arguably incompatible with a new understanding of democracy that allows both for a diversity of justifications of why democracy is desirable and explicit recognition of the plurality of conflicting and often incommensurable notions of the good affirmed by people living in actually existing democratic - and non-democratic - societies. The point is that today's silence about why democracy is supposed to be a desirable universal norm harbours much inherited philosophical arrogance that is itself undemocratic - and not likely to wither away unless it is vigorously exposed and opposed. The norm of democracy needs actively to be democratised: brought down to earth, stripped of its philosophical foundations so that it can better serve the earth and its peoples even-handedly, with less fanatical presumption and more humility.

Traces of old-fashioned arrogance are easy to spot within the contemporary belief that democracy is a universal value. Consider to begin with the nineteenth-century Christian view that support for the ideal of democracy is desirable, even necessary because it is based on ‘the principles of eternal justice, the unchanging laws of God’. These words, famously spoken by the New England minister and campaigner, Theodore Parker, before a large public rally against slavery in Boston,⁸ subsequently surfaced in the speeches of many an American president, most recently in those of George W. Bush, and they also command strong support today among many Christians of different persuasions around the world. Christians were not always so inclined; the case for the marriage of Christian ethics and the norm of democracy was itself an historical achievement and had to be made politically the hard way, including through tough philosophical argument. An example is Jacques Maritain’s justification of democracy as a predicate, or sublimated form, of Christian ethics.⁹

Maritain draws on the well-known remark of Henri Bergson that the motive power of democracy is love in order to describe the motivations

⁸ From the speech, ‘The American Idea’, delivered by Theodore Parker to an anti-slavery rally in May 1850 : ‘A democracy, that is a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people; of course, a government after the principles of eternal justice, the unchanging laws of God; for shortness sake, I will call it the idea of freedom’. Parker elsewhere noted that ‘the democratic idea has had but a slow and gradual growth even in New England,’ but that it was nevertheless spreading throughout the American republic, such that ‘government becomes more and more of all, by all and for all’, a testimony to the fact that democracy is ‘the enactment of God’s justice into human laws’ (quotations respectively from *Additional Speeches, Addresses, and Occasional Sermons* (Boston 1855), volume I, p. 33; and ‘The Nebraska Question’, in *ibid.*, volume I, p. 327).

⁹ From ‘Christianity and Democracy’, a typewritten manuscript prepared as an address at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in New York on December 29th 1949, and again at Gettysburg College on February 19th 1950, for the Adams County Round Table of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. The manuscript is preserved in the University of Notre Dame Archives, Notre Dame, Indiana., Jacques Maritain Papers, 6/04 F. The following quotations are drawn from pp. 2,5,4 and 2-3.

that must be cultivated by citizens if democracy is to be born, or to survive and to flourish. Sense experience suggests that democracies require a 'common consciousness and common moral experience'. Citizens must be convinced in their hearts that rulers who produce injustices and commit crimes by using 'iniquitous and perverse means' are the sworn enemies of democracy. Citizens need a measure of secular faith in the forward march of humanity; they must be persuaded that human history does not go around in circles, or that it moves inevitably towards decline, or disaster. On that basis, democrats must believe that human beings, whether in their capacities as voters or as workers or as members of social groups, are rights-bearing subjects who are equal before the law, even in the face of inequalities that are regarded by most people as functionally necessary for the survival of democracy. Democrats must also understand that they are members of a state and that their lives and liberties and wellbeing depend upon its structures and policies. Yet the citizens of a democracy must grasp as well that their own dignity transcends the state and its powers. Democracy demands respect for the belief that legitimate government is exercised by virtue of the consent of the governed - not by the trickery and threats of the governors.

Among the unusual twists in Maritain's philosophical defence of democracy is its stress on the point that in any democracy worthy of the name the principle of 'the will of the people' is not its founding principle. Conventional, simple-minded democratic views of the Sovereign People are blind to the ways in which democracy can degenerate into mere rule of a majority that considers itself the sole judge of good and evil, so setting democracy on the road to totalitarian rule. The prevention of totalitarianism and other forms of violent injustice requires institutional

limits on the formula of popular (majority) sovereignty – in favour of a ‘common democratic charter’ that privileges such aforementioned motivations as faith in the possibility of human progress, the inviolability of human dignity and the conviction that human suffering and injustice can be overcome through ‘political work’. These motivations serve as correctives of simple-minded understandings of democracy, which suffer from blindness of a second sort: the blindness that accompanies their old-fashioned commitment to the dogma that the people of any single state are sovereign masters of their own sovereign house. The dogma of sovereignty overlooks the pressing need to cultivate ‘brotherly love’ across borders, to extend ‘civic friendship...to the entire human race’. Conventional notions of democracy suffer a third form of blindness: they indulge a misguided belief that ‘the people’ can do without transcendental standards while living on earth. Here Maritain moves by way of reflexive abstraction from considerations of sense experience to the metaphysical claim that democracy is the ‘temporal manifestation of the inspiration of the Gospel’. Democracy is rooted in God-given Being; it is the sublimate of God’s creation and guidance of the earth and its peoples. Historically speaking, Christian teachings provided by degrees the evangelical inspiration of the secular democratic consciousness that was born of modern times. Human beings with democratic instincts are not soulless apes for whom the accidents of zoological mutation and adaptation just happened by chance to turn out favourably. ‘The democratic sense or feeling’, says Maritain, ‘is, by its very nature, an evangelical sense or feeling, its motive power is love, the essential thing in it is fraternity, it has its real sources in Gospel Inspiration.’ The corollary of this thesis is that the democratic state of mind cannot survive in purely secular form. ‘The people are not God, the people do not have infallible reason and virtues without flaw’. Democratic efforts to decide what is just or unjust

require the inspiration of the Gospel. Authority ultimately has its source in God. No person or group or people can claim the right to rule others. That is why, Maritain concludes, the voluntary re-Christianisation of the world, the ‘internal awakening’ of individuals who become spiritually committed to the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, is a basic condition of reviving and quickening democracy in troubled times.

Traces of Christian thinking are blended into a quite different justification of democracy in the widely-read, hotly-debated polemic by Guiseppe Mazzini, *Thoughts Upon Democracy in Europe* (1847).¹⁰ It begins with a stirring anthem: ‘The democratic tendency of our times, the upward movement of the popular classes, who desire to have their share in political life, - hitherto a life of privilege - is henceforth no Utopian dream, no doubtful anticipation. It is a fact; a great European fact, which occupies every mind, influences the proceedings of government, defies all opposition.’ Mazzini interpreted this ‘upward movement’ towards democracy as confirmation of the Principle of Man. This guiding foundational principle has a ‘religious’ quality: faith in its workings is mandatory because everybody and everything in the world is both its expression and potential beneficiary. Democrats ‘are believers without a temple’. The Principle of Man – together with its corollary that all living men and women can come to enjoy freedom and equality – is becoming the measure of all things. The world is subject to what Mazzini called ‘the law of continual progress’. Nudged along by political will and due effort, it leads everywhere to the self-improvement and equality of human beings.

¹⁰ Guiseppe Mazzini, *Thoughts Upon Democracy in Europe*, first published in the *People’s Journal* (1847) and reprinted in *Joseph Mazzini. A Memoir by E.A.V. with Two Essays by Mazzini* (London 187), pp.171-257. The quotations that follow are found on pp. 171, 175, 171, 179, 202-203, 178, 185, 177, 180, 194, 239, 205, 239, 233 and 217.

The Principle of Man stands opposed to competition, selfishness, ‘party spirit’, and the present-day ‘analysing, dividing, and sub-dividing’ of Man into unequal fragments. It is opposed to talk of individual rights and to efforts (like that of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man* [1791-2] and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792]) to ground democracy on a theory of rights. The Principle of Man also abhors the exploitation of Man by men. It seeks to overcome the divisions between ‘the Glasgow workman and his master, the Irish labourer and the middleman, the child who works in the mine and he who with a rod prevents him from falling asleep’. Democracy is a ‘creed of fusion’. It ‘thirsts for unity’. It stands for co-operation, love, association, and enthusiasm: the individual living for his or her family, the family for its country, the country living for humanity as an integrated whole.

Mazzini was at pains to point out that democrats know that inequality disfigures people. ‘Give the suffrage to a people unfitted for it, governed by hateful reactionary passions, they will sell it, or will make a bad use of it; they will introduce instability into every part of the state’. That is why democrats wish human beings to be better than they currently are. ‘Democracy says to us – “If you wish to attain it, let man commune as intimately as possible with the greatest possible number of his fellows.”...It bids us – “Endeavour all to unite. Invite all to the banquet of life. Throw down the barriers which separate you. Suppress all the privileges which render you hostile or envious...Make yourselves equal, as far as it can be done.’ Democrats champion ‘the idea of the mission of humanity’. They work for the nurturing of dutiful love within the Family, where the child’s first lesson in the Principle of Man is offered by ‘the mother’s kiss and the father’s caress’. Democrats see the Family as the

nucleus of the Nation and in turn they champion the self-determination of all Nations, considered as equals, as entities that nurture the solidarity of citizens, for instance through the ownership of property and the right of suffrage. According to Mazzini, solidarity in the home is linked to the solidarity that comes through membership of a Nation. And just as he objects to the fracturing of Family and Nation by the greedy exploits of 'the well-lodged, well-clothed, and well-fed classes', so he finds abhorrent 'the usurping and monopolising nation, conceiving its own grandeur and force only in the inferiority and in the poverty of others'. Democracy lives for the day when all forms of privilege and inequality within nations shall be turned into dust and ashes. For the same reason it yearns for the peaceful integration of all Nations into a common Humanity based on family and 'fatherland' - a new world order of democracy based on sovereign nations bound together 'by progress, and consequently by liberty'.

A pinch of religion, an ounce of nation-thinking, two spoonfuls of the belief in progress, a large serving of Humanism: Mazzini's eclectic thought patterns had the effect of widening the repertoire of philosophical justifications of modern representative democracy while deepening its embrace of foundational principles. The same effect - and the grip of the philosophical past on the present - is evident in efforts to define democracy as founded on the principle that power sharing arrangements are desirable because concentrated power always has unhappy or dangerous effects.

Among the first formulations of this particular justification of the democratic ideal was an influential tract called *Government* (1820), written for an encyclopaedia by the Scottish preacher and teacher and

civil servant, James Mill (1773-1836).¹¹ It explained that democracy in representative form maximizes the happiness of the governed by providing them with the means of sacking those governors who make them miserable. Democracy conforms to the fundamental utilitarian principle that ‘if the end of Government be to produce the greatest happiness of the greatest number, that end cannot be attained by making the greatest number slaves’. The ‘evils of unbridled power’ and the enslavement to rulers is a constant political problem because all men - Mill thought women and children were non-players in the game of politics - strive constantly for power over others. Power is a universal aphrodisiac. Men cannot resist its charms. It sets off insatiable desires for the total conquest of others. Power hunger is ‘boundless in the number of persons to whom we would extend it, and boundless in its degree over the actions of each’.

It follows from this ‘grand governing law of human nature’ that the great problem in matters of government is somehow to turn necessity into virtue by restraining those in whose hands is lodged the powers needed to protect the political community. Absolute monarchy is an objectionable type of government because it potentially takes whatever it pleases from its subjects and, in the extreme, ends in ‘terror’. Government by a propertied aristocracy is not much better; for all its talk of virtue and civilisation, in practice it drags people down ‘to the condition of negroes in the West Indies’. That leaves ‘Democracy’. Mill reasoned that the ancient understanding of democracy by assembly, while admirable in its search for government for and by the whole community, in fact proved to be unworkable, at least for modern times. This is because it thwarted

¹¹ James Mill, ‘Government’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1820), reprinted as *An Essay on Government* (Cambridge 1937).

‘calm and effectual deliberation’ by stirring up violent passions that encouraged some to shout down or speak over the heads of others; and because the regular assembly of a whole community would cut short the time spent producing wealth so vital for the survival and self-improvement of a community. Democracy therefore requires representatives, who do the job of governing, on behalf of others, but are prevented from becoming their masters because the representatives are themselves subject to voters’ power to correct their actions or to get rid of them using the fair trial of periodic elections¹².

Emigration

When the language of democracy began to travel across seas and continents during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, brand new justifications of its superiority as an ethical ideal appeared. One of the long-lasting effects of the growing worldliness of democracy was to widen the philosophical case for it by adding to its existing menu of justifications. The curious thing is that despite its development of many

¹² James Mill, *An Essay on Government* (Cambridge 1937), pp. 4, 49, 18, 17, 22, 25, 9. It is worth noting that in this tract Mill did not favour universal adult suffrage, as might have been expected from his reasoning about the common interest of the people in preventing their suffering at the hands of arbitrary power. Women, children, younger adult males and those without property – ten-twelfths of the population - are struck off the possible list of the enfranchised, on the ground that ‘an interest identical with that of the whole community, is to be found in the aggregate males, of an age to be regarded as *sui juris* [Mill set the limit at 40], who may be regarded as the natural Representatives of the whole population’ (p. 45). Further discussion of Mill’s defence of representative democracy is to be found in the contrasting views of C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford 1977), chapter 2; Joseph Hamburger, ‘James Mill on Universal Suffrage and the Middle Class’, *Journal of Politics*, volume 24, 1 (February 1962), pp. 167-190; and Mill’s own claim, recorded later by his son, John Stuart Mill, that in the tract *Government* he presumed that the times were such that the franchise had to be restricted, so that he was asking only what seemed to him an allowable or achievable franchise (see John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* [London 1924], pp. 87-88). But as Macpherson points out (*ibid*, p.41), the wording of the article *Government* ‘suggests not that he regarded the restrictions as unfortunately necessary concessions to political realism, but rather that he regarded them as useful in securing that the electors would make a good choice.’

tails of different colours, the norm of democracy continued to be wedded to universalist claims based on some type of first principle. A case in point, developed in New Zealand during the Second World War, is Karl Popper's knowledge-based theory of democracy as a unique type of polity that produces policies through evolutionary learning by enabling the public refutation of nonsense through public conjectures linked to truth claims. Democracy is an opponent of 'the closed society' and to all forms of 'historicism', by which Popper meant the dogmatic belief that history develops inexorably and necessarily, according to knowable general laws, towards a determinate end. Democracy is also an implacable opponent of unthinking acceptance of whatever seems fated, or necessary. 'One hears too often the suggestion that some form or other of totalitarianism is inevitable', wrote Popper. 'They ask us whether we are really naïve enough to believe that democracy can be permanent; whether we do not see that it is just one of the many forms of government that come and go in the course of history. They argue that democracy, in order to fight totalitarianism, is forced to copy its methods and thus to become totalitarian. Or they assert that our industrial system cannot continue to function without adopting the methods of collectivist planning, and they infer from the inevitability of a collectivist economic system that the adoption of totalitarian forms of social life is also inevitable.' Such ways of explaining and justifying the end or decline of representative democracy ignore its principal normative advantage: 'only democracy provides an institutional framework that permits reform without violence, and so the use of reason in political matters'¹³.

¹³ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, New Jersey 1950), pp. 4,6.

Popper's central claim is that democracy is a non-violent and permanently self-reforming polity whose governments and citizens are guided by rational public deliberations that are subject to the principle of the rejection of falsehoods and the development of falsifiable claims to truth. Democracy in this sense is the political complement of what happens in the field of scientific-technical innovation, where the progress of knowledge - the improved human ability to solve human problems by coming better to know the world of nature - is facilitated by the use of scientific methods that Popper calls 'critical rationalism'. Popper is sure that the growth of human knowledge is a causal factor in the evolution of human history; he is equally insistent that the accumulation of knowledge is no straightforward (empiricist) matter of observing 'reality' and verifying theories through inductivist reasoning and the marshalling of the 'facts' of that so-called reality. Scientific theories, and human knowledge generally, are irreducibly conjectural: they are nurtured by acts of creative imagination for the purpose of solving problems that have arisen in specific historical and cultural settings. Positive results from the experimental testing of truth claims cannot confirm their truth status; what is logically decisive in the effort to demonstrate their validity is that such claims can withstand vigorous and rigorous attempts to falsify them. Not verification but falsifiability is the key criterion of the boundary between what is and is not genuinely scientific: a theory should be considered scientific if and only if it is open to, and can withstand, falsification. Just as in science, so as in democracy: fallibilism is their common property. Under democratic conditions, truth claims by citizens, parties and governments are under constant public scrutiny. When democracy works well, actors make conjectures, marshal evidence and use rational argumentation to pour cold water on hot-headed rhetoric, bogus truth claims and dangerous ideologies. In this way, democracy

displays its ‘fitness’ and ultimate justification: that it holds hands with metaphysical and historical indeterminism and so makes possible evolutionary progress towards the elimination of errors, the solving of socio-economic and political problems, and the search for greater equality. Democracy is synonymous with the advance of reason. ‘Men are not equal; but we can decide to fight for equal rights’, concludes Popper. ‘Human institutions such as the state are not rational, but we can decide to fight to make them more rational. We ourselves and our ordinary language are, on the whole, emotional rather than rational; but we can try to be a little more rational, and we can train ourselves to use our language as an instrument not of self-expression...but of rational communication.’¹⁴

Popper’s re-grounding of democracy as a form of polity guided by the unending quest for truth exemplifies the growing muddle within democratic theory. Expressed in a less judgmental way, one could say that as the ideal of democracy travelled to all four corners of the earth, its arsenal of normative weapons grew in size and variety; or, to switch similes, the norm of democracy began to resemble an exotic plant whose seeds were carried to foreign soils, where they took root and flourished as healthy plants in various mutant forms. This syncretism of the democratic ideal no doubt helps to explain how its language could adapt to so many different habitats, for instance to lands where it had previously been absent. An example is Sun Yat-Sen’s famous account of the arrival of democracy in China – ‘the age of the people’s power’ – as the teleological culmination of Four Stages of History. Picturing modern

¹⁴ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, New Jersey 1950), p. 461.

Europe as a latecomer to the ideas of democracy that were already sketched by Confucius and Mencius (for whom ‘most precious are the people; next come the spirits of land and grain; and, last, the princes’), Sun Yat-Sen summed up a world-historical movement as powerful and unstoppable as the eastwards-flowing Yangtze River : ‘the first period was one of struggle between man and beast in which man employed physical strength rather than any kind of power; in the second period man fought with Nature and called divine powers to his aid; in the third period, men came into conflict with men, states with states, races with races, and autocratic power was the chief weapon. We are now in the fourth period,’ said Sun Yat-Sen, ‘of war within states, when the people are battling against their monarchs and kings. The issue now is between good and evil, between right and might, and as the power of the people is steadily increasing we may call this the age of the people’s sovereignty [*Min-ch’uan*] – the age of democracy’.¹⁵

Then – a more recent example – new justifications of democracy have sprung up in the Muslim world, of the kind currently championed in Iran by Mohsen Kadivar. ‘From the point of view of Islam’, says Kadivar, ‘human beings are endowed with magnanimity [*keramat*]. They are the carriers of the spirit of God...and are therefore entitled to act as God’s viceroy or Caliph on earth.’ Human beings are deemed trustworthy, but this implies that each individual is saddled with the God-given duty to decide how to live, and to live well, according to certain norms. Core transcendent precepts certainly play (for believers) an important role in fulfilling this duty, but Kadivar emphasises that religious precepts are of

¹⁵ Delivered in Canton as weekly lectures that concluded during the first months of 1924 and published as Dr Sun Yat-Sen, *San Min Chu I. The Three Principles of the People* (Shanghai 1927), pp. 165-166.

two types: immutable and variable. Some broad religious principles, such as the unity of God, the prophecies of Mohammed and the certainty of the Hereafter, are unquestionable. They are God's gift to humanity, providing us with answers to questions that are otherwise impossible or too difficult or time-consuming to pose, let alone to answer. But God has left for human beings great scope for the exercise of human judgement. It is not only that the interpretation (*ijtihad*) of scriptural texts and traditions is intrinsically temporal, that is, subject to freshly decided edicts by human beings themselves; *ijtihad* itself finds its limits in the fact that the texts and traditions are either silent about worldly affairs (the realm of *mubahat*) or inapplicable to a wide variety of matters (*manteghatul fragh*) that include such disparate challenges as operating an air traffic control system or deciding how best to secure the welfare of children within marriages that fall apart. This necessity of human judgement means that in many contexts the religious texts and traditions must be thought of as directives that are only capable of providing non-binding general guidelines (*akham-e irshadi*) for dwelling on earth. Hence the inescapability of *politics*: the collective definition and handling by human beings of their collective affairs.

Kadivar insists that politics in this sense is not a fixed, unchanging activity that is based on immutable principles, such as command and obedience. Democracy is just one of three broad types of politics - along with autocracy and aristocracy - and each has a contingent relationship with the religious precepts of Islam. Government conducted in the name of Islam (or any other religion) has no fixed or universal form; theocracy is not a type of government *sui generis*. Government can be autocratic, or aristocratic, or democratic, but only democracy can satisfy the formal requirements of Islam. Kadivar once called this form of government

peculiarly suited to Muslim societies a ‘religious democracy’; more recently, he prefers to speak of a ‘democracy in Islamic society or democracy for Muslims’.¹⁶ He has in mind democratic institutions and procedures that are infused with the religious conscience of citizens who think of their polity as legitimate because it is authorised by God. Since God has entrusted *all* people with the responsibility of living well on earth, and since living well depends upon the learned capacity to contribute as equals to the common ordering of collective affairs, democracy - not the system of appointive, absolute guardianship known as *velayat-e faqih* - is a requirement of serving God. Democracy breathes new life and new meaning into the old Islamic custom of swearing an oath of allegiance to leaders (*bay’at*). It does not treat humans as if they were orphaned children in need of guardians. Democracy provides the procedures for demonstrating human magnanimity. It has the added advantage of minimising ‘the likelihood of making erroneous decisions in the public domain through maximising public participation in the

¹⁶ Correspondence with Mohsen Kadivar (Tehran, 26 June 2006). See also his ‘Mardom Salari-ye Deeni [Religious Democracy]’, *Tabarestan-e Sabz* (Tehran), 31 June 2001, pp. 5-7; also available online at www.kadivar.com The vexed relationship between democracy and the system of Shi’ite Islamic government known as *velayat-e faqih* is analysed in ‘*Velayat-e Faqih* and Democracy’ (November 17, 2002), available at www.kadivar.com In these and other publications, including a recent address delivered in Mashad on the subject of ‘Islam and democracy: compatibility or incompatibility?’, Kadivar spells out his objections to those followers of Islam who base their objections to religious democracy on the following cluster of assertions: human beings are untrustworthy creatures who are easily led astray by satanic temptations or self-created fantasies, and hence are in need of guardians appointed by God; Islam is a comprehensive, totalising religion in that it provides guidance for the solution of all problems and the satisfaction of all needs of human beings, from the cradle to the grave; the guiding deliberations of the *ulama*, especially the grand jurists or *mujtahids*, must be paramount in the process of defining problems and satisfying needs of the people, who are duty-bound to accept and to comply with their teachings and rulings; the secular principles of civil and political equality are not in accordance with Islamic teachings, since believers are not equal with non-believers, men are not equal with women, the learned (*a’alim*) are not equals of the ignorant (*jahil*), while the people are most certainly not equals of the Guardian Jurist (*vali faqih*), whose say in all matters is final. On the writings of Kadivar and the history of different interpretations of democracy in Iran, I have drawn upon the insightful commentary of Ali Paya, ‘Islam and/or Democracy? Some Views from Iran’, *Centre for the Study of Democracy Research Report* (London, September 2004).

decision making process'.¹⁷ Civil society institutions, free and fair elections, the rotation of office holders, respect for citizens' rights, the public supervision of governmental power, and the civil, political and legal equality of opportunity of Muslims and non-Muslims with respect to race, ethnicity, gender, religion and political beliefs: these and other democratic mechanisms are the condition of possibility of living in dignity as a Muslim in the contemporary world.

The Originality of Democracy

What are we to make of these many and various attempts to find a normative foundation for democracy? Their heterogeneity is striking and it might be said by way of implication that the tendency for democracy to mean so many different things to so many different people is both an expression of its remarkable 'indigenisation' in many different contexts – the language and institutions of democracy have now 'gone native' on every continent of the earth – and one of the key reasons why it has been able to spread and to win popularity in so many different socio-cultural contexts. The forces of indigenisation and diversification have combined to enhance its global popularity: *e unus plurimum* might be a short-hand formula to describe this trend towards semantic pluralism. Future historians who look back on our times may well conclude that this chameleonic quality of the democratic ideal proved to be its winning smile, in much the same way as the partly overlapping words 'liberty' and 'rights' have managed to win friends who see many different and conflicting things in the mirror of those terms.

¹⁷ 'Velayat-e Faqih and Democracy' (November 17, 2002), p. 4.

While it is of course impossible to know how things will turn out, the polysemic quality of the democratic ideal is arguably a mixed blessing, if only because it arouses the deep suspicion – among those who think for themselves - that it is a thoroughly incoherent and dogmatic norm. The simple juxtaposition of its different justifications - here I am following the well-known method employed in Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers (Tahafut al-falasifah)*¹⁸ – exposes their incommensurability. Plenty can of course be learned positively from their comparison, including the imperative to *acknowledge* their legitimate place in any revised normative theory of democracy. Yet logical flaws and slips of reasoning are plentiful; the plausibility of each is weakened by blind eyes or dulled senses about important matters; and when assembled and compared, it is obvious that the problem they each set out to solve – to settle once and for all questions about what is so good about democracy - is compounded by their incompatibility. None of this should be surprising, since elsewhere in the field of philosophy all efforts to provide a rational foundation for ethical principles seem to have failed. One need not accept the melancholy conclusion of Wittgenstein – that ‘the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk of Ethics or religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless’¹⁹ - to see the severity of the problem. Since Wittgenstein, techniques of rational argumentation and analytical reasoning have become more sophisticated, but in the world of the philosophy of ethics everything remains the same: disagreement and tower-of-Babel confusion tempered only by temporary trends and fashions led by this or that approach - yesterday existentialism

¹⁸ Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers /Tahafut al-falasifah*, translated, introduced and annotated by M.E.Marmura (Provo, UT, 2000).

¹⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, ‘A Lecture on Ethics’, in Peter Singer (ed.), *Ethics* (Oxford 1994), pp. 146-147.

and universal pragmatics and liberal theories of justice, today communitarianism and deconstruction and theories of sovereignty - whose success in the world is mainly determined by rhetorical charm, institutional power, charisma the art of timing and a measure of luck.

The many and various attempts to find a foundation of democracy have similarly failed to put a stop to controversies and to heal disagreements. Like yeast mixed with flour, these efforts may well have leavened the philosophical case for democracy - but they have done so by producing a strange-tasting bread. Incoherence turns out to be the price of diversity. Can an ideal that is backed up by little platoons of clashing metaphors and colliding justifications be anything other than 'essentially contested' - even downright incoherent? Can democracy mean so many things to so many different people in so many different contexts that - like a Coke adds Life advertisement - it comes to mean everything and nothing? And if that is so, then surely it is no longer possible to believe naïvely that democracy has a special philosophical status, that it is based on an incontrovertible First Principle? In an age that offers technical expertise, blind deference, nationalism, media-spun videocracy and the fists of brute power and violence as alternative ways of governing, isn't democracy to be seen as just one - dispensable - norm among many others?

Tough questions of this kind should make us realise that the age of innocent belief in democracy is over; as well, they should serve as a warning that democratic ideals have no meta-historical guarantees, no inbuilt anti-virus protectors that shield democracy from its critics and dedicated foes. Rorty's cynical pragmatism is symptomatic of this deflowering of democracy. So too is the audible increase in expressions of outright boredom with democracy - sometimes in disturbingly high

places, like Silvio Berlusconi's mischievous tactics and televised appeals, directed like darts over the heads of parties and government officials and civil society groups, to be granted a simple majority so that he could get on with the job of taking care of business.²⁰ The loss of innocence of democracy is manifested in the deep unease generated by Napoleonic big talk of worldwide democracy. And its deflowering is suggested as well by the strange disappearance of normative discussions about democracy - or their replacement by various types of consequentialism, including the claim that democracy distinguishes itself from other polities because it maximises the ability or opportunity of citizens to participate effectively in matters of collective decision making.

Those who favour consequentialist arguments for democracy heap praise on it for achieving various goals. It is claimed that democracy is good because it stimulates economic growth, or forms of development that are mindful of justice (Rajni Kothari). Others have claimed that democracy tames the beasts of war, or that it can and does reduce 'terrorist' threats to 'national security'. Still others suppose that democracy fosters 'human development more fully than any feasible alternative' (Robert Dahl). Empirically and conceptually speaking, all of these claims are highly doubtful (they beg too many tricky questions about the nature of 'human development' or the desirability of 'economic growth', or what is 'national security', for instance), so doubtful in fact that potentially they do more harm than good for democracy, considered as a theoretical norm. The recent turn towards theories of 'deliberative democracy' arguably

²⁰ See 'Un'idea chiara di democrazia', *Unita* (Rome), 14 June 2004, quoting Prime Minister Berlusconi: 'When I take a decision, there begins a process of confrontation... You then have to go to a [parliamentary] commission and to the House of Representatives [Camera dei Deputati]. All of this takes a long time. Then comes the turn of the Senators to prove [to the public] that they come to Rome not only to have a love affair. Give me 51% and I'll take care of everything.'

provides no convincing solution in this respect. Quite aside from strategic problems, to do with whether and how democratic deliberation is best maximised through reformed representative institutions, mass public spheres, judicial or constitutional guarantees, electronic voting or oppositional initiatives, self-styled ‘deliberative democrats’ praise democracy as a regulative norm because of its insistence that ‘people’s votes ought to reflect their *considered* and *settled* judgements, not top-of-the-head or knee-jerk reactions’.²¹ Exactly why it is a good thing that citizens should act reflectively, responsively and responsibly, whether or to what extent that stipulation can come to mean the same thing, and why the norm of deliberation is to be counted as a universal norm, remains quite unclear. It is as if deliberative democracy is desirable because it maximises deliberation, which in turn has the good effect of keeping citizens busily involved in the business of deliberation.

In an era in which more people than ever before treat democracy as a worldly ideal without any sure grasp of why it is a universal good, something more radical is required. The last justificatory word in matters of democracy should not be left to pragmatists or cynics or ephemeral politicians like President George W. Bush, or to their clichés about ‘democracy promotion’ and the global war in support of ‘democracy’ against ‘terrorism’. The democratic imagination now needs to protect the specificity of democracy from the criticisms of its opponents and doubters and charlatans by venturing into new territory. Consider the

²¹ Robert E. Goodin, *Reflective Democracy* (Oxford and New York 2003), p. 1. Compare p. 228, where democratic deliberation is praised for its requirement that each individual tries to step into the shoes of others: ‘It asks each of us to look at the situation from all those various perspectives, and to come to a judgement as to what is best from all those perspectives. But in saying “what is best overall”, or “what is best for all”, there is no sense of any “community” or “public interest” that is more than a function of the interacting interests of all those representative individuals, their preferences and perspectives.’

following possibility: the effort to democratise the norm of democracy by ‘burrowing’ underneath all previous efforts to ground democracy in arrogant talk of First Principles.

Attempts to fix the meaning and superiority of democracy using First Principles are not only incoherent. They also harbour an arrogance that undermines its historical originality – an originality that needs to be underscored by building it into the norm of democracy itself. What is this originality of democracy? Like gunpowder and print and other exotic imports from afar, the arrival of popular assemblies and (later) the strange-sounding word *dēmokratia* in the region that today we call the West changed the course of human history. Understood simply as people governing themselves, democracy implied something revolutionary: it presupposed that humans could invent and harness special institutions to decide for themselves how they would live together on Earth. It may seem simple and straightforward to us, but the whole idea that flesh-and-blood mortals could organise themselves as equals into forums or assemblies, where they could pause and consider and then decide this or that or some other thing - democracy in this sense was an extraordinary invention of breathtaking scope because it was in effect the first-ever *human* form of government. All government is of course ‘human’ in the sense that it is created and built up and operated by human beings. The exceptional - out-of-the-ordinary - thing about the type of government called democracy is that it demanded that people see that life is never merely given, that nothing that is human is built on stone, that all human institutions and customs are built on the shifting sands of time and place, and that if people are to acknowledge their equal vulnerability to the evanescence of human existence then they have no option but to build and to maintain ways of living openly and flexibly. Democracy - the most

power-sensitive form of government ever invented – implied the denaturing of power. It called on human beings to understand that we are not what we are – that within any political order who manages to get what, when and how should be permanently an open question.

Democracy urged people to see through talk of gods and nature. It called on them to reject claims to privilege based on some or other irrevocable criterion of superiority. Its ethic poured cold water on believers in *karma* - presumptions that individuals wishing to improve their prospects in the next life must properly fulfil the (caste) roles assigned to them in this life. Democracy meant self-government, the lawful rule of an assembly of people whose sovereign power to decide things was no longer to be given over to imaginary gods, the stentorian voices of tradition, to cruel despots, or simply handed over to the everyday habit of unthinking indifference, so allowing others to decide matters of any importance on behalf of their subjects. The point can be put more abstractly: as a contingent mode of being in the world, democracy was born of a this-worldly orientation. It supposed not only the willingness of people to spot a disjunction between the transmundane and mundane worlds, to think and act in terms of a chasm that separated a higher transcendental moral or metaphysical order and the everyday world of human beings living together within various earthly institutions. Democracy further supposed that there was no straightforward homology between these two otherwise connected worlds, and that therefore the mundane realities of the everyday world were ‘up for grabs’, that is, capable of ordering and re-ordering by human beings whose eyes were fixed for at least some of the time on *this* world and not *that* world extending through, above and beyond human intervention.

Among the paradoxes in the history of democracy is that this originality of democracy was largely concealed in the best-remembered Athenian discourses on the subject - the very discourses that most still suppose to be the degree zero of thinking about democracy. Positive justifications of democracy – democratic ways of speaking about democracy – were scarce in classical Greece, and not simply (as the English scholar Moses Finley once claimed) because ‘the philosophers attacked democracy; the committed democrats responded by ignoring them, by going about the business of government and politics in a democratic way, without writing treatises on the subject’.²² The reasons why the best-recorded early experiment with democracy left no democratic theory of the value of democracy run deeper. The French scholar Nicole Loraux has put one finger on the problem. She has shown that Finley’s pragmatic interpretation begs too many questions and misses the key point: that the Athenian democracy actively mistrusted and never used writing as an instrument of theoretical reflection because it required withdrawal from the active life of the city. Exiled figures like Thucydides; Isocrates, who kept his distance from public life because he was shy and had a weak voice; outright opponents such as pseudo-Xenophon; and figures like Plato whose political career had been cut short: it was characters like these who condemned democracy and were in turn condemned as failed citizens because they were deemed both inactive (*apragmones*) and useless (*achreioi*). The touted exceptions – the funeral orations by Pericles (who proposed *arête* as the fundamental principle of democracy) and Lysias (who spoke of ‘the ancient valour’ of democracy’s ‘ancestors’) – both contradicted the originality of assembly-based

²² M.I. Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (London 1973), p. 28; cf. A.H. M. Jones, ‘The Athenian Democracy and Its Critics’, in *Athenian Democracy* (Oxford 1957), p. 41, where it is noted that ‘it is curious that in the abundant literature produced in the greatest democracy of Greece there survives no statement of democratic political theory’.

democracy by picturing it as a beautiful, harmonious whole, which it most certainly was not. Put simply - the point should be surprising for us today – classical Greece cannot rescue us from our confused ignorance about why democracy is a good thing because Greek commentators offer us only foundational reasons – or silence. Stranger still is the fact that the active friends of *dēmokratia* typically justified democracy by linking it to empire. Kurt Raaflaub and others have shown that by the middle of the fifth century BCE, ‘power’ and the striving for its accumulation stood at the centre of the lives, the experiences and the expectations of the Athenians. Power politics and imperialism were seen as typically Athenian and as typically democratic. The reputation of Athens as a busybody (*polypragmōn*) constantly striving to acquire (*ktasthai*) became synonymous with democracy itself. Hence the well-known remark of Thucydides: ‘Remember, too, that the reason why Athens has the greatest name in all the world is because she has never yielded to misfortunes, but has lavished more lives and labours upon warfare than any other city, thus winning the greatest power that has ever existed in history. The memory of this greatness....will be left to posterity forever...’²³

Humble Democracy

So what is needed – in the face of silence combined with the anti-democratic resort to First Principles or imperial advantage - is a democratic way of thinking about the advantages of democracy. Here is one possible alternative: a theory of humble democracy. This approach does not see democracy as a universal norm founded upon some or other

²³ Kurt A. Raaflaub, ‘Democracy, Power, Imperialism’, in J. Peter Euben et. al. (eds.), *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy* (Ithaca and London 1994), pp. 103-146; Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (London and Cambridge, Mass., 1956), Book 2, 64.3.

First principle. It rather understands democracy as a desirable norm whose ‘universality’ - its applicability across borders and in different contexts - stems from its commitment to ‘pluriversality’, its militant striving to protect people and their biosphere everywhere and always against bogus First Principles and arrogant Grand Ideologies and their associated claims upon power. The norm of humble democracy knows that in practice such Universals – dogmatic belief in the Nation, the Party, Men, the Market, the People or the State, for instance – have a bad track record because they nurture and camouflage monopolies of power in the fields of both government and civil society. Humble democracy therefore favours the invention and preservation of institutions and ways of life that stand guard against Universals. It recognizes and fosters the need to understand that multiple and different forms of democracy are thinkable and practicable. It stays calm when asked the unnerving question whether the West could endure forms of democracy created by its foes - the question (asked by the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk in his novel *Snow*) that for many resembles a pistol shot in the middle of a music concert, or a prayer. Humble democracy champions key virtues like toleration, respect for legality and non-violence; it favours institutional pluralism, complex equality and a variety of mechanisms of public accountability that ensure that wrong-headed decisions and outright folly can be prevented, or undone.

Humble democracy is inclined to action. But humble democracy does not embrace contingency for the sake of contingency. It knows that a taste of contingency can excite the desire for unlimited power over others. That is why humble democracy humbles. It favours the equalisation of power and stands opposed to manipulation, bossing and violent rule. It knows that efforts to prevent monopolies of power must never be abandoned,

even though they are often in vain. Humble democracy dislikes hubris. This is not because it thinks of democracy as True and Right. It is rather because humble democracy sees democracy as the best political weapon so far invented for publicly humbling armies, governments, parties, corporations and other NGOs, especially when their lust for power is aroused by the conviction that True and Right are on their side.

Seen in this way, democracy is a whole way of life whose durability depends upon the cultivation of the ‘pre-political’ virtue of humility. Democrats should not shy away from talk of virtues. Benedetto Croce’s well-known warning that those who engage in politics should learn to respect the power of the non-political, applies especially to democracies, which require more than respect for the law, the desire for participation, freedom of communication and periodic elections in order to function well. They also need democratically virtuous citizens. Virtues are the substructure of a peaceable democracy. There are of course many great democratic virtues – among them truthfulness, mercy, tolerance, courage – but the cardinal democratic virtue is humility. Humility is a friend of democracy because it refuses to put itself and other virtues on a pedestal: to be proud of certain virtues, including one’s own or others’ humility, is to suffer from its lack. Although sometimes symbolised by the quiet and boring person of modest upbringing, humility should not be confused with docility or submissiveness. Nietzsche insisted that humility is the morality of slaves, and therefore deserves nothing but contempt. ‘Humility [*humilitas*] is sadness born of the fact that a man considers his own lack of power, or weakness’, wrote Spinoza, but both he and Nietzsche provide misleading accounts of humility.²⁴ Had they been

²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in the *Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, edited by Oscar Levy (London 1964), volume 12, aphorism 260, p. 229; and Benedict de

privileged to witness first hand public figures like Gandhi or Martin Luther King or Aung San Suu Kyi, they would have seen that the humble are not necessarily private, insignificant, or inconspicuous individuals - mere subjects who will never become rulers, or who die without leaving any other mark on the world except a few belongings and (if they are lucky) a grave. Humility is neither meekness nor lowliness (what Aristotle called *micropsuchia*) nor servility. Humility is in fact the antithesis of arrogant pride: it is the quality of being aware of one's own and others' limits.

Humility has an allergic reaction to the self-satisfied Hobbesian rule *homo homini lupus est* (man is a wolf to men). It does not suppose it to be the starting point for understanding modern politics and international relations. Those who are humble try to be without illusions. They dislike vanity and have an affinity with honesty; nonsense on stilts and lies and bullshit on thrones is not their scene. Humble human beings feel themselves to be dwellers on earth (*humus*, from which the word humility derives). They know that they do not know everything, that they are not God, or a god or goddess. Humility is a vital resource that strengthens the powerless and tames the powerful by questioning their claims to superiority. It is the opposite of haughty hunger for power over others, which is why humility balks at humiliation. In a world of arrogance tinged with violence, humility emboldens. Unyielding, it gives individuals inner strength to act upon the world. It dislikes hubris. It yearns for its dethronement. Humility detests violence and the violent who always suppose, for a time, that they are right. Humility shuns showy arrogance and all forms of aggressiveness. Humility radiates in the

Spinoza, *The Ethics*, in Edwin Curley (ed.), *A Spinoza Reader : The Ethics and Other Works* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), III, definition 26 , p. 192.

presence of others, calmly, and cheerfully - it is a social virtue - enabling them to 'be themselves'. It does not demand reciprocity. It implies equality. It is generous. Augustine wrote: 'Wherever there is humility there is also charity.' Descartes agreed: 'the most generous people are usually also the most humble.'²⁵ Aimed at the haughty and the bossy, humility implies tolerance, and since it shuns abusive power, it anticipates a more equal and tolerant - and less violent - world. The humble live off the simple conviction that the world to which they aspire is better than the world in which they are forced to dwell.

Policy Implications

This is all very well, a sceptic may say, but what might this radical revision of our understanding of democracy imply for citizens, activists and policy makers? What are the practical implications of supposing that democracy is a universal norm defined by its opposition to First Principles and to all forms of arrogant rule?

There are various possibilities. The most obvious implication is the need to preserve as many power-monitoring and power-humbling mechanisms as possible. Actually existing democracies do not need to re-invent wheels like periodic elections supervised by uncorrupted electoral commissions, requirements that politicians must resign when they are involved in conflicts of interest, or laws and independent media that guarantee the right of citizens publicly to question nonsense, to speak bitterness, and to organize against their elected representatives. These tried and tested procedures all tend to have humbling effects upon those

²⁵ Augustine's remark is cited in the entry 'Humilité' in Xavier Léon-Dufour et. al. (eds.), *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique* (Paris 1970); René Descartes, *Les passions de l'âme* (Paris 1937 [1645-1649]), part 3, article 155, p. 102.

who step out of line when they exercise power over others. They are methods more refined and effective and egalitarian than those of previous polities. Hunting and gathering communities excommunicated those who aroused the wrath of the spirits by falling in love with their own arrogance. Sumerian kings had their face slapped once a year by a priest to remind them of the importance of humility. Medieval kings in Europe were forced on occasion to swear to God that they would not abuse their power. Democracy instead prefers more down to earth methods with regular effects. It mobilises a much wider variety of non-violent means of subjecting the exercise of power to public scrutiny in order that constituents become free to choose decision makers who will eventually lose the trust of others, get the blame, and get thrown out of office, without triggering violence and uncivil war.

Such methods as periodic elections, competitive parties and parliamentary assemblies are an important inheritance, but they are not enough. There is today an urgent need worldwide to develop innovative methods of safeguarding and enlivening actually existing democracies - by strengthening the hand of humility as citizens tussle with power brokers in the fields of government, civil society and areas in between. The reason for the urgency is that all actually existing democracies, whether in India or Australia or the United States or the older democracies of the European Union, are today suffering definite symptoms of aging and degeneration. There are troubles in the house of democracy.²⁶ The cluster of institutions that we call representative democracy is a product of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In many countries, this power-humbling system of representative democracy – periodic elections, the secret ballot, competitive party systems,

²⁶ See my *Whatever Happened to Democracy?* (London 2002).

parliamentary and expert supervision of state policy, cabinet or presidential forms of executive leadership, publicly funded governmental administration – is not working as well as it should. The degenerative symptoms include the growing sense among publics that government is distant and too much like show business, or that politicians are pitiful creatures, or that joining a political party is for losers. The pores through which societies humble those who exercise power, through which they breathe and are represented within government, are beginning to feel partly or wholly blocked, which is also why talk of ‘post-democracy’ or even ‘democracy’ is today flourishing. Such talk, despite all its imprecision, is the carrier of the feeling that there are things going on that we do not understand – even that there are bad developments for which we have no good theories, let alone practical remedies.

The list of such developments is perforce long because the scale of the emerging problems is large. Their effects run wide and cut deep. Actually existing democracies are subject to demographic trends - a dramatic ageing of the citizenry - that prompts some observers to speak of an emerging age of ‘silver democracy’. Actually existing democracy are experiencing the rise of new patterns of social inequality caused either by the advance of market competition and/or the restructuring of the Keynesian welfare state. The world of rich democracies is joining ranks with the world of the poor, not in the literal sense that wealth disparities and poverty of (say) Indian proportions are now haunting the wealthier democracies of the Atlantic region, but rather that democracy everywhere is coming to be blighted with the problem of how to create greater equality in such matters as life expectancy and health and housing when unrestrained market competition necessarily produces social losers. Actually existing democracies are facing as well the decline of social

solidarity – a new round of social fragmentation and social contests caused by such forces as immigration, flourishing diasporas and the developing self-awareness of rights-bearing civil societies. Then there are difficulties that result from the renewed impetus to de-democratize or insulate certain institutions (like corporations, central banks and newly privatized organisations) from electoral pressures, legal challenges and public accountability procedures. The ‘normalization’ of state security apparatuses and security operations of the kind that underpinned the 2004 inauguration of President George W. Bush are especially worrying examples of this growth of autocracy in the name of defending democracy.

Contemporary democracies face additional challenges, including new and bitter controversies concerning the role and legitimacy of expertise in democratic politics. When and through which forums should so-called experts be allowed to dictate the terms of policy making in such fields as stem cell research and nanotechnology? What counts as expertise? These and other questions first surfaced during the nineteenth century. They remain poorly formulated and badly handled in democratic theory and practice, partly because it remains unclear whether or where a line in the sand needs to be drawn against the use of power-humbling democratic procedures. Meanwhile, there are anxieties in the house of democracy about the long-term implications of the embedding of democratic politics in a new galaxy of communication media that could erode the public spheres that nurture and protect democracy, replacing them with some or other form of politics-free ‘videocracy’ featuring ‘block-busting’ leader-performers like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Silvio Berlusconi. The sarcastic complaint of Gore Vidal serves as a warning: ‘a democracy is a

place where numerous elections are held at great cost without issues and with interchangeable candidates’.

All of these ailments are directly or indirectly traceable to the functioning of democracy itself. They show that the efforts of past generations to humble power are no straightforward recipe for the building of paradise on earth, that the quest to tame the tigers of power is never entirely successful – hence, of eternal importance. That is why actually existing democracies urgently need new thinking and practically effective remedies for the ailments of democracy. The cultivation of a more complex or ‘post-representative’ democracy is among the imperative trends of our times; a theory of humble democracy helps make sense of its contours and lends it a stronger significance.²⁷ In practical matters, some of the innovations associated with this trend towards complex or ‘post-representative’ democracy have already been placed on the political table. Neighbourhood governance councils, such as the experiment that is underway in Chicago to use monthly ‘community beat meetings’ to give interested residents a chance to humble police officers by holding them accountable for their actions, count as an example. So too does the Brazilian practice of participatory budgeting, which is designed to enable a city’s humble residents to improve public facilities by co-determining public budgets that were previously distorted by patronage payments. Many of these innovations are local in spirit and effect. Regional and country-wide initiatives – like new publicly-funded ‘integrity commissions’ for spotting and stamping out corruption, or the use of citizens’ assemblies to redesign electoral systems - are less plentiful,

²⁷ John Keane, ‘Democracy, a short history’, www.johnkeane.net; Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (eds.), *Deepening Democracy. Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance* (London and New York 2003); and Claus Offe (ed.), *Die Demokratisierung der Demokratie. Diagnosen und Reformvorschläge* (Frankfurt am Main and New York 2003).

though of equal importance. But the biggest challenge to the democratic imagination and democratic ingenuity arguably lies in the field of cross-border power relations. Our world currently witnesses a growth spurt in the global integration of law and government, the invention of new arguing and bargaining mechanisms like summits and social forums, a flourishing cross-border journalism and culture of public debate, even the expansion of a global civil society – something like a world-wide version of Gandhi’s idea of the *lok sevak sangh*, global networks of committed and politically unaffiliated activists who articulate local injustices, educate public opinion, mounting *satyāgrahas* when necessary, thereby acting in general as watchdogs of public life on a global scale.²⁸

When examining these and other developments, we should not kid ourselves. The radical idea of democracy, the best human weapon ever invented for humbling power, remains theoretically in crisis and institutionally impoverished. Who today knows how to put an end to the arrogant behaviour of our species by extending the vote and giving a ‘voice’ to nature? Should actually existing democracies try to develop new mechanisms for intervening in violent conflicts, using ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ means? And what should democrats around the world think about the United States? How can the first-ever global dominant power that is itself a democracy be democratised - subjected to power-humbling democratic mechanisms? The fact is that democrats currently have no solutions to these problems. We barely know how to ask questions about them. And when we do, the questions themselves seem unintelligible.

Not for the first time in its long and stormy history, democracy is again confronted with the unexpected, the un-named, the unknown, the

²⁸ John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge and New York, 2003).

unsolved. ‘Thunder on! Stride on! Democracy. Strike with vengeful strokes’, says the poet. Indeed. But with the humility that comes from the wisdom that knows that the (fashionable) distinction between ‘consolidated’ and ‘transitional’ and ‘failed’ democracies, sometimes even between ‘good’ and ‘defective’ democracies, should not be turned into a dogma; that actually existing, ‘consolidated’ democracies are in no way blessed with divine immunity from internal corrosion and external weathering; that democracy as we have come to know it has no transversal or meta-historical guarantees; that it is a tender plant that grows only when embedded in a well-watered and nutritious soil of institutions and customs that need to be fertilized regularly with good and regular doses of the food called humility.