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BOOK REVIEW

David Stavasage, *The Decline and Rise of Democracy: a Global History From Antiquity to Today*

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Democracy and its unknowns

A short story by the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges tells of an emperor who so wanted to improve knowledge of his realm that he instructed his royal cartographers to prepare a perfect map of his empire. They obliged, by delivering a map the size of the empire. There was just one problem: the oversized map unhelpfully obscured the complexity of the realm it was meant to represent.

David Stavasage's *The Decline and Rise of Democracy* (2020) suffers a similar defect. The book draws a macroscale map of democracy. It is a bold and not uninteresting attempt (as its dustjacket announces) to "provide crucial information not just about the history of governance, but also about the ways modern democracies work and where they could manifest in the future." Its aspirations are ambitious and its tone self-confident. Though the history of democracy is riddled with puzzles and unknowns — democracy likes to keep her secrets, such as why it has most often been represented as a woman, or who first coined key words such as democracy and representative democracy — the large-scale narrative is mostly untroubled by doubts about its grip on the reality.

The story Stavasage tells pivots on the distinction between "early democracy" and "modern democracy". Early democracy is said to be "a naturally occurring condition in human societies" (p. 5). It emerged at various points on our planet where states backed by bureaucracies were weak or non-existent, so that rulers were obliged to seek the consent of those they governed. Early democracy was "a system in which a ruler governed jointly with a council or assembly composed of members of society who were themselves independent from the ruler and not subject to his or her whim. They provided information while also assisting with governance" (pp. 4–5). The key terms cited here - ruler, council and governance - are strange fits in the vocabulary of democracy, and they are left undefined, but Stavasage's mammoth map of the history of democracy proposes that the hallmark of early democracy was the frequent "participation" of subjects in small-scale government.

The book details examples, including the central council of chiefs of the Huron peoples, pre-colonial African tribal government, the Mesopotamian kingdom of Mari, the Mesoamerican polity of the Tlaxcala, and the *demokratia* of the early Greek city states. Stavasage is aware of the great diversity of practices within this group of early "democracies" — some featured high-intensity popular participation "while in others this was more limited" (p. 8) — but he wants to say that all the variants displayed a common feature: the mutual recognition that in such matters as taxation and war, access to material resources such as land and water, rulers and people needed each other. Early democracy "involved the balance between how much rulers needed their people and how much people could do without their rulers."

Stavasage is right to question the old story that democracy was born in Athens. His quest for a global history of democracy is most welcome, but some readers will feel discomfort at the grand generalisation about "early democracy" at work in the book. They will easily spot that this ruler-people formula is not unique to democracy. The rulers of the new despotisms of our age — Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, Iran, China — practise a version of this same axiom that rulers functionally depend upon the support of their subjects, as I have documented in *The New Despotism* (2020). The point might be stretched further, as David Hume did in his *On the First Principles of Government* (1742), which reasoned that since force "is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing

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to support them but opinion. 'Tis therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments, as well as to the most free and most popular." (*Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* [London 1777], volume 1, p. 32) Worth noting, too, is the objection that Stavasage's account of early democracy ignores tricky questions about both the origins of the signifier democracy — its roots are traceable to the Linear B language of the Mycenaean period, seven to ten centuries before the emergence of democracy in Athens — and the dangers of projecting the word democracy backwards, anachronistically, without explanation, onto contexts where nobody referred to the prevailing system of "governance" as "democratic".

More serious is the objection that the book's account of early democracy is thoroughly secular — dogmatically secular, one could say. It makes no mention of deities, or the spiritual, despite the fact, as historians and anthropologists tell us, practically every known early experiment with self-government was entangled with transcendent sentiments and various religious rituals and practices. The point about divination is important, not just because in every recorded case of "early democracy" cited by Stavasage both "people" and "rulers" were subject to the much-feared dictates of fickle deities. By ignoring the power of divination, Stavasage is led to mis-define democracy. Democracy is much more than people and leaders needing each other and engaging in mutually agreed compromises. Such practices are the surface symptoms of its deeper spirit. Considered as a set of institutions and a way of life, democracy stimulates people's awareness that as equals they do not need to be bossed about by powerful others. Democracy thus supposes humans' release from pure determination by forces natural and supernatural, however they are conceived. Democracy does not necessarily demand the practical rejection of the belief in transcendent or sacred standards (the history of democracy is full of examples of actors, customs and institutions which thrive on belief in the sacred). But for a society to qualify as "democratic" it must contain mechanisms that foster a measure of self-reflexivity among equals, their awareness that is and ought are not identical, that things do not have to be what they currently are, or seem to be.

Modern democracy

Let's set aside these complaints about missing details and return to the book's jumbo map. Stavasage tells us that as societies grew in scale and communities of people were ensnared territorially by rulers bent on extracting resources from their subject populations, early democracy was pushed underground or forcibly disappeared from the face of the Earth. The "natural" form of government was replaced by various forms of "autocracy", a term he never properly defines but stretches, like the mythical emperor's cartographer, to cover every political form antithetical to democracy. World history is summarised in grandiloquent terms as an epic struggle of "democracy" against "autocracy". Stavasage could easily have written the script for Joseph Biden's first presidential news conference (March 2021), which featured talk of an emerging "battle between the utility of democracies in the 21st century and autocracies." Autocracy is a dubious word of doubtful utility in our times, yet the book depends on it heavily. Strictly speaking, an autocracy (the word entered the English language in the mid-seventeenth century from the French *autocratie* and originally Greek *autokráteia*) is a political system in the hands of a sole ruler enjoying absolute power unhindered by external legal constraints and popular controls. In received Western taxonomies of government, it differs from tyranny, which Socrates told us is a dangerously unjust type of rule by a strongman consumed by lawless passions and desires to confiscate others' property "by fraud and force". Then there is monarchy, which in some quarters still enjoys a positive reputation as the rule of a queen or king claiming to exercise power benevolently over their loyal subjects. Twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, by contrast, ruled through a combination of strongmen, mass mobilisation of "the people", all-purpose terror and a dominant "glorious myth" ideology that purported "to know the mysteries of the whole historical process" (Hannah Arendt). The new despotisms of our time are different again. Countries such as China, says Stavasage, are polities devoid of "consensual governance" (p. 305), but that claim, based on the simple story of people power versus top-down rule, is misleading. These despotisms are not "autocracies" in any simple sense. They function as phantom democracies, top-down systems of tutelary power whose rulers claim to be "democratic" incarnations of the people.

The book's big picture side-steps this complication. It concentrates instead on explaining the advent of modern democracy. Sometime during the eighteenth century, says Stavasage, democracy appeared in modernised form. It came widely to be known as representative democracy. Stavasage says that it is an imperfect, weaker, flawed adaptation of early democracy. It is "a form of rule where political participation is broad but episodic: citizens participate by voting for representatives, but this occurs only at certain intervals, and there are few means of control other than the vote" (p. 17). According to Stavasage, modern democracy in this sense was born in England — counter-evidence that representative assemblies first appeared in northern Spain and the Church of medieval Europe is ignored — and later spread to the British part of colonial North America, took hold of the newly-independent USA, then later made its way to the rest of the world.

Why modern democracy happened is of particular interest to Stavasage. Although he analyses factors such as the invention of writing and lists charts covering population density, crop yields and solar irradiance, the timing and sequencing of

state building always proved paramount, he argues. Wherever autocrats managed to build armed territorial states backed by bureaucracies, modern democracy usually failed to take root, or perished, as happened in Russia and China. "Once autocrats have constructed a powerful state bureaucracy, it is hard to then transition to democracy, but if rule by council or assembly comes first, particularly if it involves formalized arrangements extending over a large territory, then democracy has a better chance of emerging and surviving the development of a bureaucracy" (pp. 27–28).

Democracy as 'Natural?

Bureaucracy and autocracy are terms used interchangeably by Stavasage. He wants to emphasise the chronic threats posed to modern representative democracy by "autocratic" territorial states. Unlike Max Weber, who thought along similar lines, but (in a letter to his pupil Robert Michels) famously declared *utopian* every scheme of citizens' self-government, Stavasage has a deep affection for early democracy. It serves as his normative standard for judging all subsequent developments, but for reasons that aren't clearly or coherently spelled out.

What's so good about early democracy, the "natural" form of handling power and deciding who gets how much, when and how? His answer: it draws upon the frequent, not episodic, "participation" of people in shaping how they live. Democracy is the defender of the all-affected principle, the view that everybody whose lives are impacted by decisions has an inalienable right to be involved in making and applying those decisions. In other words: democracy understood as popular participation in government is good because it enables popular participation in government and so promotes trust in government. The tautology isn't persuasive; and the non sequitur rests on the misleading supposition that trust and democracy are twins. Both claims come wrapped in the mistaken assertion that democracy is "something that comes naturally to humans" (p. 25).

The notion that democracy belongs to the realm of the *natura naturans* — nature doing what nature does — is a category mistake. Democracy in its multiple variants is the enemy of "the natural". Compared with other political forms such as tyranny and monarchy, whose legitimacy and durability depend upon rules that make time seem fixed and frozen, as if the prevailing form of government is immutable, the exceptional thing about the type of government called democracy is that it requires people to see that nothing which is human is "naturally" carved in stone, that everything is built on the shifting sands of time and place, and that therefore, in order not to give themselves over to tyrants, monarchs, emperors and despots, people need to live together as equals, openly and flexibly. Democracy is the companion of contingency. With the help of institutions like freedom of public assembly, periodic elections and anti-corruption commissions, it presupposes and? promotes indeterminacy. Democracy denatures power. It casts doubt on all claims to "natural" privilege based on such criteria as brain or blood, skin colour, caste or class, religious faith, age or sexual preference. Democracy spreads doubts about talk of the "essence" of things, fixed habits and supposedly immutable "natural" arrangements. It encourages people to see that their worlds can be changed.

The pathologies of modern democracy

The naturalist defence of early democracy does have the positive effect of unlocking questions about the pluses and minuses of electoral democracy. Stavasage concedes that "modern democracy" is designed to work at scale. Scale really matters when it comes to democracy, he insists, though he's equally adamant modern democracy suffers a fundamental weakness: the near-fulltime exclusion of citizens from day-to-day government fuels their chronic mistrust and disaffection with parties, politicians and whole governments.

Other pathologies of modern representative democracy, such as its unhappy entanglement with capitalism, its vulnerability to populist demagoguery and the predatory power of cross-border corporate and governing institutions, hardly rate a mention. The analysis instead focuses on the dangers of what he calls the "distant state" (p. 299). "The challenge of modern democracy is combining the core principle that the people should have power with the fact that day-to-day affairs of government are run by a strong bureaucratic state" (pp. 303–304). Stavasage makes it clear that he's no fan of "modern democracy". Popular estrangement from elected governments is persistent, he says, because inscribed in its election rituals is infrequent participation of citizens who in practice, whether they like it or not, are required to relinquish decision making power to elected governments acting at a distance from their citizens. Modern democracy promises self-government but reduces it to scattered and sporadic voting.

Stavasage's complaint is hardly new. From the beginning, he notes, drawing on the writings of the anti-federalist Virginia politician John Taylor (1753–1824), modern representative democracy was accused of thwarting the opinions of the people (pp. 248–249). The nod to Taylor is a strange dalliance (Taylor was a well-known apologist of slavery and the deportation of free black people) with odd consequences. Chief among them is the setting aside of other justifications of democracy in representative form. Contrary to Stavasage, the challenge of scale was not the only or even the most interesting problem analysed by the early champions of representative democracy. Electoral democracy was for them much more than a functional response to territorial imperatives, a practical solution to the problem of how to exercise power

responsibly over great distances, within empires (a topic wholly neglected by Stavasage) and large-scale territorial states. It was seen to have several other advantages unknown to the classical model of assembly democracy.

One element in the ingenious case made by late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century publicists, constitution makers, journalists and citizens centered on the indispensability of political leadership. Democracy required guidance, inspiration and support from leaders when handling complicated political matters, they said. It needs true leaders who lead because they get people to look up to them, rather than leading them by the nose. It was argued that electoral democracies keep leaders grounded. They elect leaders, grant them the authority to govern, but also put them periodically on trial, mock them, make jokes at their expense, and threaten scoundrels with loss of office. Representative democracy provides citizens with a way of ditching lousy leaders who tell lies, cheat, prevaricate, promise miracles or act like demagogues. Unlike unelected monarchs and power-hungry tyrants and despots, elected representatives "hold office" only temporarily. Representative democracy was thus a peace formula, a brilliant way of avoiding civil war by creating space for political dissent and offering losers an olive branch: the hope of running again for office, the reassurance that there are no misfits in the polity.

Leadership on a leash was one thing. Another benefit of representative democracy, said its champions, was its open acknowledgment of the legitimacy of social divisions and party competition. The point was captured in a famous remark by Thomas Paine. "Athens, by representation, would have outrivaled her own democracy", wrote the author of the biggest-selling books of the eighteenth century, including *Rights of Man* (London 1791 [1925], Part 1, pp. 272–274). Paine thundered in favour of "representation ingrafted upon democracy" not only because it rejected monarchy and its outdated belief in a unified body politic. Representative democracy was superior to the "simple democracy" of ancient Athens because it put the *dēmos* under constant pressure to act as if social diversity and divisions of political opinion were an impediment to popular rule, a terrible void to be filled with the words and deeds of a unified People.

This was an excitingly fresh way of thinking about the opportunities and dangers of handling political power. It served to justify periodic elections in which citizens entitled to vote typically opted to support candidates chosen by political parties. Periodic elections with multi-party competition — they first happened in the USA during the 1820s — were among the core inventions of the age of representative democracy. Once denounced as dangerous "factions" and "conspiracies", political parties became living reminders that the body politic was materially divided by different opinions and interests. In this new equation, the job of parties was to do more than mobilise votes. They expressed disagreements, formulated agreed policies, spread literacy, provided jobs and welfare for their supporters, and prepared representatives for holding elected office. Parties also helped guarantee that democracy enabled non-governmental associations known as "civil society" to flourish. Including such bodies as businesses, churches, taverns, restaurants and printing houses, civil societies made room for non-violent civil associations that citizens could use to keep at arm's length from government, for instance by wielding non-violent weapons like freedom of religious worship and public assembly, printing presses, public petitions, competing political parties and covenants and constitutional conventions called to draw up and enforce written constitutions.

Monitory democracy

It is a pity that *The Decline and Rise of Democracy* airbrushes this reimagining of democracy by the early modern champions of free and fair elections, political parties and civil society. The pity is compounded by another oversight spawned by the book's mega-map urge to simplify things: its failure to spot the birth and growth of what I have called *monitory democracy*, a new type of power-sharing democracy quite different from the assembly-based ('early') and electoral ('modern') democracies of past times.

Born of a great crisis of electoral democracy during the 1920s and 1930s — Stavasage does not dwell on the fact that fewer than a dozen survived this period — monitory democracy is defined by the global appearance of many kinds of power-checking watchdog organisations that never existed before in the history of democracy. Workers' participation in codetermination schemes (*Mitbestimmung*) first developed in Germany in the 1940s, for instance. Future generations commissions were born in Wales. Bridge doctors — volunteer teams of university engineering students checking the safety of city bridges — are a South Korean specialty. Participatory budgeting is a Brazilian invention. South Africa made famous truth and reconciliation forums. Coral-reef monitoring networks are a product of global cooperation.

These kinds of monitory bodies have consequences for the way democracy is practised. They transform its architecture. The grip of elections, political parties and parliaments in shaping citizens' lives and representing their interests is waning. Democracy comes to mean much more than periodic elections. Within and outside states, toothy watchdog bodies have begun to reshape the landscapes of power. By keeping corporations and elected governments, parties and politicians permanently on their toes, the new monitors question abuses of power, force governments and businesses to modify their agendas — and sometimes smother them in public disgrace.

Monitory democracy is the most complex and vibrant form of democracy, yet it goes missing in this book. In the name of 'people', 'the public', 'public accountability' or 'citizens', power-checking institutions guarantee that corruption

scandals and public outcries against monkey business become the new normal. Elections, political parties, legislatures and public assemblies aren't disappearing or declining in importance, but they are most definitely losing their pole position as hosts and drivers of politics. Democracy is no longer simply a way of handling and taming the power of elected governments, and no longer confined to territorial states. The age of electoral democracy — "a form of rule", says Stavasage, "where…citizens participate by voting for representatives" (p. 17) — is behind us. Whether we are talking about local, national or supranational government, or the world of business and non-governmental bodies, those who wield power over others are now routinely subject to public monitoring and public contestation by an assortment of public accountability mechanisms.

The advent of monitory democracy contradicts Stavasage's two-part big story of how early assemblies were replaced by election-centred understandings of democracy that are nowadays haunted "naturally" by the spectre of people power, "real democracy". Monitory democracy spells trouble as well for Stavasage's view that democracy is essentially a method of controlling governments and taming state power. Remarkable is the way the power-scrutinising mechanisms of monitory democracy spread "downwards", into areas of social life previously untouched by the spirit of democracy. Assembly democracies typically regarded power dynamics within households, and the treatment of women and slaves, as a "private" matter. Stavasage observes that the age of electoral democracy witnessed political resistance to slavery and to the exclusion of women, workers and the colonised from elections; and that elected governments intervened in such areas as healthcare and education. But striking is the way our age of monitory democracy enables, as never before, organised public scrutiny and refusals of arbitrary power in the whole of social life. Matters such as workplace bullying, sexual harassment, racial and gender discrimination, animal abuse, species destruction, homelessness, disability and data harvesting become central themes of democratic politics. Parties, legislatures and elected governments are typically reactive to such issues; monitory bodies and networks instead become the true drivers of democratic politics. The spirit of equality and openness spreads through social life and across state borders. For the first time in the history of democracy, not surprisingly, civil society is a phrase routinely used by democrats at every point on our planet.

Uncertainty

In his allegory of an empire whose cartographers produced a giant map, Jorge Luis Borges wanted to note much more than the absurdity of wasting the talent of well-trained and highly skilled experts. The sarcastic title of the short story — called 'On Rigour in Science' — underscores the inevitable failure of human quests for total knowledge. We are told that subjects of the realm, farmers and shepherds included, grew incensed by the over-sized map because it blocked the sun and rain needed by their crops and flocks. Particularity is the enemy of generality. Every subject of the empire meanwhile grew convinced of the foolishness of supposing that the great complexity of the realm's population and habitats could be grasped by a single map. Infinity is the enemy of generality, too. Efforts to summarise the world in grand generalities carelessly disregard both particularity and infinity. The upshot: the whole exercise of mapping the realm lapses into failure. The 'broken ruins of the map' were 'delivered to the inclemencies of the sun and the winters', writes Borges. The reputation of the 'disciplines of geography' was destroyed.

The double problem of respect for particularity and acknowledgment of infinity dogs Stavasage's book. It is indeed an ambitious work with a well-written and bold thesis. But it suffers from what the Oxford scholar of democracy Laurence Whitehead has called 'universalist myopia'. Too many details are set aside or ignored by the book's grand but simplified 'early' and 'modern' democracy framework. And there is much too much self-assurance about the grand narrative. The book makes the same mistake as the cartographers of Borges' short story. It neglects the elusive, ultimately ungraspable quality of democracy.

Towards the end of the book, Stavasage says history teaches us that democracy is "an ongoing experiment" (p. 296), but the insight is never developed. The ultimate weakness of this book is its unwillingness to note that every history of democracy is fated to fail because democracy past and present is an unending, restless process of "denaturing" unjust power and bringing its dangerously unaccountable forms to their senses. Like water, democracy has no permanently fixed shape or substance. Not only does it vary through time and space, as *The Decline and Rise of Democracy* shows, despite its insistence that democracy is "natural". Particularly striking is the way democracy defies fixed ways of living and refuses all forms of top-down power masquerading as "normal" or "natural". Democracy has a punk quality. It is anarchic, permanently unsatisfied with the way things are. The processes unleashed by its spirit and institutions create space for unexpected beginnings. Democracy is the carrier of uncertainty. It doubts orthodoxies, loosens fixed boundaries, widens horizons and pushes towards the unknown.

When understood in this way, as a shape-shifting way of protecting people and their environments against predatory power, democracy offers much more than freedom and equality. In an age stained by terrible abuses of power, its ultimate value is that it serves as a means of damage prevention. It warns against reckless power. We could say that democracy is the champion of precaution, an early warning detector, a way of enabling citizens and whole organisations and networks to sound the alarm whenever they suspect that others

are about to cause them harm, or when calamities are already bearing down on their heads. Democracy is a weapon for guarding against the "illusions of certainty" (Daniel Kahneman). It is a method of breaking up monopolies of unaccountable power, wherever and however they operate. Nietzsche famously complained that democracy stands for the disbelief in rule by elites and strongmen. It does, and for good reasons. Wherever it operates and functions well, democracy brings things back to earth. It serves as a "reality check" on unrestrained power. It is a potent means of ensuring that those in charge of organisations don't stray into cuckoo land, wander into territory where misadventures of power are concealed by fine words, or by lies, bullshit and deafening silence.

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