

Democratic Universalism as a Historical Problem

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1. Promoting Democracy: from Enthusiasm to Self-Imposed Blindness

In the immediate aftermath of Second World War, less than 20% of the world could reasonably be considered “democratic,” if one understands the term in the minimal sense of a regime in which the government is chosen through a genuinely open electoral competition between different political parties. During this period, moreover, democratic institutions and values were hotly contested: while Communist rhetoric accused them of being purely formal and thus illusory, conservative discourses suggested that they were poorly adapted to the “realities” of developing countries, exposing them prone to demagogic manipulation. In this context, promoting the general interest and establishing democracy no longer seemed to go hand in hand. Western countries themselves often acted one way while speaking another, refusing to apply to their colonies those traditions in which they took such pride at home.

Three great waves of change transformed this situation. The first came in the 1960s with decolonization, when several dozen newly independent states on the African continent adopted democratic institutions to varying degrees. Beginning in the seventies, the collapse of dictatorships in Europe (Spain, Greece and Portugal), Latin America (Brazil and Argentina) and Asia (Indonesia and the Philippines) strengthened democracy’s hand. Finally, with the dismantling of the Soviet Union and its satellite states after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the movement towards democracy grew and continued to spread. At the dawn of the twenty-first century,

democratic regimes have become prevalent throughout the world—so much so that today, it is the absence of democracy that is deemed problematic. Such general observations no doubt require greater nuance and precision. Admittedly, more often than not, what has triumphed is simply the appearance of democracy, leading them to be dismissed as “Potemkin Democracies.”¹ Yet the general trend is no less remarkable. These various democratic “transitions,” each with its own set of problems, have been analyzed in a great number of works, which together could fill an entire library. “Transitology” has even become an important sub-discipline in political science. Previously, these transitions were seen as simple and positive—to such an extent that at one point in the 1990s, an “end of history” could seriously be contemplated. This naïve vision was of course “complicated” by a desire to describe reality more carefully, notably by identifying the vast grey area lying between authoritarian regimes and liberal democracies (hence the importance of such concepts as “illiberal” or “defective” democracy). But the perception that democracy is a self-evident good remains.²

In this context, “democracy promotion” presented itself as a new ideal, one that set out to complete earlier achievements by universalizing them. Agencies with this objective were organized by the United Nations and various Western countries in the European Union.³ Democracy promotion acquired its own technicians and prophets. It generated programs, campaigns, and conventions. It had its own analysts and its scholarly journals, including, most importantly, *Democratization*, which first appeared in 1994. In this context, the United States and the European Union, during a summit held in Vienna on June 21, 2006, “recognized the advancement of democracy as a strategic priority of our times.” Yet this commitment was soon plagued by serious difficulties resulting from the situation in Afghanistan and particularly Iraq. By the same token, public support for promoting democracy declined sharply, notably among the citizens of its strongest proponent, the United States. The fact that this much touted goal required the use military force is, most likely, the primary reason for the

¹ See Charles King, “Potemkin Democracy,” *The National Interest*, vol. 64, summer 2001.

² Aurel Croissant and Wolfgang Merkel, “Democratization in the Early Twenty-First Century,” *Democratization*, vol. 11, n°5, December 2004.

³ See Gordon Crawford, “Promoting Democracy from Without, Learning from Within,” parts I and II, vol. 10, n°1 et 2, spring and summer 2003. See also, “Promouvoir la démocratie?,” *Critique internationale*, n°24, July 2004.

doubt, confusion, and opposition that it has recently elicited⁴—as well as for the fact that “soft power” options now meet with almost unanimous approval. But is the problem merely one of means, or of the destructive consequences by unbridled idealism? This short essay proposes to take analysis one step further. It is not enough to content oneself with judging or denouncing the imperial smugness and stubbornness of a super-power whose behavior seems to be the prisoner of an ideological and mechanical vision of the state and of the course of world history. All of this has been said countless times. Rather, if the problem under consideration does indeed have a political dimension, it lies precisely in the conception of democracy that has been exported and promoted. The fact of the matter is that a combination of Western arrogance and a blindness to the nature of democracy have together produced disastrous results.

Blindness? No better word exists. The Western world has lived the past thirty on the self-satisfied assumption that democracy is a good that it alone possesses, and that only it has fully theorized and implemented. That the West has been forced to recognize India as the “world’s largest democracy” did little to weaken this certainty or to undermine its self-centeredness. To call this assumption into question, whether by denouncing the gap between ideals and reality or by acknowledging democracy’s unfulfilled promises, was tantamount for a long time to crossing the Rubicon to the opposite creed: that of relativism. The impatience and opposition that fed post-colonial studies find themselves largely justified by the West’s pretenses. Western blindness and a self-protecting relativism have thus made common cause. The time has come to break out of this intellectually impoverishing cycle. It lies at the heart of our current confusion and despair.

This problem, it must be acknowledged, has deep roots. While it appears today in a particularly acute form, its origins go back to the European and American revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth, which from beginning, were the sites of interrogations and contradictions that have typically been minimized and even hidden. The uncertainties of experience, as well as the ambiguities and tensions of history, have been systematically erased in favor of a seamless, peaceful story of the advance of freedom and the expansion of political participation. The history of the French Revolution is particularly emblematic of this slippage. The impossibility of achieving

⁴ See the data found in “Democracy Promotion,” *Transatlantic Trends 2006*, Washington, The German Marshall Fund, 2006.

true democratic universalism first saw the light of day in this event. Consequently, the meaning of democracy promotion can only become apparent in the Western world if one looks back at the uncertainties and problems of its own democratic experience. A *universalism of closed systems* must be replaced by an *open universalism grounded in competing experiences*. Only in this way will a “de-Westernization” of our perspective not bring us to the dangerous shores of relativism. Thus we need to reexamine the tensions and interrogations that have surrounded the very use of the term “democracy” in the West. We need, moreover, to understand the mechanisms by which the West has become blind to itself.

2. “Democracy’s” Tumultuous History: the French and American Examples

The primary goal of this process must be to rehabilitate the multiple experiences of the non-Western world. But one must also, at the same time, identify the meaning of the contradictions that have structured the Western experience. When studying the French and American revolutions, one cannot help being struck by the fact that both were characterized by deep ambiguities relating to such essential questions as those of citizenship, representation, and sovereignty. During these decisive moments, the democratic process did not appear as a clearly defined “program” that simply needed to be pursued while keeping forces of resistance at bay. On the contrary, the tensions and disagreements were dominant, both philosophically and at the more practical level of institutional organization. The subsequent obscuring and elimination of these initial uncertainties have contributed significantly to Western blindness. In the United States as in much of Europe, the rough edges of democracy’s tumultuous and tentative history have been so smoothed over that little remains but the simplistic truisms of sterile historical narratives and of quasi-religious visions.

The fact that during the French and American revolutions, the democratic ideal was far from straightforward and self-evident cannot be emphasized enough—a fact to which the very history of the word democracy testifies in often startling ways.

In France, it was not until 1848, a half-century after the 1789 revolution, that the word democracy definitively entered political discourse. The term democracy did not

belong to the vocabulary of Enlightenment *philosophes*⁵; it was used solely to refer to the ancient world. Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) defined democracy as: "A form of government in which the people have all the authority. Democracy flourished only in the republics of Rome and Athens." In these dictionaries, the political definitions of the word were all the more succinct to the extent that it had archaic (i.e., Roman and Athenian) and exotic connotations (thus the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* notes that "some Swiss counties are true democracies"). As a technique for government, democracy was, moreover, often criticized by eighteenth-century philosophers. Montesquieu summed up this general feeling when he emphasized that democracies are unstable and have an almost mechanical tendency towards corruption. Jaucourt, who wrote the article on "Democracy" for the *Encyclopédie*, borrowed heavily from the *Spirit of the Laws* to denounce democracy's tendency to degenerate into ochlocracy or aristocracy. Thus at the same time that the word was linked to antiquity, or at least to certain periods and mythical moments in ancient history, democratic regimes were almost always associated with images of disorder and anarchy. In his *Dictionnaire social et patriotique* of 1770, Lefevre de Beauvray went so far as to write (in his article on "democracy") that "democratic regimes are closer to anarchy than monarchies are to despotism."

The antiquated and almost technical connotations of the word "democracy" in the eighteenth century help to explain the word's almost complete absence from the vocabulary of the 1789 revolution. The idea of a regime in which the people was its own legislator and magistrate met with little support, as it seemed to hark back to a distant and bygone era, corresponding to an archaic and unstable stage in political life. The pejorative connotation of the word "democracy" was therefore almost as strong as its utopian and archaic overtones. In the spring of 1789, some nobles spoke with open disdain of "democracy" while assessing what would happen if the Estates General were to vote by head. Brissot observed: "The word democracy is a scarecrow which the mischievous use to trick the ignorant." Among the vast array of revolutionary newspapers and journals, not one, between 1789 and the year IV [1795-1796], used "democracy" or "democratic" in its name. These publications preferred the adjectives "national", "patriotic," or "republican" (especially after 1792). It is also

⁵ For more on this subject see P. Rosanvallon, "L'histoire du mot démocratie à l'époque moderne," *La Pensée politique*, n°1, 1993.

worth noting that the word “democracy” did not appear a single time in the debates on suffrage between 1789 and 1792.

It was in the work of Sieyès and Brissot that democratic government was the most blatantly reduced to its ancient origins and narrowly defined as the people governing and legislating directly for themselves. Throughout 1789, Sieyès repeatedly highlighted these characteristics in order to emphasize the specificity of the regime that the revolution was establishing. “In a democracy,” he wrote, “citizens make their own laws and appoint their public officials directly. In our plan, citizens choose, more or less directly, their representatives in the Legislative Assembly. Legislation thus ceases to be democratic, and becomes representative.”⁶ As the kingdom’s size made it technically impossible for the general will to rule directly, Sieyès concluded that “France is not, and cannot be, a democracy.”⁷ “Representative government,” which Sieyès embraced, must thus not be confused with “democracy,” which remained couched in eighteenth-century connotations. In a similar fashion, Brissot distinguished the idea of a republic, which he hoped would be established in France, from that of democracy. Like Thomas Paine, he defined a republic as a government based on representation, thus rejecting the democratic model: “French republicans,” he wrote, “do not want the pure democracy of Athens.”⁸ Brissot’s argument was no doubt largely tactical. By disassociating republics from direct democracies, he hoped to rehabilitate the republican idea by absolving it of the charge, leveled by its detractors, that republics lead to anarchy. But at a substantive level, too, he wanted to highlight the specificity of the modern republic in relation to ancient arrangements. Both authors vacillated, emphasizing the technical distinction between democracy and representative government on the one hand, and insisting upon the philosophical differences between the two forms on the other—without, however, ever really clarifying the matter. In any case, they never conceived of democracy as modernity’s characteristic political regime. “Democracy” remained a cumbersome term.

⁶ Sieyès, *Quelques idées de constitution, applicables à la ville de Paris en juillet 1789*, Versailles, 1789, p. 3. Sieyès also writes: “immediate participation [*concours*] is what characterizes true democracy. Representative government is marked by mediated participation. The difference between these two types of political systems is enormous.” (*Dire sur la question du veto royal*, Versailles, 7 September 1789, p. 14).

⁷ *Dire sur la question du veto royal*, p. 15.

⁸ J-P. Brissot, *Ma profession de foi sur la monarchie et le républicanisme*, in *Recueil de quelques écrits, principalement extraits du Patriote français*, Paris, July 1791, p. 7 (reprinted in vol. V of the collection *Aux origines de la République, 1789-1792*, Paris, EDHIS, 1992).

It was not until the 1820s, during the Constitutional Monarchy, and thanks paradoxically to liberals, that the word democracy became commonly used in French. It was used, however, to designate the egalitarian character of modern *society* and not the *political regime* associated with the Greek and Roman republics, in which the people participated directly in public affairs. This semantic shift was fully completed in 1835 when Tocqueville published the first volume of *Democracy in America*. It had already begun even earlier, during the first years of the Restoration. Royer-Collard defined, in terms that would become standard for an entire generation, the new sociological meaning of the word democracy, conceiving of it as the “social condition” (*état social*) characteristic of a society that had broken with the ascriptive distinctions of the aristocratic order. Paradoxically, the word democracy entered the French language as a definition of modern society at the very moment when suffrage remained severely restricted (only 100,000 Frenchmen could vote in 1820). Significantly, its triumph coincided with a time when the term republic was associated in common political discourse with the extreme left. For the liberal school known as the Doctrinaires, speaking of democracy was a way of embracing the sociological and juridical legacy of the revolution while at the same time radically rejecting the republican political heritage. It implied, in other words, that the what the revolution had created was a kind of society rather than a specific regime. Charles de Rémusat observed that democracy refers solely to the idea of “modern civilization.” In his view, “democracy lies in the social order. This is the most definitive and most striking consequence of the revolution.”⁹

This semantic shift was consolidated at the beginning of the 1830s. “Democracy has become a part of social mores [*est dans les moeurs*],” Villemain wrote in his introduction to the 1835 edition of the Académie Française’s dictionary. It was Tocqueville, of course, who would use this meaning to greatest effect. By making the equality of conditions the driving force of the revolution and of modern society, he permanently enshrined, with the first volume of *Democracy in America*, the sociological definition of democracy into contemporary discourse. Yet his work’s interest also lies in the fact that it demonstrates the impossibility of confining the term to this definition alone. With Tocqueville, the meaning of “democracy” is never

⁹ Cf. Charles de Rémusat, “De l’esprit de réaction, Royer-Collard et Tocqueville”, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 15 Octobre 1861.

stable,¹⁰ for modern civilization must constantly confront the unstoppable pressure that popular sovereignty places on political institutions. This is particularly evident in his manuscripts: On the one hand, he says: “Democracy is a social condition, the dogma of popular sovereignty is political right. These two things are not analogous. Democracy is a way of being in society, popular sovereignty is a form of government.”¹¹ But a few pages later, he calls this clear distinction into question, when he writes: “popular sovereignty and democracy are two words that are perfectly correlated; one offers a theoretical ideal, the other its practical application.”¹² This wavering attests both to the reality and to the limits of the semantic shift—as if it were impossible to completely separate the social from the political, or to make something new without evoking the old.

Tocqueville’s equivocations were viewed as a threat by many contemporary liberals, who continued to reject the ancient ideal of democracy and only retained the word’s modern sense. In a work published in 1837 as an implicit response to Tocqueville, *On Modern Democracy, or On the Mores and the Power of the Middle Classes in France*, Edouard Alletz (a friend of the Doctrinaire thinker Guizot), thus opposed “old democracy,” defined as “the government of the masses”, “worldly power,” and “the authority of carelessness and misery,” to “new democracy,” based on representation and civil equality.¹³ Alletz thus thought it possible to imagine “democracy without universal suffrage.”¹⁴ One must not forget that a similar ambiguity prevailed on the other end of the political spectrum as well. It is noteworthy, for example, that Armand Carrel, a prominent figure in the opposition to the July Monarchy, published an article in 1835 entitled, “One Must Not Confuse Democracies and Republics”¹⁵, in which he explains that “democracy” means the rule of law while “republic” describes the regime of universal suffrage. If the word “democracy” asserted itself over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, it nonetheless remained, in France, ridden with ambiguity. On the left, its relationship

¹⁰ See the eleven definitions of the word “démocratie ” cited by James T. Schaefer in Tocqueville in *The Making of Tocqueville’s Democracy in America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

¹¹ Yale manuscripts, quota by J-C Lambert, *Tocqueville et les deux démocraties*, Paris, PUF, 1983, p. 33.

¹² Yale manuscripts, *ibid.*, p. 30.

¹³ See his introduction, *op. cit.*, t. I, VIII-XIII.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. VIII.

¹⁵ *National*, 9 December 1835. Reprinted in *Œuvre politiques et littéraires d’Armand Carrel*, Paris 1858, vol. IV.

to the idea of popular sovereignty remained ill defined; on the right, it represented both a threat and a promise. It was destined to occupy a relative marginal place in political language until the Third Republic.

The history of the word democracy in the United States is in many respects similar. It no more belonged to the vocabulary of the American revolution than it did to that of the French. One might even argue that the term democracy served the Founding Fathers as a foil, one that evoked all the political ills and dangers they sought to avoid. Hamilton thus spoke of the “vices of democracy” and criticized its propensity towards excess. The terms “deathly illness,” “confusion,” and “license” were regularly associated with “democracy.” The members of Philadelphia Constitutional Convention of 1787 generally agreed with Burke’s assessment that “a perfect democracy is the most shameful thing in the world.”¹⁶ Images of disorder (confusion, anarchy, and violence), irrationality (passion and madness), and immorality (evil and vice) made up the semantic field in which the word democracy moved.¹⁷ Many Americans’ rejection of the French Revolution’s “excesses” reinforced these claims, while the repellant connotations of the word “Jacobin” dovetailed, at the turn of the nineteenth century, with fears of democracy. Thus John Adams deliberately attacked his political enemies by calling them “democrats” and “Jacobins.” During the Federalists campaign against Jefferson in the presidential race of 1800, allusions to the specter of “Jacobin democracy” that might accompany his victory were a regular staple of campaign rhetoric.

The rejection of the word “democracy” went far beyond the historical and constitutional distinction between democracy and representative government made by Madison in some of the best-known Federalist Papers.¹⁸ Calling someone a “democrat” was almost an insult in the United States at the outset of the nineteenth century. The Federalists used this term negatively to distinguish themselves from Jefferson, who proposed to make “representative democracy” the foundation for an enriched vision of the republican ideal (he was at the time the leader of the republican party, which opposed the Federalists). But as often happens in history, the republicans

¹⁶ Quoted in R. R. Palmer, “Notes on the Use of the Word ‘democracy,’ 1789-1799,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 68, 1953, p. 208. See also Robert W. Shoemaker, “Democracy and Republic as Understood in late Eighteenth Century America,” *American Speech*, vol. 41, May 1966.

¹⁷ See Bertinde Laniel, *Le Mot “democracy” aux États-Unis de 1780 à 1856*, Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 1995.

¹⁸ See *The Federalist Papers* 10 and 14.

ended appropriated the word that had first been used to criticize them. While the Federalists had denounced democracy as a regime of the ignorant masses—a “mobocracy”—republicans prided themselves in their ability to express the aspirations of ordinary men. The beginning of westward expansion reinforced this trend, as the ideas of a “nose-count democracy” or a “coonskin democracy” met with popular approval.¹⁹ Republicans made the decisive step when they adopted the name “Democratic Party” in 1828 (the Federalists would later form the Republican Party). Jackson’s election in 1830 consolidated this transition.

In this way, the sociological meaning of the term democracy was established first in the United States. Distinguishing between democrats and aristocrats was a way of articulating the perception that political cleavages reproduced the breach separating the multitude from the elites. But it also helped to undermine the negative connotations of “democracy”. How could one reasonably refuse the express wishes of a large majority? During the 1840s, the word democracy was thus, in the United States, suffused with ambiguities, and torn between opposing referents. In both France and United States in the mid-nineteenth century, democracy was far from being an uncontested political ideal upon which everyone could agree. How, then, did this word come to assume its present meaning? It is this very process which must be understood in order to grasp fully contemporary challenges.

3. The Construction of Closed Democratic Universalism

While the term democracy was, half-way through the nineteenth century, still a source of controversy, at the same time that its meaning remained ambiguous, it would gradually become increasingly prevalent—even as it was discussed with ever less frequency. Understanding how the democratic ideal was transformed into an ideology is essential if one is to take full measure of the ways in which the western political imagination has become closed in itself.

Once again, the American example allows one to follow this process. It played itself out in two domains: that of politics and that of culture. Politically, the decisive

¹⁹ This history resembles that of the word populism, which was launched as a critique before being appropriated positively by others.

moment was the presidential election of 1840, when Martin Van Buren, a Democrat, ran against General William Henry Harrison, a Whig (the immediate ancestors to the Republican Party). Van Buren was a man of some wealth, a little aloof, who lacked a common touch. He mocked his opponent, condescendingly advising him to give up politics so that he could go back to smoking his pipe in his log cabin. But these sarcastic efforts to dismiss Harrison as a country bumpkin ultimately turned against him. Harrison embraced this image, arguing that he alone was the people's candidate. In the end, his claim to be the first "Log Cabin President" won him the election. To achieve this feat, however, he defined himself as a "true democrat" against an opponent whom he dismissed as a "modern democrat." In the process, the word democracy was normalized, the dispute over adjectives merely marking its entry into ordinary language.

But the story does not end here, with the conclusion of what one might call the "social history" of the word democracy—a holdover from the skepticism with which the onset of universal suffrage was originally met.²⁰ The adoption of the word democracy was ultimately indistinguishable from its sacralization. In the 1840s, the word democracy emancipated itself from specific historical and institutional reference points in order to become simply an ideal towards which humanity was heading, designating, in terms as fervid as they were vague, a destiny to be fulfilled. Having been decried and vilified for so long, democracy was now sanctified, and automatically acquired a universal scope. Anticipating Wilson's 1918 appeal to "make the world safe for democracy," a number of authors in the 1840s sanctified the democratic ideal, equating it with "universal hope and love." The historian and philosopher George Bancroft went so far as to write that "democracy is Christianity in practice." In *Moby Dick* (1851), Herman Melville expressed, for his part, the spirit of the time when he spoke of "that democratic dignity which ... radiates without end from God," equating the substance of democracy with "God absolute," and seeing in it an earthly reflection of "divine equality." Democracy, in this context, ceased to be the subject of disagreement and controversy, becoming rather an object of faith. Voting itself was also commonly considered a "political sacrament". During this

²⁰ One must remember that in the United States and in France, representative government was defined in opposition to democracy. This allowed for the triumph of a kind of aristocratic or elitist vision in the new world of civil equality. One must also keep in mind that universal suffrage was discussed in philosophical terms long after it was officially adopted. See P. Rosanvallon, *Le Sacre du citoyen. Histoire du suffrage universel en France*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

period, the old Quaker language of the seventeenth century took possession of the political realm.²¹ Walt Whitman was the eloquent spokesman of this democratic mysticism, which has continued to mark the United States ever since.²²

If the word “democracy” slowly became an object of faith, it was because it managed to dispel the radical implications haunting previous definitions, thus ridding itself of its subversive potential. The institutionalization of democracy as a moral dogma thus went hand in hand during this period with its increasing abstraction, the negation of its social content, and the dissimulation of its difficulties and contradictions. As a missionary activity, it infused a spirit of high-mindedness that was as naïve as it was unshakable. It is in this context that the first form of “closed western universalism” emerged: that of a *dogmatically religious universalism*. High-mindedness, blindness, and a missionary-like brutality followed naturally in its wake.

The United States offers an almost ideal-typical example of this first form of closed democratic universalism. Others have existed, but they were less intense and thus less compelling. France in the spring of 1848 illustrates this form particularly well. The establishment of the republic dispelled all doubts and objections as if by magic. Organized on Easter day, the first elections held on the basis of universal suffrage conferred on this event an air of pious solemnity that was celebrated throughout the country. This quasi-religious *élan* was, however, short-lived—a sappy interlude before the country turned its attention back to more pressing conflicts and concerns. In fact, a different form of universalism characterized the French experience, one that might be called a *rhetorically formalistic universalism*. It was essentially an abstract universalism. Its force lay less in its content than in its message and in the critical force that such a message authorized: it was organized around values rather than institutions. With it, the *ideas* of liberty and democracy triumphed. One could say that with this second form of closed western universalism implied a vibrant political culture, but little in the way of political forms.²³ Any nation could appropriate this tradition by inscribing a motto onto the flag of its own fight for freedom, but none could use it as a blueprint for political organization. This universalism was generous, but also smugly satisfied with its own enchanted

²¹ At the end of the seventeenth century, William Penn spoke of the “Holy Experiment in Christianity” when he founded the Quaker colony.

²² See his *Democratic Vistas* of 1871.

²³ The phrase in French is “*une culture politique pleine et une forme politique vide*.” I am borrowing this expression from Pierre Nora who uses it in his entry on “*la République*” in the *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1988) François Furet et Mona Ozouf, eds.

history—once, that is, it had repressed the demons and blemishes of its history through a celebration of only the vaguest of principles. Moreover, this universalism’s abstract character discouraged any effort to question it. It thus easily lent itself to endeavors in which the generous language of emancipation served as a cover for the brutal reality of conquest. As early as 1799, the creation of “Sister Republics” in Italy and elsewhere, to the deafening applause of peoples “liberated” by Napoleon’s armies, testified to this form’s profoundly ambiguous nature.²⁴ Later, the French colonial experience would essentially recapitulate this story.

The foundation of both “closed” universalisms rests on a denial of the tensions and ambiguities that structure the democratic ideal. They push to the sidelines all the tensions and ambiguities that underpin the history of Western democracy. They ignore, notably, the social conflicts that accompanied the long story of the struggle for voting rights. But they also discount the intellectual ambiguities that constantly stimulated investigations into the nature of democracy when it was first being established in the United States, France, and England. One ambiguity concerns the “subject” of democracy, for “people” only exists through approximate and successive representations of itself. As a master, the “people” is at once imperious and elusive. It is a “we” whose contours are always being challenged. Defining the “people” is thus both a problem and a contest. Secondly, democracies are afflicted by the tension between number [i.e., majority rule] and reason—i.e., between opinion and objectivity. This tension resides in the fact that modern regimes use universal suffrage to establish both political equality and a rational form of authority, the very objectivity of which entails the depersonalization of political power. A third uncertainty concerns the challenges of endowing self-government with an adequate institutional form, for popular sovereignty finds it difficult to express itself in representative institutions without in one way or another calling itself into question. Lastly, a tension exists between the modern idea of emancipation, which implies a desire for individual autonomy (with an emphasis on rights), and collective participation in the project of self-government (which makes politics the priority).

²⁴ Unfortunately, there is no history of these “*cisrhénane*,” “*parthénopéenne*,” and “*cisalpine*” republics. Nonetheless, see Albert Sorel, *L’Europe et la Révolution française*, t. V, *Bonaparte et le Directoire*, Paris, 1903. It is however interesting to note that far from offering an example of an exportable French model, they in fact served Bonaparte as a laboratory for his Constitution of the Year VIII, in which he severely restricted the sovereignty of the people.

This is, in short, the tension between liberty and power, or—to put it differently—between liberalism and democracy.

These were the structural tensions that were hidden by the emergence of the two forms of *closed democratic universalism* that have been briefly described. However, a third form of closed universalism, it is worth pointing out, has also asserted itself in recent years: *a normative universalism*. John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas have been the strongest proponents of such an approach, though they were neither the only nor the first to have so.²⁵ Their works explain what counts as rational deliberation, the meaning of popular sovereignty, what universally acceptable criteria for justice might be, and the grounds upon which the legitimacy of juridical rules should be formulated. We are all aware of the great contributions that these works have made in putting back on the agenda questions that the social sciences had ceased to consider. They were central to a remarkable renewal of political thought in the seventies, which some dubbed the “return of the political.” But in a certain sense, these works also failed to acknowledge the contradictory nature of politics. This is evident in the fact that their essentially *procedural* emphasis brought them closer to law and ethics. One can clearly see how a rationalist understanding of the social contract in the works of these authors led them to grasp reality in “formal” terms. For Rawls, those who decide behind the veil of ignorance adopt points of view that are all the more rational and universal insofar as they remain ignorant of the real world. Reason, from this perspective, prevails only to the extent that it is abstract—that it distances itself from all the sound and the fury of the world.

Yet if one acknowledges the complexity and the contradictory character of reality, one is led, on the contrary, to the very stuff of politics. One must thus begin by examining the problematic nature of the modern political regime if one wants to grasp its basic dynamic, rather than by dispelling its enigma by forcing normativity onto it, as if a pure science of language or law could offer a solution that people would then simply follow. In this way, it is just as misguided to wish away the shifting complexities of the democratic process through exercises in classification. There is little interest in distinguishing between various types of representative government, or in attempting to force individual positions and institutional characteristics into neat

²⁵ It would be of great interest to trace the history of this type of universalism back to its first “realist” and “minimalist” theorists, from Pareto to Schumpeter or from Kelsen to Popper. These theorists attempted to overcome the contradictions of the term democracy by imposing a fixed exchange rate on its meaning.

conceptual cubbyholes. On the contrary, the real challenge lies in grasping the open-ended and dynamic character of the democratic experience. Nor is the point blandly to contrast practices to norms; the point, rather, is to take as one's starting point the constitutive antinomies of the political—antinomies whose character can only be revealed in the course of history itself.

Each in their own way, these three forms of closed universalism have made the West blind to its own history and arrogant in its relations with the rest of the world. It would certainly be possible to push this analysis further by exploring the differences between the United States and Europe on this matter. In Europe, democracy was not established as an *ersatz* political religion. Rather, it motivated more prosaic agendas, provoked bitter conflicts, and unleashed the most extreme perversions. In other words, democracy was understood and experienced as an experiment, in which hope and obstacles were constantly intertwined. The ultimate outcome was a vision of democracy that was more modest but also more effective, precisely because it reflected the tentative, fumbling character of life itself. Yet if the difference—in nature as well as in degree—between these forms of closure is undeniable, no less so is the fundamental fact that they all sought to distance themselves from the political contradictions of modernity. In each of the three cases, it is the very idea of a *model* that impedes an attitude of openness towards oneself and the world simultaneously. In each case, one finds the idea of a value that has been acquired, rather than that of a process that must be nurtured, or of a task meriting reflection.

4. From Democracy as a Model to Democracy as an Experience

In order to adequately think democracy, one must thus abandon the idea of a model in favor of that of experience. The conditions of common life and of self-government cannot be defined *a priori*, fixed by tradition, or imposed by an authority. On the contrary, the democratic project establishes politics as a field that constitutively resists closure by virtue of the tensions and uncertainties that underpin it. If democracy has appeared for the last two centuries as the unavoidable organizational principle of any modern political order, the imperative driving this necessity has always proven to be as imprecise as it is compelling. Because it has

founded the experience of liberty, democracy has never ceased to constitute a problematic solution for instituting a society of free men. In it, the dream of the good is wed to the reality of uncertainty. This coexistence is strange, for it is not due to the fact that democracy is an ideal that everyone accepts, while disagreeing over the best means for achieving it. The story of democracy is not simply that of a frustrated ambition and failed utopias.

Rather than arising from practical uncertainties concerning its implementation, the indeterminate meanings of democracy belong to its very essence. These multiple meanings are part and parcel of a regime that always resisted efforts to categorize it. They are the source of the strange malaise which has underpinned its history. The steady procession of disappointment and feelings of betrayal that always accompany democracy are all the more vivid in that its definition continues to be incomplete. This ambiguity has informed both a search [for its ultimate meaning] and dissatisfaction [resulting from its failure] which do not easily make themselves clear. Any understanding of democracy must start from this point: it is within democracy that one finds the story of its own disenchantment, as well as that of its own indeterminacy.

Only an historical approach can fully grasp politics conceived in these terms. Indeed, one can take full measure of politics understood in this sense only if one brings out the full depth and density of the contradictions and ambiguities that underpin it. One must thus seek to think democracy by tracing the course of its history. Yet it is clearly not enough merely to say that democracy *has* a history. Rather, one must take the more radical step of recognizing that democracy *is* a history. It cannot be separated from the task of self-exploration and experimentation, nor from an effort to understand and to build upon its own essence. The ancient genealogies of our contemporary political questions must thus be traced if ever they are to become fully intelligible. History consists not only of weighing the full burden of the past, nor simply of clarifying the present through the study of earlier periods. It seeks, rather, to bring the succession of “past presents” back to life as a series of experiences that might inform our own.

History must thus be the *active laboratory* of our present, and not simply its back-lighting. It is through a permanent dialogue with the past that the political processes through which society is instituted becomes legible and that an interactive understanding of the world can be born. This suggests that we must consider a history

of the democratic phenomenon that could be described as comprehensive: reflections on the past and the interrogations of the present belong, in this context, to the same approach. Only such a history can bring to light the relationship between our experience and those of the men and women who preceded us in all corners of the earth. There is, according to this conception, no model of democracy with which some have been endowed so that they might institute it throughout the world. There are only experiences and the results of trial and error, which must be meticulously and lucidly assessed and grasped by all.

5. The Meaning and Impact of Comparing Democratic Experiences

The comparative approach considered in this essay involves both an ethic and a political philosophy. The goal is neither to juxtapose facts, nor to lay them out along a normative scale. For above all, to compare means to put one's certainties aside, to resist the obvious, and to accept to see one's worldview challenged. To compare consists in always using gaps in one's own understanding as springboards for thought. To compare is to break with dominant viewpoints that are too easily accepted. To compare means giving oneself the possibility of achieving a better understanding of one's context and of one's identity. One might speak in this way of the virtues of a "revelatory comparison," in which a more deeper knowledge of others is tied to a better understanding of oneself. To pose the question of democracy in these terms simultaneously "complicates" matters and "expands" one's understanding. It does so in two ways: first, by considering the diversity of non-Western experiences; next, by restoring to the West's many histories their problematic character.

Understood as an experience, democracy opens the door to a true universalism—an experimental universalism. By acknowledging that in the workshop of democracy, we are all apprentices, this approach allows us to establish a political dialogue between nations that is more open because it is more egalitarian. Democracy is an objective to be realized: the constitution of a society of equals and the collective mastery of things are still far away; democracy is not capital that we already possess. It is not that we must find a way for traditions, religions, and mutually hostile philosophies to live side by side in a state of tension (as with the "clash of

civilizations”) or of indifference (as with pluralism taking the form of relativism). Nor is it on the utopian basis of a mass conversion to a single political religion that the world will achieve greater unity. The only positive universalism is a universalism of the problems and questions that we must all solve together. Only on this basis does what it could mean to recognize share values become apparent.

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