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Introduction

Despite persistent claims since the late 1980s, the “End of History” has not arrived. Nor has democracy emerged as the world’s political norm. Instead, we are becoming aware that democracy and the values associated with it – freedom, equality, and prosperity – continue to be challenged. Worse, not only have old threats to democracy not been successfully resolved, new ones seem to emerge as we enter a more interdependent and globalized reality. Insecurity caused by the ecological crisis, terrorism and counter-terrorism, and increased economic volatility resulting from deregulated financial markets, are posing new challenges to the well-being of humanity. If anything, we are increasingly conscious that we need more understanding of the potentially devastating roadblocks to democracy.

This is, however, not another account of democracy’s “victory and crisis” throughout history. This history has already been written. Instead, we set out to tackle a more ambitious task: to discuss democracy from a multi-faceted perspective, broadening our focus to include factors habitually overlooked by mainstream social science. This book tells the story of democracy as a social practice, as an idea and a continuously developing ideal, of the social context into which democratic rule needs to be embedded, and of the different challenges democracy faces, some as old as the idea itself, other as new as the idea of the global war on terror.

We follow democracy’s unfolding over time and the contestations and resistances it encountered and still encounters in the different geographical regions where it was able to set foot. Ever since the notion of democracy emerged in ancient Greece, its core idea was self-rule, thus threatening the claims of those seeking to rule over others. Many ideologies have been sought to justify domination over those deemed subordinate and when reasons did not suffice, violence and coercion were readily employed first to impose minority or single-person rule and then to secure the established order. But at the same time that those able to access power were resourceful enough to delay the spread of popular rule and the core values associated with it, commoners proved even more spirited in their consistent pursuit of freedom, equality and self-rule. Yet even though mass movements have at times been able to wring power from those that seek to concentrate it, their victories were never lasting, as the opponents of self-rule soon regrouped and found new ways to undermine the claims and the practices of the many. Democracy has remained an unfulfilled promise and whenever achieved is readily
contested by all those that have much to lose from its reign, namely the powerful and all those able to gain from manipulating and exploiting the masses. This book, then, is about the biggest struggle of humankind, initiated in some Greek city-states some 2,500 years ago, and fought in different arenas ever since. It thus describes a spectacular drama, with much heroism, sacrifice, phenomenal gains and tremendous losses, on both sides. The opponents are always the same, although taking on different forms and shapes in different times and places: in every battle the simple people fight against the few privileged, more educated and rich. The reason for the struggle has not changed since the old days: who shall rule over whom.

Instead of offering a complete and encyclopaedic discussion of democracy, we set out to offer a more critical and much more engaged approach. This is not an “objective” assessment of democracy and its challenges, if such a thing were possible. To the contrary, our starting point is explicitly normative. We are stern believers in and ardent defenders of democracy, both as a means and as an end, and as such, we offer our critical and engaged reflections and share our concerns and worries about certain developments we find potentially dangerous to the quality of democracy. As proud democrats, we find this to be not just morally important, but also scientifically sound, as we are sceptical of all those claiming to produce “neutral” and “objective” science in a field dominated by human interaction and the social construction of reality. More often than not, such “neutrality” is but a façade, unable to conceal ideological bias and hidden intent, clumsily covered by often unsound and tricky scientific methodology. As critical thinkers, we believe that reliability is achieved best through intellectual honesty and transparency, and we thus make no qualms about our aim of warning against the potential threats to democracy. To us, democracy is not just a way to rule among others; it is superior.

This book, then, represents a critical and engaged attempt to do what we perceive is part of the academic profession, namely to speak out against potential ills and to offer profound analyses of social problems so that they can be addressed and solved. Against all those demanding that scientific inquiry requires disengaged distance, we contend that to the contrary, reliable findings require that researchers and scholars lay bare their convictions. We also contend that the social location from where they observe, measure and explain reality has to be taken into consideration, thus producing a more reliable form of scientific enquiry and a harder objectivity (Harding, 1993). To all those who contend that there is no science able to capture human action, we say that we are not looking for explanatory laws guiding history. We are aware that there might be no such laws; rather, it is essential to gain understanding of the contingencies and conditionalities of democracy. Ours is a quest
to establish an “if...then” logic, which allows us to point out both
circumstances that put democracy at risk and others that favour its
blossoming.

To the reader, we thus offer more than a textbook. Although we do
provide the relevant background information that enables the reader
to follow our reasoning, we want to raise questions that point beyond
the concrete and the measurable and we hope to inspire our readers to
discover and explore with us the many folds and often filigree and wide-
spun capillaries of democratic processes and practices and the effects
they produce on our lives.

Hence, this book is about democracy both as a phenomenon and as a
normative ideal. It also deals with the dynamics of democratization and
de-democratization; namely the processes of expansion and contraction
of popular rule. For there is as much reason to think of democracy as a
forward-moving process as there is also evidence of entropic tendencies.
In this contradiction lies the dual nature of the democratic challenge.
On the one hand government by the people under the rule of law poses
a threat for authoritarian, abusive and corrupt regimes throughout the
globe. On the other, the very notion of popular rule is contested not
only by persistent worldwide autocratic and oligarchic tendencies; but
by new, or seemingly new developments such as globalization, neo-
conservatism, market fundamentalism, ultranationalism, the national
security state and re-emerging religious messianism.

Democracy is a particular form of collective organizing for conflict
management, as well as rule-making and implementation. Historically
and semantically we can talk about numerous variations of the term,
from “classical” to contemporary. We will examine these variations later
on, in the search for persistent continuities and relevant discontinuities.
Democracy as an ideal has a final goal: a desired form of political asso-
ciation of free and equal people living together under a form of legality
based upon consensus. Yet, its concrete realization in the here-and-
now remains elusive, as real politics is a changing, dynamic and often
“messy” thing.

Democracy is an attribute, and unlike systems of management and
organization in the field of administration it is not a tangible, mater-
ial object whose existence can be easily verified and engineered. For
Arblaster (1987: 1) it constitutes an abstract and essentially contestable
idiom, without precise and agreed meaning. However, as a current prac-
tice it exhibits some common and conventional elements, or “common
core of meaning lying beneath all the varied uses and interpretations
which have been made of the term” (ibid.: 8). These traits include gov-
ernment by the people, equality, representation, inclusiveness, univer-
sal suffrage, frequent elections, majority rule, those who govern being
accountable to the larger social constituency, consent, debate and
freedom of speech. All this boils down to legitimacy based upon support by the people and the principle of “popular sovereignty,” understood as the presence of “popular power.” In a democracy, the people rule and popular rule happens when the gap between those who rule and those who are ruled remains minimal.

However, polities and their governments distance themselves from any ideal democratic benchmark over time and space. Real and concrete political systems exhibit to greater and lesser degree democratic and autocratic traits, the predominance of which depends upon internal and external factors. The latter define the context in which politics operates, being affected by such context, and in turn affecting it in multiple ways.

*The Democratic Challenge* is a critical study of the issues and debates around widely used concepts and trends in political science, economics, political economy and development studies. It aims at presenting a systemic, global and critical perspective to the analysis of the main views on democratization and de-democratization (Crenson et al., 2002). It combines empirical findings with theoretical reflection to examine the conjectures, assumptions and stereotypes existent in conventional theories and studies of democracy in the so-called new world order. It also proposes alternative perspectives for understanding democracy and democratization in the contemporary scene. Finally, it advances a number of hypothetical formulations to study the “real world of democracy” (Macpherson, 1969), by casting them in the perspective of human security and mutual vulnerability (Nef, 1995).

Far from postulating a universal and unidirectional democratizing trend, this study seeks to provide for history and context – ecological, economic, social and cultural – in a broadly comparative study focused on three interconnected processes: democratization, re-democratization and de-democratization. In fact, it questions the alleged convergence of globalization, liberalism and democracy as an adequate descriptor of the post-1989 democratic conjuncture, by contrasting discourse, ideology and rhetoric on the one hand, with concrete trends on the other. While focusing on the interplay among history, culture, ideology, economics and politics, our study approaches any overly deterministic explanations of democracy with scepticism and methodical doubt. Instead, it presents a multi-varied, situational analysis instead of the self-congratulating discourses that, more often than not, dominate and obscure the discussion of democracy. As specific processes and circumstances are examined, unique tendencies and often contradictory patterns of democratization/de-democratization across the globe will be discussed, including emerging and as yet rather amorphous strains of democracy that could often be looked upon as anomalous.

In particular, this work concentrates upon probing into and also contesting three dominant themes in the discussion of democracy: (a) the
so-called crisis of democracy; (b) the inevitability of democracy thesis extant in the End of History literature (Fukuyama, 1989); and (c) the globalization thesis and its contested corollaries – the erosion of sovereignty and the prospects for global democracy. In tackling these theses, we confront several intellectual challenges. One is to lay bare the major elements and assumptions in the study of democracy and democratization. Another is to define the terms and establish the interconnectedness among these elements and assumptions. This entails sketching some basic theory or conceptual framework to explain and understand the democratic phenomenon. A third and equally fundamental task is to articulate the set of conjectural propositions and implications of these conceptualizations.

Besides a systematic treatment of democracy following the paths laid by major theorists, this book will undertake a genealogical analysis of the idea and practice of democracy and their variations (Arbaster, 1987: 13–37). Our aim is to provide a general perspective of the theoretical and philosophical foundations and contributions to the explanation and understanding of democracy and democratization over time. One essential theoretical and practical aspect appearing and re-appearing in the diachronic (time bound) and synchronic/structural treatment of the subject is the uneasy relationship between liberalism and democracy. Another is the complex interplay between the notions of power, equality, liberty, freedom, justice, majority rule, inclusiveness and the like.

A main tenet of our approach to the subject is the need to examine differing democratic visions not as a lofty discourse but as a concrete and indeterminate process with multi-directional dynamics and possibilities. Far from seeing democracy as a stable and irreversible stage (in the sense of “development” envisioned by modernization theorists) our study emphasizes the essentially open and indeterminate nature of the democratic phenomenon as a complex historical, cultural and socioeconomic process. Nor do we look at democracy as a discrete purely institutional category, limited to formal, procedural and constitutional factors. To approach the subject from the proposed wide angle requires studying the relationships among various interconnected, though at times contradictory, levels of analysis. These constitute the structural foundations of democracy. They range from the broader social, economic and cultural regime, to the political community, the state, the government and the self (for instance, the interplay between culture and personality). This means focusing on democratic and antidemocratic attributes present in concrete social, economic and political institutions and practices. Such attributes present at various levels of analysis permit to ascertain the extent and nature of popular empowerment and disempowerment under several circumstances and historical moments. To accomplish its stated goal, the book is divided into nine inter-related chapters.
Chapter 1 presents an historical and structural overview of the concept of democracy. It outlines the key notions, ideas and evolving trends regarding democracy and the process of democratization, as well as its counter tendencies. The chapter briefly discusses democracy among a constellation of different models of conflict management. It also sketches the major theses and debates surrounding these and related concepts, as well as their contingent political use. Besides being a systematic treatment of democracy, this foundational chapter undertakes a genealogical analysis of the idea of democracy and its variations.

Chapter 2 examines, from an institutional viewpoint, the proposition that the varied definitions and conceptions of democracy often imply very different processes and organizational manifestations. This chapter takes a closer look at the dominant Western, liberal and representative paradigm of procedural democracy as characterized by Schumpeter (1942). From our perspective, formal procedures – though necessary – are insufficient to empower people in decision-making process and in the creation of a democratic (“civic”) culture (Almond and Verba, 1965). The attributes of formal democracy are contrasted here with those of substantive democracy. From a substantive point of view, constitutions, elections, separation of powers, checks and balances, and responsible government can be seen as a necessary but by no means sufficient condition of democracy. Instead, such criteria as equal access to citizenship rights and self-governance are significantly more central to the meaning of democracy.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the uses, and abuses, of the democratic idiom in current discourse. After pointing out some of the inherent contradictions between democracy, understood as the rule of the people, and liberalism, with its emphasis on individual freedom, it examines how the perception of the word democracy has changed over the centuries; from one evoking mob rule to one where government by the people appeared as a political ideal. With the emergence and consolidation of the labour movement as a political actor in the later part of the nineteenth century, the struggle for democracy became equated with equity, justice, self-determination, majority rule, constitutionalism and the rule of law. For progressives, it came to signify modernity and also social change. In the post-World War I era democracy constituted a hegemonic concept. From left to right – including mainstream radicals, liberals, conservatives and even anarchists – the term evoked a positive connotation. Yet it was anathema to fascists and reactionaries, and to leftist groups who rejected its “bourgeois” trappings. This chapter seeks to elucidate the various meanings, extrinsic conditions and intrinsic traits of the democratic phenomenon. In so doing, it
also attempts to provide criteria to compare and contrast the various manifestations of democracy, which allows us to challenge a number of propositions emerging, and derived from, the above-mentioned literature.

Chapter 4 begins by examining the relationship between democracy and sovereignty (who rules) and subsequently explores some of the implications of popular sovereignty, namely the question “who are the people.” After developing some of the inherent complications that result from the pairing of democracy with economic liberalism, the chapter explores two important developments during the 1970s and 1980s that challenged the concept of democracy on a global scale. One was the shift from the idea of participation to the conservative notion of order, justified by postulating a crisis of democracy resulting from “over-participation.” Another was the support by the West for ostensibly antidemocratic regimes elsewhere, justified by the need to fight communism.

This latter shift relates directly to the emergence of “transition theory.” This theory provided a roadmap for controlled political openings, geared at maintaining both the socioeconomic order harboured by these regimes (and supported by the West) and the international alliances of the crumbling dictatorships. Transition theory became relevant to explain the fragmentation and reconfiguration of regimes in Eastern Europe at the heels of the collapse of communism and its replacement by liberal – though not yet democratic – systems of government. Besides addressing these historical developments, the chapter addresses a related but more contemporary issue. This is the movement away from democracy in the developed world and the multiple factors seemingly accounting for it.

Chapter 5 examines the relationship between human insecurity in its multiple global and subsystemic dimensions, and democracy. In particular, it studies how major international economic crises in recent decades, converged with globalization, state policies, and uneven distribution of income, to alter the socioeconomic conditions of liberal democracy. The recognition of this contradiction, as well as the inherent tension between legitimacy and effectiveness in democratic regimes, has led numerous analysts to speak of the profound and unprecedented crisis of democracy, referred to in previous chapters. Shrinking revenue and a new free-market paradigm has made untenable the notion of an expansive safety net once provided by a welfare state. In it, the contradiction between legitimation and accumulation has created conditions for both greater exclusion, and its enforcement via repression.

But the challenges to democracy also emerge from other international, regional, as well as national and more local threats. Issues like failed
states, criminality and especially terrorism have a deleterious impact on democracy, not so much from the direct risks associated with these acts, but because of dysfunctional systemic responses. While the maintenance of security is a necessary condition for democracy, the “securitization” of politics carries with it a most destructive challenge for popular sovereignty under the rule of law.

Chapter 6 centres on the issue of structural inequality. The chapter explores the central proposition that liberal democratic consensus requires economic growth, employment, and equitable distribution. In the past this was facilitated in developed societies by the presence of a strong, efficient and effective administrative, and subsequently welfare, state. Under the management of a white collar middle class, its central function was to play brokerage between elites and non-elites, relying on the fiscal surplus generated by economic expansion to soften the often radical and socially undesirable consequences of unfettered capitalism. This “welfarist” model is there no longer and hence social frictions have intensified, whereas the room for compromise has shrunk. Without adequate distributive policies, it has become harder to manage conflict in a democracy, even with significant economic growth, as regressive distribution has a most negative effect on the aggregate level of human security.

Chapter 7 deals with the emergence, evolvement and entrenchment of “governable” and limited democracies in the context of neo-liberal reforms. Despite claims of a final stage of history characterized by global democracy, the outcome of this process of transformation is today uncertain. If democracy was ever thought to be a benchmark of political development in nation and state building, the contemporary situation appears to be one of de-development. Thus, this chapter also examines a paradoxical trend, taking place as many analysts proclaim the global triumph of democracy. It also addresses the factors underpinning globalization and the implications of these factors for democracy. In this sense we examine the retrenchment and erosion of democracy (or “un-doing democracy,”) in the sense used by Close and Deonandan (2004), which is occurring not only in unstable polities, but also in reputedly developed and pluralistic regimes.

Chapter 8 concentrates on the antidemocratic effects of traits associated with the nature of the contemporary state. These include increased concentration of ownership of different media, an overdeveloped and increasingly autonomous defence and security apparatus, complex hierarchical and highly specialized bureaucratic structures of modern government, and a process of acute transnationalization of the economy and the state itself. The end of the Cold War affected the nature of global politics, rendering the “old” military industrial complex less
instrumental to facilitate continuous growth. This transformation threatened the survival of this entrenched and relatively autonomous part of the administrative state and created conditions for its return under the mantle of a new perpetual state of war, exemplified by the “war on terror.”

The combination of globalization with militarization, though intrinsically incompatible in the long run, has resulted in an erosion of democracy. This power deflation is rooted in the convergence of two opposite processes: global accumulation and national security. The nature of the contemporary state is being affected by these contradictory and essentially external gravitational pulls.

The chapter also explores the internal contemporary manifestation of Michels’ “Iron Law of Oligarchy” applied to the crucial mechanisms of brokerage – interest groups and political parties – that define the open (inclusive) or closed (exclusive) nature of the state. Narrowing participation, the bureaucratization of representation, and the growing influence of electoral mega-machines create conditions for plutocracy, favouring a kind of restricted democracy without people. This is not without precedent or theorization in the historical journey of the democratic idea. The Greek polis and the predilections of some influential founders of the American republic, like Alexander Hamilton or James Madison, preferred a type of democracy distrustful of equality and popular rule. Only some of the people, but not all the people, were fit to rule.

We suggest in this chapter that democratic control seems to be constantly slipping from the hands of the common people, even in systems characterized as open and fair. Moreover, ever more entrenched global and internal inequality, combined with media concentration and a growing “securitization” of the state, create conditions adverse to popular rule. In the midst of these processes, the model of democracy proclaimed and prescribed by the West to the world becomes for many an empty shell: a cynical façade that masks authoritarian and predatory decision-making.

The concluding chapter synthesizes the various themes explored in the previous chapters, and looks for the common roots and circumstances of the alleged crisis of democracy. Is it a crisis of governability resulting from over-participation, or is it something else? In so doing, it re-examines the purposeful deconstruction of the popular component of democracy and its replacement with what Duverger called Pluto-democracies, and “democracies without people” (1966, 1967). It also calls into question the thesis that there is no alternative to the prevailing neo-liberal, free market model of limited democracy that is being peddled as the last and highest stage of political and economic development.
Some lingering questions

Any analysis of democracy confronts us with several recurring riddles. One of these is the problem of inevitability: is democracy an expression of an unfolding historically-determined trend, a slowly unfolding “Zeitgeist,” as suggested by Fukuyama’s take on Hegel? Or is democracy rather something that inevitably will decay as a result of its own contradictions, as Michels and more recently Huntington have implied? There seem to be strong arguments on both sides. Or is history bereft of any unfolding soul or spirit, as Nietzsche first suggested? A related question is the complex association between democracy and development. Is democracy a “luxury” that only prosperous and developed societies can afford? Alternatively, will prosperity, complacency and apathy ultimately smother democracy? (Stoker, 2006: 87–102).

Another very relevant question at present is the issue of portability and replicability: can democracy be “exported” and transplanted? Certainly, there is abundant evidence of imperial powers attempting to reproduce, or impose their version of a “benchmark” political system on others. But, has this worked? Some of these transplants seem to have survived; even been successful. More often than not, however, impositions and imitations have been dismal failures. Yet, this obvious lesson seems to be hard to accept by the foreign policy establishments of major powers; witness Soviet and American involvements in Afghanistan and beyond.

Democracy is ultimately self-government, in the sense of home-rule, and as such it cannot be imposed. Of course, societies learn from each other and therefore a great deal of borrowing, “hybridization” and imitation takes place. Yet, democracy appears to be a kind of social or “soft” technology that, after all the learning and borrowing is done, still needs to be home-grown. As an ambassador in Washington back in the 1920s put it, “we do not need so much a world safe for democracy, but a safe democracy for the world.” Democracy is not just a piece of hardware that can be plugged in to produce instantaneous results. As a soft technology, it is not even in the same category as a managerial structure, accounting system or business plan; though little critical thinking often accompanies most incorporations of administrative know-how. Learning, context, culture and ethical considerations are extremely important, but these often tend to be ignored.

Our contention is that democracy is not an exclusive and perennial endowment of those chosen or fortunate enough to possess it. Nor is it something that once acquired is here to stay; let alone an object of passive contemplation. Instead, it is something that needs to be nurtured and contested in the practice in everyday life. Democracy, in this sense, always remains a challenge and a promise and as such, it is not restricted to the narrow field of politics. Not only have our expectations towards
democracy increased steadily over time, we have also come to realize that democracy is a fragile and illusive practice. It is easily distorted by power, threatened by inequality, and promptly held hostage by what has been termed “the establishment,” the “military-industrial complex,” the “state apparatus,” or simply, “the system.” But democracy is not only threatened from above. To be meaningful, democratic principles must guide all levels of human interactions. To put it simply: there cannot be a democratic state ruling over an undemocratic society. Democratic practice needs to start at the individual and family levels for a democratic common sense to emerge and be able to slowly and gradually consolidate and become institutionalized. Ultimately, a democratic regime, which includes a democratic state and its diverse legal components, must grow out of a democratic society, where the process of gradual democratization is as important, maybe even more important, than the end result; meaningful democracy cannot be achieved by antidemocratic means. Hence the democratic quality of processes is of utmost importance for the establishment of democratic political regimes and anyone interested in democracy needs to include an analysis of the processes and paths leading up to the ideal of popular rule.
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