

CASTLES IN THE AIR, WHERE IS THE DEMOCRACY PARACHUTE?

Paul J Carnegie

“Democracy is best understood as an implied condition and practical consequence of philosophical - political pluralism. In essence it is not merely the political juridical equality of isolated individuals but the total complex of social decision making”

Mihaly Vajda

“I know you don’t know what life is really worth.
It’s not all that glitters is gold, half the story has never been told.”

Bob Marley

Introduction

In the following I explore the terrain of democracy. There will be at least three aspects to the inquiry. On an analytical level I investigate the logical structure of democracy and its relations, coupled with a deliberation on the philosophical or ontological status of democracy. Following this I examine some of the normative and practical dimensions of democratic discourse. To start with the process of assigning symbols to mean a thing or an idea is signification, the most illuminating map of this process coming from the world of semiotics. Above all, semiotics is a perspective that consists in asking oneself how things become carriers of meaning. This becomes problematic from the perspective of contemporary capitalism as it does not need to construct a “centre” or “meaning” to operate as it is continually transforming through a process of “deterritorialization” that distinguishes it from earlier modes of production (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 241). Therefore how applicable the signifier and

signified of “democratic discourse” is today open to question. However, as Gilles Deleuze (1990: 19) notes, an ‘event’ is a bifurcator which unleashes an “emission of singularities”; that is, it provides for a new set of attractors or patterns of behaviour. As a multiplicity an ‘event’ is profoundly social and collective, therefore, irreducible to individual states of affairs, particular images or personal beliefs. The terrain of democracy is woven into the circumstances that surround situations or ‘events’ and give it meaning to something else and as such remains an open-ended flow subject to differing interpretations.¹ The ‘event’ of democracy should continually stimulate the imagination to transform democratic futures by expanding our imagined worlds and what it is possible for us to think.

This article is a journey into a theme that re-evaluates preconceptions and raises the question: can a normative search for the ‘promises’ of the enlightenment rescue a democracy without metaphysical foundations?² If so, what constitutes the ‘promise’ of democracy? Jacques Derrida has referred to the ‘promise’ as a radically open ended future; “la democratie a venir” - democracy to come. The very structure of a ‘promise’ inscribes democracy with the ability to recreate and re-perceive the world and our relationship to it (Derrida 1992: 78).

Structured Values or Valued Structures?

“All that is Solid Melts into Air”

Karl Marx

¹ Deleuze & Guattari (1987) utilise the “linguistics of flows” instead of a “linguistics of the signifier” to analyse the semiotics of a capitalist society. ‘Ideas’ for them have a complex internal structure or rhizome, being composed of a series of singularities.

² As Marcuse (1968: 117-118) notes, “essence and appearance, ‘is’ and ‘ought’ confront each other in the conflict between actual forces and capabilities in the society. And they confront each other, not as reason and unreason, right and wrong - for both are part and parcel of the same established universe, both partaking of reason, unreason, right and wrong. The idea of reason pertains to the movement of thought and of action. It is a theoretical and practical exigency”.

It is a fairly non-contentious claim that there are many different democracies in the world. Some are similar, some are not, some are more recognisable than others, all are by some definition imperfect and subject to ongoing processes of change. Although Lijphart (1975) divides existing democracies in two basic models of majoritarian and consociational, one has only to consider democracy at an elite-leadership level to realise that democratic regimes vary greatly according to the degree of separation of judicial, legislative and executive power. The dispersal or separation of powers rests on doubts as to the adequacy of executive supremacy and the need to protect the polity from its possible abuse (Pennock 1979: 478-500). Given the vast array of existent institutional arrangements called democracy then differences are as important as the common ground. Therefore a crucial expression of democracy lies neither solely in the similarities of state institutions nor the characteristics of society, but the effective interaction with one another. In other words, a 'living democracy' becomes the habituated linkages between state institutions and society. The particular arrangements that allow channels of popular control and political equality to form are part of what David Held (1996) terms the broad project of democratic autonomy. Held (1996:119-120) defines this as

a cluster of rules and institutions permitting the broadest participation of the majority of citizens in the selection of representatives who alone can make political decisions.....this cluster includes elected government; free and fair elections in which every citizens' vote has an equal weight: a suffrage which embraces all citizens irrespective of distinctions of race, religion, class, sex and so on, freedom of conscience, information, expression on all public matters broadly defined: the right of all adults to oppose their government and stand for office: and associational autonomy - the right to form independent associations including social movements, interest groups and political parties.

The project and process is without ultimate solution, but as a condition should mirror democratic values. Held's concern is with extending popular control and protecting political equality. Therefore the changing notions of liberty, equality

and the 'good-life' and their connexion with what it is to be human ultimately provide the measure of the condition. The linkages constituted between state and society should allow people to effectively access, engage, and have a genuine degree of influence.

However, the practical consequences that emerge from the implied condition of democracy meld with cultural notions and values that vary in a spatial-temporal sense between different social groupings. Franz Boas once defined culture broadly as, "the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterise the behaviour of the individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relation to their natural environment to other groups to members of the group itself and each individual to herself" (1988:4). Therefore, the symbolised understandings of perceptual meanings are constantly open to change.³ Similarly 'democracy' is the mirror of this complex plurality and signifies a diverse range of political systems, institutions, political culture and practice. People are enmeshed within a complex linguistic and cultural (re) translation of democracy. A dynamic process of interpretation in regards to inclusion, suffrage, minority representation, public ethos, socio-economic preoccupation and geo-political orientation. The recurrent although discontinuous theme of contestation plays out in reiterative and inter-subjective relationships between culture and politics and between discourse and practice. The relational aspect of such processes provides the possibility for differing interpretations and practice (Mouffe 1988:90). An emergent democracy (re)constitutes through (re) translation with the nodes of contestation immanent in any political system undergoing a positional shift within the relationships of power (Foucault 1980: 194; Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 105). To wit, existing systems of political

³ Deleuze & Guattari (1987) note that symbolised meaning is open to slippage, flowing within and through a contextually embedded rhizome of power-knowledge.

signification are capable of transformation. The challenge remains as always to weave democratic autonomy into the texture of the imperfect mess of humanity.

The Democratic Condition

“There is no knowledge of true being. The world is fundamentally in a state of becoming.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

However the unsettling paradox of the late-modern era is that democracy is today everywhere and nowhere. If democracy on a political institutional level is measured against the project of democratic autonomy its ascendancy to respectability has turned out to be a disappointment at best and at worst a sham. We are currently living in an age of global economic integration with a complex variety of forces and trends having brought paralysis to the democratic imagination itself. The prognosis that the singular pursuit of competitive market advantage is subsuming our political, social and environmental life-worlds to the detriment of our overall well-being is beginning to gain greater credence (Hamilton 2003; Paehlke 2003). In short, contemporary democracy can be distinguished by the existence of a largely passive citizenry compounded by the erosion and displacement of parliamentary institutions by unelected concentrations of political and economic power. Governments silently acquiesce to the power interests of global economic bodies and trade agreements by relinquishing environmental protections, public services and hard fought for social programmes in the name of remaining globally competitive. The threat of capital flight is hung like a sword of Damocles over elected governments with progressive programmes of social reform. The consequences of this relentless onslaught sweep across societies abetted by advertising and marketing that mediates the pervasive commodification of every aspect of our lives.

We no longer benefit from or develop the classic Athenian notion of an active citizen, preferring instead to economise on direct experience having our desire to participate satiated as largely passive recipients of mass communication.⁴ The discrete addictions and fetishisms of consumer society have us habitually sedated to a purely symbolic perception of public life that renders democracy virtual.⁵ Snared in a chimerical web of para-social interaction our collective will has become diffident. We have lost the habit of asking questions about established beliefs and procedures. This apathy in our human ability to explore or conceive of an authentic plurality of life-worlds both formal and informal, local and central, temporary and permanent has us congealed within an increasingly stagnant orthodoxy.

How did Occam's razor get applied to Democracy?

"Pluralitas non est ponenda sine necessitate"
(Plurality should not be posited without necessity)

William of Ockham (1285-1349)

"To want control is the pathology. Not that the person can get control, because of course you never do... Man is only a part of larger systems, and the part can never control the whole."

Gregory Bateson

What accounts for the malaise, this discontented ennui of our times? How did we arrive at such an impasse? Although all existing democracies are necessarily incomplete and imperfect, its very name conjures up notions of a rare and

⁴ The idea of transmission, manipulative and hypodermic models of mass communication were articulated by the likes of Adorno & Horkheimer ([1948] 1979) and Marcuse (1968).

⁵ See Deleuze (1993 51-52) who notes that the main characteristic of this virtual is that it is self-differentiating, or "difference in itself." The virtual realm is not an undifferentiated chaos, but is articulated by "ideas" which serve as "regional ontologies," mapping the many ways in which 'a' society, 'a' language, 'an' animal, and so forth can exist. The world is an infinite series of folds that permutates within extrinsic limits. The concept of the virtual is thus a way to understand the relation of any system to the probabilities of its behaviours it designates the unilateral character of inclusion.

desirable political form. The complex democratic canon has been (and is) continually influenced by changing circumstances and shaped by the capacious history and traditions that intersect it. How have people conceived, represented and thought about democratic concepts? Do notions of democracy have a concomitant responsibility to acknowledge that they are neither static nor unchallenged but a continually changing process of representations, differences, hybridisations, contradictions, ambiguities and conflicts? If cultures are multi-layered and complex manifestations what then constitutes a democratic polity? What is the relationship between democracy and modernity and what are the major assumptions about the nature of democratic polities?

Democratic traditions trace back some 2500 years in the history of western philosophy from Ancient Greece and the time of Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle through to the enlightenment epoch of Locke, Hume, Kant, Rousseau and onto Hegel. However the general commitment to democracy is a fairly recent phenomenon and from Plato to Hobbes 'democracy' was often held as a pejorative term to be viewed with suspicion (Held 1996: 28-32). As a normative term laden with value judgements and assumptions as to substantive definition it remains a 'promise' that has proven ever vulnerable; a praxis project without ultimate solution. In this next section I explore aspects of the democratic canon to illuminate this complex puzzle.

The work of the likes of Robert Michels and Max Weber provide a strong rationale and the antecedents for contemporary understandings of competitive elitist democracy.⁶ Their work was later re-articulated and developed in America

⁶ See Michels ([1915] 1959) and Weber ([1927] in Roth & Wittich 1968). Weber's work was a critique of socialism and challenge to Marx and Engels and their explanations of the processes of modernity and bureaucratisation. Weber did not view the state and bureaucratic organisations as parasitic and thought direct participatory democracy was an unsuitable mechanism for mediating the struggles of factions and therefore an inappropriate model for general political regulation and control.

by the likes of Joseph Schumpeter (1943) and Robert Dahl (1971). The thread running through them all is a focus on choosing decision makers and curbing their excesses by positing very particular forms of political arrangements. Schumpeter (1943: 269) describes and seeks to explain democracy in minimal and instrumental terms as a procedural mechanism for conferring legitimate authority or, "that particular institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote".

Given that Schumpeter was an economist by trade, the analogy of entrepreneurs competing for customers and using the techniques of advertisers is strong. We see here an extension of Max Weber's notion of plebiscitary leadership democracy where 'people' are producers of governments and contemporary democracy was fully enmeshed with the project of modernity. His sociological explanation highlighted that in an era of mass politics, the development of mass franchise, electoral politics and bureaucratic organisation modern democracy was a process of choosing decision makers and curbing their excesses (Weber [1927] in Roth & Wittich 1968: 141-4). For Weber this was an inevitable condition of living in modern industrial society, "the decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organisation has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organisation" (Weber [1927] in Roth & Wittich 1968: 973). However, this protective form of competitive elitism or leadership democracy gives little scope for considering the role of democratic participation and individual or collective development. The inherent positivism of Weber's work justifies a technocratic consciousness devoid of imaginative impulse that pays little notice to the surrounding social context in which activities take place (Bachrach 1968: 36-8).

If we accept Weberian-infused positivism as the way things are, this tends to become an undefended celebration of existing social arrangements or the status quo ante. Democracy is no longer seen as functioning as an ideal in itself or an end in itself but merely a means to particular ends. Construed in implied instrumental and protective terms it is a procedure for arriving at decisions that severely curtails the normative impulse of democracy as socio-political trope. It no longer becomes a measure of broader values within an ideational landscape but operates in the essential, though limited, capacity as a protective mechanism for organising authority to prevent the 'tyranny of the majority' and check official representatives abusing state power. The sanction and legitimacy of authority or rule becomes predicated on the production of an accountable, feasible and stable government in modern industrial capitalist societies.

Schumpeterian democracy tends to view the installation of elections in a country as enough to warrant the classification of democracy and with it the accompanying advantageous inference of legitimacy. Although there is no argument that the election of representatives is a procedural necessity it does not negate the fact that is far from a sufficient condition for a healthy democracy (Bermeo 1990: 359-77; Carothers 2002: 5-21). It is impossible to assume that elections in and of themselves effectively channel political action into peaceful contests and accord public legitimacy. To do so unintentionally ignores the issue of civil liberties and the deleterious effects to democratic mechanisms of political juridical equality posed by powerful asymmetries of economic interest and wealth.⁷

Now obviously this is a piece of rhetorical reductionism and not the whole story. Robert Dahl's (1971) criteria based "polyarchy" is a more familiar outline of

⁷ A closer reading of Schumpeter (1943: 249-69) does reveal his own awareness as to the threats of erosion to the democratic mechanism. Elections are not the sine qua non of democracy but the unintentional rhetorical consequences of his circumscribed conceptualisation remain.

democracy for many.⁸ His definitions of minimal institutional guarantees include elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage and the right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative information and associational autonomy (Dahl 1971: 3). It fits well with the economic principles of Adam Smith (1776) and David Ricardo (1817) and leading early advocates of this type of protective representative government, James Madison and Alexis de Tocqueville.⁹

However if we accept that a critical aspect of democracy is neither the state institutions nor the characteristics of society in isolation from one another, but how the two interact with one another then other considerations arise. As mentioned earlier, if democracy manifests in many respects from the habituated linkages between state institutions and the nature of a particular society then qualitatively it is the peoples' ability to access, utilise and have a genuine degree of influence via the linkages. It is this relationship that provides a significant measure of a living 'democracy'. Although pluralist conceptions provide guarantee to formally disperse power to protect the 'individual' the ability to conceive of the de jure and de facto dimensions of 'democracy' is limited.

Unintentionally conceptualising power as non-relational misses the 'interaction' of demos with kratos.¹⁰ It is not what is said but what is left out of pluralist conceptions of the distribution of power and the asymmetries in economic and political resources. Contemporary corporate capitalism tends to produce inequalities in social and economic resources so great as to bring about severe

⁸ Polyarchy etymologically speaking is 'multiple' 'power' or "government by the many" reflected in contemporary democratic institutions by the separation of powers as between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government producing a compound or constitutive form of rule or leadership that has legitimate authority.

⁹ In The Federalist No. 10 Madison famously states that, "the latent causes of faction are sown in the nature for man" ([1787] 1961: 79). See Madison ([1787] 1961: 77-84) and de Tocqueville ([1824] 1972) for the utility of this type of political formation as safeguard against domestic factionalism and insurrection.

¹⁰ 'Demos' (people) 'kratos' (power/rule/authority) are the etymological roots of the Greek *demokratia* (democracy).

violations of political equality in the democratic process and is vastly deleterious to the health of existing pluralist arrangements of representative democracy. Our present institutional arrangements guarantee and protect individual liberties against the 'tyranny of the majority' by quelling the rise of *demos* to *kratos*. Despite the fact the people in a democracy are the source of legitimacy and power little concern is shown about the processes of domination by *kratos* over *demos*. The annexing of political decision making to corporate interests corrodes the public sphere and any notion of common political life. We bear witness to the constant undermining of the structures of participation in local society and in the workplace.

The Hobbesian assumption would be that whatever is beneficial for the order of the political system as a whole is beneficial for the individuals within it. Order, stability and control of existing social, economic and political arrangements becomes privileged above all else.¹¹ This implies that apathy and restricted participation are actually beneficial to the system and the classical conception of participation as having intrinsic value is subverted. However, if order, stability and control are accepted as *sine qua non* to a democratic system then it becomes difficult to question or examine the nature of the set of social, economic and political relations being stabilised and our position within them. To unreflectively ignore the vicious circles of non-participation, whereby effective participation requires political will and the actual capacity of resources and skills to pursue different courses of action, is to risk the shallow and laminated homogenisation of today's consumer democracy. Bellamy and Taylor (1998:99) draw our attention to the numerous limitations and the risk we run of consumer democracy restricting citizenship to stake-holding in public services where public information is only accessible in relation to the citizen's stake in the delivery of public services. The over-reliance on the consumption nexus to interpret and

¹¹ See Held (1996: 13-15) for the intrinsic value of participation to classical notions of democracy.

moderate individual consumer preferences neglects the possibility that citizens might engage with others. It denies that individual choice might be moderated by the political interactions and engagement with other citizens who may have equally powerful and rational preferences to express.

The worrying paradox in the scenario of apathy becoming beneficial to a democratic system is that those who are the worst off, the alienated, the marginalised and the disenfranchised are the people most prejudiced by having nothing to do with politics. However, the hostility to intervention or redistribution inscribed in liberal thought permeates contemporary models of democracy that are predicated on a protecting negative liberty and the juridical political equality of the isolated sovereign individual. Therefore even those embarrassed by the social, economic, cultural and environmental consequences of late modern capitalism are in paralysis. As for the prospects of democratic autonomy, the arrangements of contemporary democracy are now so wedded to and collude with capitalist transformation as to be like the victim and accomplice in a perfect crime. What to do?

Re-igniting Democracy

"The happening of the event is what cannot and should not be prevented: it is another name for the future itself. Not that it is good – good in itself."

Jacques Derrida

"To know where the other person makes a mistake is of little value. It only becomes interesting when you know where you make the mistake, for then you can do something about it. What we can improve in others is of doubtful utility as a rule, if, indeed, it has any effect at all."

Carl Gustav Jung

If stability and order depends on apathy or a subservient passive citizenry then there would seem little reason for citizens to identify with the needs of the

current system of arrangements. An expansion of what it is possible for us to think is an act of the democratic imagination. It is the faculty that ignites and transforms the experience of what is into a future of what could be. However the democratic dilemma is to move beyond dogmatic notions of thought as purely the propositional production of knowledge for the direct solution of problems. New formulations and concepts are needed that allow us to extend, re-imagine and re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. A challenge that calls for a more mindful appreciation of the underlying influences and structures that control our lives from without whilst remaining aware of the discrete impacts they have on our emotional or inner being. They all in turn effect our own perceptions, words, and actions.

If the transformation of democracy is undertaken in different ways to articulate interests, purposes, needs and visions of the 'good-life' then the invention of democracy is a practical historical experience. It impacts on living, thinking, feeling people with referents being constructed, accumulated and learnt. Western understandings of democracy themselves have always and already gone through a process of multiplication, contestation, destabilisation and differentiation. It would be to deny western countries' development of their own individually specific democratic institutions, practices and political culture not to realise that the ad-hoc inventions and spontaneous improvisations that emerged over time themselves settled. The latter inventions and improvisations eventually emerging as particular sets of referable institutional arrangements, political culture and practice called democracy. The impossibility of fixing the idea of democracy with definite signifieds and unchanging referents should fill us with anticipation. As Derrida notes, "democracy is a promise. That is why it is more a historical concept of the political - it's the only concept of a regime or a political organisation in which history, that endless process of improvement and

perfectibility, is inscribed in the concept. So it's a historical concept through and through, and that is why I call it 'to-come'" (1997:5).

The concern to a vast majority of people is whether they themselves have the genuine opportunity and capacity to utilise or engage the democratic institutions that are supposed to emerge out of a democratic polity. The dynamic processes of free speech, conscience and thought that compose, publicise and reproduce referents for a democratic polity by the people who live there remains a crucial expression of the implied condition of democracy. It gives a sense of shape, time and place to abstract and amorphous aspirations. However, the symbolic experiences and public space of democratic struggle that allow people to look and walk through a 'living' democracy are becoming commodified. Deontological conceptions of 'the good-life' configured around individual consumerism articulate no actual context within which the democratic imagination flourishes through an open and continued deliberation.¹² The embodiment of collective memory is allowed to atrophy and the symbolic space of democratic identity formation dissipates.

As mentioned, with an unanchored metaphysics it is impossible to stabilise any attempt to fix a normative construction of something that is immanently unstable. However, merely because something is 'Sisyphean' does not mean it necessarily has to be abandoned. If democracy is to have a continued significance it should come to people as a self-educating process and struggle that provides the genuine opportunity to learn, define and build by them. It would be antithetical to any democracy worthy of the name to claim ownership

¹² See Berman (1983) and Jameson (1991). Modernity is intimately entwined the dissemination and imbrication of 'democracy'. The major transmissions have not occurred through traditional means of communication, oral or written but through an emergent capitalist cultural market in the shape of commodities (books, journals, magazines) and mass communication (television, internet) that tends to advance a promulgated commodification of 'democracy' as promiscuous as it is subtle. The idea of an active democratic citizen becomes distorted into political passivity incapable of speaking its name.

of the single definitive democracy. The very processes of 'attempting' or 'becoming' engenders the conditions of possibility for progressive, genuine change for the better by providing the symbolic space of democratic identity formation. Not a destination or place but a process that only begins again when you arrive. The democratic project is therefore without ultimate solution. This may appear at first a ridiculously frustrating and perplexing challenge. However I am inexplicably reminded of an optimistic quote on the human condition by Gregory Bateson (1972: 4), "if a man achieves or suffers change in premises which are deeply embedded in his mind, he will surely find that the results of that change will ramify throughout his whole universe".

What Bateson was positing was a radical transformation of self that involves revolutions in the mind without the use of violence, whilst consuming less and engendering an enriched sense of self-actualisation in one's own life. Awareness and compassion towards others is the only 'universal' posited and is more a gift of vibrant generosity than imposition. The welcome is for all with the hope of facilitating a translation into a practical politics and ethics. An open-ended dialogue that invites people to compare, contrast and learn about each other's achievements and shortcomings. In so doing, we learn from others as they learn from us in an authentic and non-violent way; freedom perhaps?

Paul J Carnegie is a PhD candidate in the School of Political Science and International Studies at The University of Queensland.



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