



*Do We Really Need a Guide?*

During the last half of the twentieth century the world witnessed an extraordinary and unprecedented political change. All of the main alternatives to democracy either disappeared, turned into eccentric survivals, or retreated from the field to hunker down in their last strongholds. Earlier in the century the premodern enemies of democracy—centralized monarchy, hereditary aristocracy, oligarchy based on narrow and exclusive suffrage—had lost their legitimacy in the eyes of much of humankind. The main antidemocratic regimes of the twentieth century—communist, fascist, Nazi—disappeared in the ruins of calamitous war or, as in the Soviet Union, collapsed from within. Military dictatorships had been pretty thoroughly discredited by their failures, particularly in Latin America; where they managed to survive they often adopted a pseudo-democratic façade.

So had democracy at last won the contest for the support of people throughout the world? Hardly. Antidemocratic beliefs and movements continued, frequently associated with fanatical nationalism or religious fundamentalism. Democratic governments (with varying degrees of “democracy”) existed in fewer than half the countries of the world, which contained less than half the world’s population. One-fifth of the world’s people lived in China, which in its illustrious four thousand years of history had never experienced democratic government. In Russia, which had made the transition to democratic rule only in the last decade of the century, democracy

was fragile and weakly supported. Even in countries where democracy had long been established and seemed secure, some observers held that democracy was in crisis, or at least severely strained by a decline in the confidence of citizens that their elected leaders, the political parties, and government officials could or would cope fairly or successfully with issues like persistent unemployment, poverty, crime, welfare programs, immigration, taxation, and corruption.

Suppose we divide the nearly two hundred countries of the world into those with nondemocratic governments, those with new democratic governments, and those with long and relatively well established democratic governments. Admittedly, each group contains an enormously diverse set of countries. Yet our threefold simplification helps us to see that viewed from a democratic perspective each group faces a different challenge. For the nondemocratic countries, the challenge is whether and how they can make the *transition* to democracy. For the newly democratized countries, the challenge is whether and how the new democratic practices and institutions can be strengthened or, as some political scientists would say, *consolidated*, so that they will withstand the tests of time, political conflict, and crisis. For the older democracies, the challenge is to perfect and *deepen* their democracy.

At this point, however, you might well ask: Just what do we mean by democracy? What distinguishes a democratic government from a nondemocratic government? If a nondemocratic country makes the transition to democracy, what is the transition *to*? When can we tell whether it has made the transition? As to consolidating democracy, what, exactly, is consolidated? And what can it mean to speak of deepening democracy in a democratic country? If a country is already a democracy, how can it become more democratic? And so on.

Democracy has been discussed off and on for about twenty-five hundred years, enough time to provide a tidy set of ideas about

democracy on which everyone, or nearly everyone, could agree. For better or worse, that is not the case.

The twenty-five centuries during which democracy has been discussed, debated, supported, attacked, ignored, established, practiced, destroyed, and then sometimes reestablished have not, it seems, produced agreement on some of the most fundamental questions about democracy.

Ironically, the very fact that democracy has such a lengthy history has actually contributed to confusion and disagreement, for “democracy” has meant different things to different people at different times and places. Indeed, during long periods in human history democracy disappeared in practice, remaining barely alive as an idea or a memory among a precious few. Until only two centuries ago—let’s say ten generations—history was very short on actual examples of democracies. Democracy was more a subject for philosophers to theorize about than an actual political system for people to adopt and practice. And even in the rare cases where a “democracy” or a “republic” actually existed, most adults were not entitled to participate in political life.

Although in its most general sense democracy is ancient, the form of democracy I shall be mainly discussing in this book is a product of the twentieth century. Today we have come to assume that democracy must guarantee virtually every adult citizen the right to vote. Yet until about four generations ago—around 1918, or the end of the First World War—in every independent democracy or republic that had ever existed up to then, a good half of all adults had always been excluded from the full rights of citizenship. These were, of course, women.

Here, then, is an arresting thought: if we accept universal adult suffrage as a requirement of democracy, there would be some persons in practically every democratic country who would be older than their democratic system of government. Democracy

in our modern sense may not be exactly youthful, but it is hardly ancient.

You might object at once: Wasn't the United States a democracy from the American Revolution onward—a "democracy in a republic," as Abraham Lincoln called it? Didn't the illustrious French writer Alexis de Tocqueville, after visiting the United States in the 1830s, call his famous work *Democracy in America*? And didn't the Athenians call their system a democracy in the fifth century B.C.E.? What was the Roman republic, if not some kind of democracy? If "democracy" has meant different things at different times, how can we possibly agree on what it means today?

Once started, you might persist: Why is democracy desirable anyway? And just how democratic is "democracy" in countries that we call democracies today: the United States, Britain, France, Norway, Australia, and many others? Further, is it possible to explain why these countries are "democratic" and many others are not? The questions could go on and on.

The answer to the question in the title of this chapter, then, is pretty clear. If you are interested in searching for answers to some of the most basic questions about democracy, a guide can help.

Of course, during this short tour you won't find answers to all the questions you might like to ask. To keep our journey relatively brief and manageable, we shall have to bypass innumerable paths that you might feel should be explored. They probably should be, and I hope that by the end of our tour you will undertake to explore them on your own. To help you do so, at the end of the book I'll provide a brief list of relevant works for further reading on your part.

Our journey begins at the beginning: the origins of democracy.

PART I *The Beginning*



## CHAPTER 2

### *Where and How Did Democracy Develop?*

#### A BRIEF HISTORY

I started, you remember, by saying that democracy has been discussed off and on for twenty-five hundred years. Is democracy really that old, you might wonder? Many Americans, and probably others as well, might believe that democracy began two hundred years ago in the United States. Others, aware of its classical roots, would claim ancient Greece or Rome. Just where did it begin and how did it evolve?

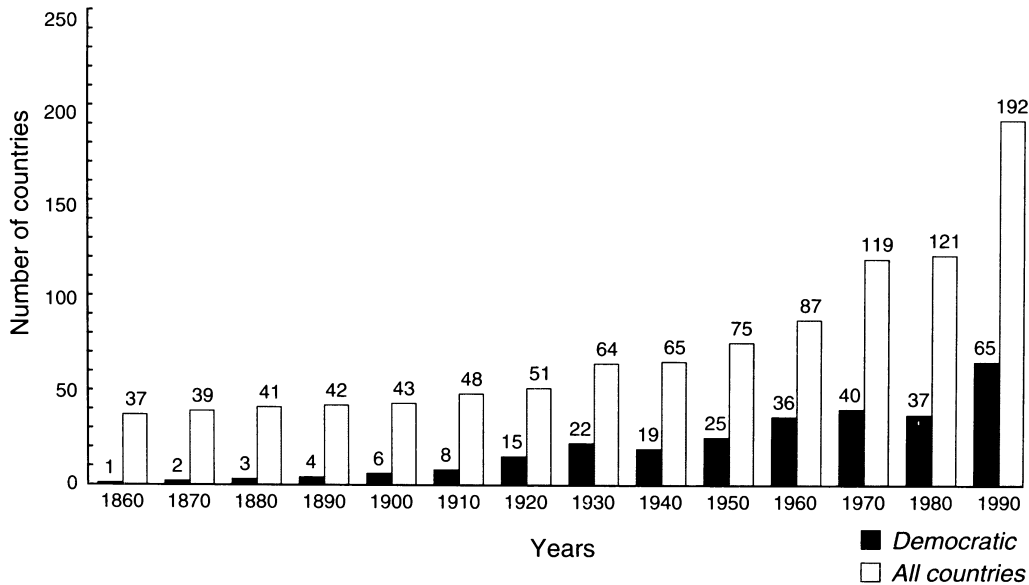
It might please us to see democracy as more or less continuously advancing from its invention, so to speak, in ancient Greece twenty-five hundred years ago and spreading gradually outward from that tiny beginning to the present day, when it has reached every continent and a substantial portion of humanity.

A pretty picture but false for at least two reasons.

First, as everyone acquainted with European history knows, after its early centuries in Greece and Rome the rise of popular government turned into its decline and disappearance. Even if we were to allow ourselves considerable latitude in deciding what governments we would count as “popular,” “democratic,” or “republican,” their rise and decline could not be portrayed as a steady upward climb to the distant summit, punctuated only by brief descents here and there. Instead the course of democratic history would look like the path of a traveler crossing a flat and almost endless desert broken by



FIGURE 1. *Democratic countries (those with male or full suffrage), 1850–1995*



only a few hills, until the path finally begins the long climb to its present heights (fig. 1).

In the second place, it would be a mistake to assume that democracy was just invented once and for all, as, for example, the steam engine was invented. When anthropologists and historians find that similar tools or practices have appeared in different times and places, they generally want to know how these separate appearances came about. Did the tools or practices spread by means of diffusion from its original inventors to the other groups, or instead were they independently invented by different groups? Finding an answer is often difficult, perhaps impossible. So too with the development of democracy in the world. How much of its spread is to be explained simply by its diffusion from its early sources and how much, if any, by its having been independently invented in different times and places?

Although with democracy the answer is surrounded by a good deal of uncertainty, my reading of the historical record is in essence this: some of the expansion of democracy—perhaps a good deal of it—can be accounted for mainly by the diffusion of democratic ideas and practices, but diffusion cannot provide the whole explanation. Like fire, or painting or writing, democracy seems to have been invented more than once, and in more than one place. After all, if the conditions were favorable for the invention of democracy at one time and place (in Athens, say, about 500 B.C.E.), might not similar favorable conditions have existed elsewhere?

I assume that democracy can be independently invented and reinvented whenever the appropriate conditions exist. And the appropriate conditions have existed, I believe, at different times and in different places. Just as a supply of tillable land and adequate rainfall have generally encouraged the development of agriculture, so certain favorable conditions have always supported a tendency toward the development of a democratic government. For example,