because of favorable conditions some form of democracy probably existed for tribal governments long before recorded history.

Consider this possibility: Certain people, we'll assume, make up a fairly well-bounded group—"we" and "they," ourselves and others, my people and their people, my tribe and other tribes. In addition, let's assume that the group—the tribe, let's say—is fairly independent of control by outsiders; the members of tribe can, so to speak, more or less run their own show without interference by outsiders. Finally, let's assume that a substantial number of the members of the group, perhaps the tribal elders, see themselves as about equal in being well qualified to have a say in governing the group. In these circumstances, democratic tendencies are, I believe, likely to arise. A push toward democratic participation develops out of what we might call *the logic of equality.*

Over the long period when human beings lived together in small groups and survived by hunting game and collecting roots, fruits, berries, and other offerings of nature, they would no doubt have sometimes, perhaps usually, developed a system in which a good many of the members animated by the logic of equality—the older or more experienced ones, anyway—participated in whatever decisions they needed to make as a group. That such was indeed the case is strongly suggested by studies of nonliterate tribal societies. For many thousands of years, then, some form of primitive democracy may well have been the most "natural" political system.

We know, however, that this lengthy period came to an end. When human beings began to settle down for long stretches of time in fixed communities, primarily for agriculture and trade, the kinds of circumstances favorable to popular participation in government that I just mentioned—group identity, little outside interference, an assumption of equality—seem to have become rare. Forms of hierarchy and domination came to be more "natural." As a result, popular governments vanished among settled people for thousands of

years. They were replaced by monarchies, despotisms, aristocracies, or oligarchies, all based on some form of ranking or hierarchy.

Then around 500 B.C.E. in several places favorable conditions seem to have reappeared and a few small groups of people began to develop systems of government that provided fairly extensive opportunities to participate in group decisions. Primitive democracy, one might say, was reinvented in a more advanced form. The most crucial developments occurred in Europe, three along the Mediterranean coast, others in Northern Europe.

THE MEDITERRANEAN

It was in classical Greece and Rome around 500 B.C.E. that systems of government providing for popular participation by a substantial number of citizens were first established on foundations so solid that, with occasional changes, they endured for centuries.

Greece. Classical Greece was not a country in our modern sense, a place in which all Greeks lived within a single state with a single government. Instead, Greece was composed of several hundred independent cities, each with its surrounding countryside. Unlike the United States, France, Japan, and other modern countries, the so-called nation-states or national states that have *largely* dominated the modern world, the sovereign states of Greece were city-states. The most famous city-state, in classical times and after, was Athens. In 507 B.C.E. the Athenians adopted a system of popular government that lasted nearly two centuries, until the city was subjugated by its more powerful neighbor to the north, Macedonia. (After 321 B.C.E. the Athenian government limped along under Macedonian control for generations; then the city was subjugated again, this time by the Romans.)

It was the Greeks—probably the Athenians—who coined the term *democracy,* or *demokratia,* from the Greek words *demos,* the people, and *kratos,* to rule. It is interesting, by the way, that while in

Athens the word *demos* usually referred to the entire Athenian people, sometimes it meant only the common people or even just the poor. The word *democracy,* it appears, was sometimes used by its aristocratic critics as a kind of epithet, to show their disdain for the common people who had wrested away the aristocrats' previous control over the government. In any case, *democratia* was applied specifically by Athenians and other Greeks to the government of Athens and of many other cities in Greece as well.[1]

Among the Greek democracies, that of Athens was far and away the most important, the best known then and today, of incomparable influence on political philosophy, and often held up later as a prime example of citizen participation or, as some would say, participatory democracy.

The government of Athens was complex, too complex to describe adequately here. At its heart and center was an *assembly* in which all citizens were entitled to participate. The assembly elected a few key officials—generals, for example, odd as that may seem to us. But the main method for selecting citizens for the other public duties was by a lottery in which eligible citizens stood an equal chance of being selected. According to some estimates, an ordinary citizen stood a fair chance of being chosen by lot once in his lifetime to serve as the most important presiding officer in the government.

Although some Greek cities joined in forming rudimentary representative governments for their alliances, leagues, and confederacies (primarily for common defense), little is known about these representative systems. They left virtually no impress on democratic ideas and practices and none, certainly, on the later form of representative democracy. Nor did the Athenian system of selecting citizens for public duties by lot ever become an acceptable alternative to elections as a way of choosing representatives.

Thus the *political institutions* of Greek democracy, innovative though they had been, in their time, were ignored or even re-

jected outright during the development of modern representative democracy.

Rome. About the time that popular government was introduced in Greece, it also made its appearance on the Italian peninsula in the city of Rome. The Romans, however, chose to call their system a republic, from *res,* meaning thing or affair in Latin, and *publicus,* public: loosely rendered, a republic was the thing that belonged to the people. (I'll come back to these two words, democracy and republic.)

The right to participate in governing the Republic was at first restricted to the patricians, or aristocrats. But in a development that we shall encounter again, after much struggle the common people (the *plebs,* or plebeians) also gained entry. As in Athens, the right to participate was restricted to men, just as it was also in all later democracies and republics until the twentieth century.

From its beginnings as a city of quite modest size, the Roman Republic expanded by means of annexation and conquest far beyond the old city's boundaries. As a result, the Republic came to rule over all of Italy and far beyond. What is more, the Republic often conferred Roman citizenship, which was highly valued, on the conquered peoples, who thus became not mere subjects but Roman citizens fully entitled to a citizen's rights and privileges.

Wise and generous as this gift was, if we judge Rome from today's perspective we discover an enormous defect: Rome never adequately adapted its institutions of popular government to the huge increase in the number of its citizens and their great geographical distances from Rome. Oddly, from our present point of view, the assemblies in which Roman citizens were entitled to participate continued meeting, as before, within the city of Rome—in the very Forum that tourists still see today, in ruins. But for most Roman citizens living in the far-flung territory of the Republic, the city was too far away to attend, at least without extraordinary effort and

expense. Consequently, an increasing and ultimately overwhelming number of citizens were, as a practical matter, denied the opportunity to participate in the citizen assemblies at the center of the Roman system of government. It was rather as if American citizenship had been conferred on the people in the various states as the country expanded, even though the people in the new states could only exercise their right to vote in national elections by showing up in Washington, D.C.

A highly creative and practical people in many respects, the Romans never invented or adopted a solution that seems obvious to us today: a workable system of *representative* government based on *democratically elected* representatives.

Before we jump to the conclusion that the Romans were less creative or capable than we are, let us remind ourselves that innovations and inventions to which we have grown accustomed often seem so obvious to us that we wonder why our predecessors did not introduce them earlier. Most of us readily take things for granted that at an earlier time remained to be discovered. So, too, later generations may wonder how *we* could have overlooked certain innovations that they will take for granted. Because of what *we* take for granted might not we, like the Romans, be insufficiently creative in reshaping our political institutions?

Although the Roman Republic endured considerably longer than the Athenian democracy and longer than any modern democracy has yet endured, it was undermined after about 130 B.C.E. by civil unrest, war, militarization, corruption, and a decline in the sturdy civic spirit that had previously existed among its citizens. What little remained of authentic republican practices perished with the dictatorship of Julius Caesar. After his assassination in 44 B.C.E., a republic once governed by its citizens became an empire ruled by its emperors.

With the fall of the Republic, popular rule entirely disappeared in

southern Europe. Except for the political systems of small, scattered tribes it vanished from the face of the earth for nearly a thousand years.

Italy. Like an extinct species reemerging after a massive climatic change, popular rule began to reappear in many of the cities of northern Italy around 1100 C.E. Once again it was in relatively small city-states that popular governments developed, not in large regions or countries. In a pattern familiar in Rome and later repeated during the emergence of modern representative governments, participation in the governing bodies of the city-states was at first restricted to members of upper-class families: nobles, large landowners, and the like. But in time, urban residents who were lower in the socioeconomic scale began to demand the right to participate. Members of what we today would call the middle classes—the newly rich, the smaller merchants and bankers, the skilled craftsmen organized in guilds, the footsoldiers commanded by the knights—were not only more numerous than the dominant upper classes but also capable of organizing themselves. What is more, they could threaten violent uprisings, and if need be carry them out. As a result, in many cities people like these—the *popolo,* as they were sometimes called—gained the right to participate in the government of the city.

For two centuries and more these republics flourished in a number of Italian cities. A good many republics were, like Florence and Venice, centers of extraordinary prosperity, exquisite craftsmanship, superb art and architecture, unexcelled urban design, magnificent poetry and music, and an enthusiastic rediscovery of the ancient world of Greece and Rome. What later generations were to call the Middle Ages came to a close, and that incredible outburst of brilliant creativity, the Renaissance, arrived.

Unhappily for the development of democracy, however, after about the mid-1300s the republican governments of some of the major cities increasingly gave way to the perennial enemies of popular

government: economic decline, corruption, oligarchy, war, conquest, and seizure of power by authoritarian rulers, whether princes, monarchs, or soldiers. Nor was that all. Viewed in the longer sweep of historical trends, the city-state was doomed as a foundation for popular government by the emergence of a rival with overwhelmingly superior forces: the national state or country. Towns and cities were destined to be incorporated into this larger and more powerful entity, thus becoming, at most, subordinate units of government.

Glorious as it had been, the city-state was obsolete.

Words About Words

You may have noticed that I have referred to "popular governments" in Greece, Rome, and Italy. To designate their popular governments, the Greeks, as we saw, invented the term *democracy.* The Romans drew on their native Latin and called their government a "republic," and later the Italians gave that name to the popular governments of some of their city-states. You might well wonder whether *democracy* and *republic* refer to fundamentally different types of constitutional systems. Or instead do the two words just reflect differences in the languages from which they originally came?

The correct answer was obfuscated by James Madison in 1787 in an influential paper he wrote to win support for the newly proposed American constitution. One of the principal architects of that constitution and a statesman exceptionally well informed in the political science of his time, Madison distinguished between "a pure democracy, by which I mean a society consisting of a small number of citizens, who assemble and administer the government in person," and a "republic, by which I mean a government in which the scheme of representation takes place."

This distinction had no basis in prior history: neither in Rome nor, for example, in Venice was there "a scheme of representa-

tion." Indeed, the earlier republics all pretty much fit into Madison's definition of a "democracy." What is more, the two terms were used interchangeably in the United States during the eighteenth century. Nor is Madison's distinction found in a work by the well-known French political philosopher Montesquieu, whom Madison greatly admired and frequently praised. Madison himself would have known that his proposed distinction had no firm historical basis, and so we must conclude that he made it to discredit critics who contended that the proposed constitution was not sufficiently "democratic."

However that may be (the matter is unclear), the plain fact is that the words *democracy* and *republic* did not (despite Madison) designate differences in types of popular government. What they reflected, at the cost of later confusion, was a difference between Greek and Latin, the languages from which they came.

NORTHERN EUROPE

Whether called democracies or republics, the systems of popular government in Greece, Rome, and Italy all lacked several of the crucial characteristics of modern representative government. Classical Greece as well as medieval and Renaissance Italy were composed of popular local governments but lacked an effective national government. Rome had, so to speak, just one local government based on popular participation but no national parliament of elected representatives.

From today's perspective, conspicuously absent from all these systems were at least three basic political institutions: *a national parliament* composed of *elected representatives,* and *popularly chosen local governments* that were ultimately subordinate to the national government. A system combining democracy at local levels with a popularly elected parliament at the top level had yet to be invented.

This combination of political institutions originated in Britain, Scandinavia, the Lowlands, Switzerland, and elsewhere north of the Mediterranean.

Although the patterns of political development diverged widely among these regions, a highly simplified version would look something like this. In various localities freemen and nobles would begin to participate directly in local assemblies. To these were added regional and national assemblies consisting of representatives, some or all of whom would come to be *elected.*

Local assemblies. I begin with the Vikings, not only from sentiment, but also because their experience is little known though highly relevant. I have sometimes visited the Norwegian farm about 80 miles northeast of Trondheim from which my paternal grandfather emigrated (and which to my delight is still known as Dahl Vestre, or West Dahl). In the nearby town of Steinkjer you can still see a boat-shaped ring of large stones where Viking freemen regularly met from about 600 C.E. to 1000 C.E. to hold an adjudicative assembly called in Norse a *Ting.* (Incidentally, the English word *thing* is derived from an Old English word meaning both thing and assembly.) Similar places, some even older, can be found elsewhere in the vicinity.

By 900 C.E., assemblies of free Vikings were meeting not just in the Trondheim region but in many other areas of Scandinavia as well. As in Steinkjer the Ting was typically held in an open field marked off by large vertical stones. At the meeting of the Ting the freemen settled disputes; discussed, accepted, and rejected laws; adopted or turned down a proposed change of religion (as they did when they accepted Christianity in place of the old Norse religion); and even elected or gave their approval to a king—who was often required to swear his faithfulness to the laws approved by the Ting.

The Vikings knew little or nothing, and would have cared less, about the democratic and republican political practices a thousand