

## **BAD MOONS, LITTLE DREAMS**

*Time present and time past*

*Are both perhaps present in time future*

*And time future contained in time past.*

T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', Four Quartets (1936)

History is often said to be a catalogue of human sorrows, an unending story of bootlicking, a slaughterhouse of crimes. It is not always so. The mould of cruel servitude can be shattered, as happened 2600 years ago, when Greeks living on the south-eastern fringes of Europe laid claim to an invention that now ranks in historical importance with the wheel, the printing press, the steam engine and the cloning of stem cells. Born of resistance to tyranny, their claimed invention at first caused no great stir. Few spotted its novelty. Some condemned it for bringing chaos into the world. Nobody predicted its universal appeal. It seemed simply to be part of the great cycle of human affairs - yet one more example of power struggles among foes. The invention was soon to be seen differently. It was to magnetise millions and to arouse passions on a world scale, understandably so, since it required human beings to picture themselves afresh, to live as they had never before lived. The invention was a potent form of wishful thinking that is still with us today: the Greeks called it *dēmokratia*.

Wishful thinking - the longing to bend the present world into a different and better future - is often mocked, but the plain fact is that it is a regular feature of the human condition. Whenever we refer to the world around us in language, we habitually allude to things that are absent. We conjecture, we say things that miss the mark, or that express yearnings for things to be other than they are. We live by our illusions. The language through which we speak is an unending series of short little dreams, in the course of which we sometimes fashion new ways of saying things, using words that are remarkably apposite, and strangely inspiring to others. The feminine noun *dēmokratia* was one of those tiny terms that sprang from a little dream, with grand effect. It was to rouse many millions of people in all four corners of the world - and give them a hand in getting a grip on their world by changing it in ways so profound that they remain undervalued, or misunderstood. In contrast to things whose names immortalise their inventors - newtons, Hoovers, Rubik's Cubes for example - democracy has no known wordsmith. The roots of the family of terms that make up the language of democracy, and exactly where and when the word was first used, remain a mystery. Democracy carefully guards her secrets. Through the fog of the past

only random clues appear, in the guise of wild-looking, ungroomed figures bearing suggestive names like Demonax of Mantinea, the bearded, robed, sandals-shod lawmaker who was summoned (around 550 BCE) by the women of the Oracle of Delphi to grant the people of Cyrene, a Greek-speaking farming town on the Libyan coast, the right to resist the tyranny of the limping, stuttering King Battus III, and the right to gather in their own assembly, to govern themselves, under their own laws.

Demonax may have been among the first public figures to describe himself as a friend of democracy, but we cannot be sure. Not one of his writings or speeches or laws has survived. That makes him a fitting symbol of the way democracy carefully guards her own mysteries against those who think they know her every way. The subject of democracy is full of enigmas, confusions, things that are supposed to be true. It harbours not a few surprises, including the certainty - this book shows for the first time - that it was not a Greek invention. The belief that democracy is or could be a universal Western value, a gift of Europe to the world, dies hard. That is why one of the first matters to be straightened out in any present-minded history of democracy is what might be described as the Greek plagiarism of democracy. The claim put forward within most Greek plays, poems and philosophical tracts, that fifth century Athens wins the prize for creating both the idea and the practice of democracy, seemed plausible to contemporaries. It continues until this day to be repeated by most observers. But it is false.

The Life and Death of Democracy, the first attempt to write a life and times of democracy for well over a century, shows that the little word democracy is much older than classical Greek commentators made out. Its roots are in fact traceable to the Linear B script of the Mycenaean period, seven to ten centuries earlier, to the late Bronze Age civilisation (c. 1500-1200 BCE) that was centred on Mycenae and other urban settlements of the Peloponnese. It is unclear exactly how and when the Mycenaeans learned to use the two-syllable word *dâmos*, to refer to a group of powerless people who once held land in common, or three-syllable words like *damokoi*, meaning an official who acts on behalf of the *dâmos*. What is also unclear is whether these words, and the family of terms we use today when speaking about democracy, have origins further east, for instance in the ancient Sumerian references to the *dumu*, the 'inhabitants' or 'sons' or 'children' of a geographic place. But these uncertainties are tempered by another remarkable discovery by contemporary archaeologists: it turns out that the democratic practice of self-governing assemblies is also not a Greek innovation. The lamp of assembly-based democracy was first lit in the 'East', in lands that geographically correspond to contemporary Syria, Iraq and Iran. The custom of popular self-government was later transported eastwards, towards the Indian subcontinent, where sometime after 1500 BCE, in the early Vedic period, republics governed by assemblies became common. The custom also travelled westwards, first to Phoenician cities like Byblos and Sidon, then to Athens, where during the fifth

century BCE it was claimed as something unique to the West, as a sign of its superiority over the 'barbarism' of the East.

Like gunpowder, print and other imports from afar, the arrival of popular assemblies and (later) the strange-sounding word *dēmokratia* in the region that today we call the West radically altered the course of history. It is even fair to say that it made history possible. For understood simply as people governing themselves, democracy implied something that continues to have a radical bite: it supposed that humans could invent and use institutions specially designed to allow them to decide for themselves, as equals, how they would live together on earth. The whole thing may seem rather straightforward to us, but think about it for a moment. The little dream that carried the big thought that mere mortals could organise themselves as equals into forums or assemblies, where they could pause to consider things, then decide on a course of action - democracy in this sense was a spine-tingling invention because it was in effect the first ever human form of government.

All government is of course 'human', in the simple sense that it is created, built up and operated by human beings. The exceptional thing about the type of government called democracy is that it demanded people see that nothing which is human is carved in stone, that everything is built on the shifting sands of time and place, and that therefore they would be wise to build and maintain ways of living together as equals, openly and flexibly. Democracy required that people see through talk of gods and nature and claims to privilege based on superiority of brain or blood. Democracy meant the denaturing of power. It implied that the most important political problem is how to prevent rule by the few, or by the rich or powerful who claim to be supermen. Democracy solved this old problem by standing up for a political order that ensured that the matter of who gets what, when and how should be permanently an open question. Democracy recognised that although people were not angels or gods or goddesses, they were at least good enough to prevent some humans from thinking they were. Democracy was to be government of the humble, by the humble, for the humble. It meant self-government among equals, the lawful rule of an assembly of people whose sovereign power to decide things was no longer to be given over to imaginary gods, the stentorian voices of tradition, to despots, to those in the know, or simply handed over to the everyday habit of laziness, unthinkingly allowing others to decide matters of importance.

Why should democracy in this sense still be of interest 2600 years later? Why bother writing or reading yet another history of the life and times of democracy? Such questions prompt a range of different answers, the first of which is the most straightforward. For those who relish the history of human inventions, *The Life and Death of Democracy* provides fresh details of the obscure origins of old institutions and ideals like government by public assembly, votes for women, the secret ballot, trial by jury, and parliamentary representation. Those curious

about these and other institutions of what we now call democracy - political parties, compulsory voting, judicial review, referenda, electoral colleges, civil society and civil liberties such as press freedom - will find much to interest them here. So, too, will those with a sense of wonder about the changing, often hotly disputed meanings of democracy, or the origins of its key terms, or the best jokes at its expense, or the cacophony of conflicting reasons that have been given for why it is a good thing.

Every page of this book (and the brief thoughts on history and democracy at its end) tries to hammer home the point that forgetting, or remembering the wrong things, is dangerous for democracy, and that things that seem timeless are never so. Take one simple example that actually turns out to be rather complicated: the language of elections, whose vocabulary resembles a magpie's nest constructed from different terms with disparate origins. The word 'election' stems from the old Latin meaning 'to choose; to pick out (from among several possibilities)'. The group term for those who can so choose, the 'electorate', is much more recent; its first recorded usage dates only from 1879. Before then, the word that everybody used was 'electors'. Their general entitlement to vote is nowadays called the 'franchise', but that word (in thirteenth-century English) originally meant 'freedom, exemption from servitude or domination'. Talk of the franchise later came to refer to the legal immunity to prosecution, only then to evolve into several new meanings, including the act of granting a right or privilege, as when a sovereign monarch granted exemption from arrest, or an 'elective franchise' (the right to vote) or, as in today's use of the word, to describe a licence granted by a business to someone to sell or trade its products within a given area. Then there are words like 'voting', a term from Latin (*votum*) that first entered the English language during the sixteenth century to mean 'to wish, or to vow', then was transformed in Scotland around 1600 to mean what it means today: the act of expressing a choice in an election. The word 'poll' is also used to describe the act of casting a vote. In its old Dutch and Germanic origins (and in several surviving dialects) it meant 'head'. During the last years of the sixteenth century, a poll came to refer to the brand-new practice, during an election, of conducting an actual head count of supporters. The invention had its detractors: 'to poll' also meant to cut the hair or behead a person or animal. The poll was, however, designed to put an end to the old corrupt practice of elections being decided by those supporters who shouted loudest in favour of their own 'candidate'. That word in turn stems from the days of the Roman republic, where the Latin word *candidatus* meant 'clothed in white'. It referred to political men who tried to draw attention to themselves by dressing up in white togas as part of their bid to become members of the Senate.

It goes without saying that connotations of whiteness and purity are today not normally associated with candidates for election. Equally strange are the connotations of blackness of election words like 'ballot' - a word that comes to us from the Italian *ballotta*, the little ball that is secretly placed in an urn or box when voting, which was exactly the meaning that members of eighteenth-

century gentlemen's clubs had in mind when they voted in secret to veto some proposal or other by placing a 'black ball' in a voting container, or 'ballot box'. 'Blackballing', meaning to reject or to vote against something or somebody, is an expression that we still sometimes associate with elections (as in the Citizens Alliance campaign against 'unfit' candidates in the National Assembly elections in Korea in 2000), but the small example of black and white balls is telling of a much bigger point: that the families of terms that make up the languages through which people know and experience democracy today are not timeless. Whether in Japan, Nigeria, Canada or Ukraine, the languages of democracy are profoundly historical.

The Life and Death of Democracy tries to remind the reader that every turn of phrase, every custom and every institution of democracy as we know it is time-bound. Democracy is not the timeless fulfilment of our political destiny. It is not a way of doing politics that has always been with us, or that will be our companion for the rest of human history. This book sets out to raise awareness of the brittle contingency of democracy, at a time when there are signs of mounting disagreement about its meaning, its efficacy and its desirability. Of course, democracy commonly refers to a special type of political system in which the people or their representatives lawfully govern themselves, rather than being governed, say, by a military dictatorship, totalitarian party or monarch. In recent decades, democracy in this sense has enjoyed unprecedented popularity. Democracy has become one of those English words - along with computer and OK - familiar to millions of people around the world. Some pundits speak of a global victory for democracy, or claim that democracy is now a universal good. Yet what the word means, and whether and why democracy is to be preferred over its rivals, continues to be disputed. Opinions remain divided about whether existing democracies like the United States, Britain, India or Argentina live up to their democratic ideals. These ideals are also controversial. The most common disagreement, a dispute that this book tries to settle, is between the advocates of 'participatory' or 'direct' democracy, understood as the participation of all citizens in decisions that affect their lives, for instance by voting and accepting a majority verdict; and those who favour 'indirect' or 'representative' democracy, a method of governing in which people choose, through voting and the public expression of their opinions, representatives who then decide things on their behalf.

### ***Assembly Democracy***

The beginning of wisdom in such disputes is to see that democracy, like all other human inventions, has a history. Democratic values and institutions are never set in stone; even the meaning of democracy changes through time. This point is fundamental to The Life and Death of Democracy, which singles out three

overlapping epochs in which democracy, considered both as a way of deciding things and as a whole way of life, has so far developed.

Its first historical phase saw the creation and diffusion of public assemblies. This period began around 2500 BCE, in the geographic area that is today commonly known as the Middle East. It stretched through classical Greece and Rome to include the world of early Islam before 950 CE; it came to an end with the spread of rural assemblies (called *tings*, *loegthingi* and *althingi*) to Iceland, the Faroe Islands and other offshore havens of what later came to be called Europe. Except for the bright moments associated with Scandinavia and classical Athens and republican Rome, this whole period is usually seen as a dark era of undemocratic degeneracy. 'With the fall of the [Roman] Republic,' says one respected commentator, typically, '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.'

That perception, steeped in modern Western prejudice, is piteously false. The truth is that during the first phase of democracy the seeds of its basic institution - self-government through an assembly of equals - were scattered across many different soils and climes, ranging from the Indian subcontinent and the prosperous Phoenician empire to the western shores of provincial Europe. These popular assemblies took root, accompanied by various ancillary institutional rules and customs, like written constitutions, the payment of jurors and elected officials, the freedom to speak in public, voting machines, voting by lot and trial before elected or selected juries. There were efforts as well to stop bossy leaders in their tracks, using such methods as the mandatory election of kings, limited terms of office and - in an age as yet without political parties, or recall and impeachment procedures - the peaceful, if usually rowdy, ostracism of demagogues from the assembly, by majority vote.

Many of these procedures played a vital role in the famous city of Athens, where, through the course of the fifth century BCE, democracy came to mean the lawful rule of an assembly of adult male citizens. Women, slaves and foreigners were normally excluded. The rest gathered regularly, not far from the main public square, at a spot called the *panyx*, for the purpose of discussing some matter or other, putting different opinions to the vote and deciding, often by a majority of raised hands, or by chunks of pottery or metal cast by hand into a pot, what was to be done. This first phase of democracy saw the earliest experiments in creating second chambers (called *damiorgoi* in some Greek citizen-states) and federated alliances or consortia of democratic governments coordinated through a joint assembly known as a *myrioi*, as happened among Greek-speaking Arcadians during the 360s BCE. This period also witnessed important efforts to create ways of being that would later be regarded as vital components of a democratic way of life. Many of these innovations happened in the Islamic world. They included a culture of printing and efforts to cultivate self-governing

associations, such as endowment societies (called the waqf) and the mosque and, in the field of economic life, partnerships that were legally independent of rulers. Islam poured scorn on kingship, and triggered unending public disputes about the authority of rulers. Towards the end of this period, around 950 CE, its scholars even revived the old language of democracy. The world of early Islam emphasised as well the importance of shared virtues such as toleration and mutual respect among sceptics and believers in the sacred, and the duty of rulers to respect others' interpretations of life. During this phase Muslims' belief that human beings were bound to treat nature with compassionate regard, as if it was their equal, because both were divine creations, also surfaced. That imperative would later come to trouble all democracies.

### ***Representative Democracy***

From around the tenth century CE, democracy entered a second historical phase whose centre of gravity was the Atlantic region - the watery geographic triangle that stretched from the shores of Europe across to Baltimore and New York down to Caracas, Montevideo and Buenos Aires. This period opened with the military resistance to Islamic civilisation in the Iberian peninsula, which during the twelfth century CE triggered the invention of parliamentary assemblies. It ended on a sorry note, with the near-destruction worldwide of democratic institutions and ways of life by the storms of mechanised war, dictatorship and totalitarian rule that racked the first half of the twentieth century. In between, extraordinary things happened.

Shaped by forces as varied as the rebirth of towns, religious struggles within the Christian Church and revolutions in the Low Countries (1581), England (1644), Sweden (1720) and America (1776), democracy came to be understood as representative democracy. This at least was the term that began to be used in France and England and the new American republic during the eighteenth century, for instance by constitution makers and influential political writers when referring to a new type of government with its roots in popular consent. Again, nobody knows who first spoke of 'representative democracy', though one political writer who broke new ground was a French nobleman who had been foreign minister under Louis XV, the Marquis d'Argenson. He was perhaps the first to tease out the new meaning of democracy as representation. 'False democracy soon collapses into anarchy', he wrote in a 1765 tract that reached the reading public posthumously. 'It is government of the multitude; such is a people in revolt, insolently scorning law and reason. Its tyrannical despotism is obvious from the violence of its movements and the uncertainty of its deliberations. In true democracy,' concluded d'Argenson, 'one acts through deputies, who are authorised by election; the mission of those elected by the people and the authority that such officials carry constitute the public power.'

This was a brand-new way of thinking about democracy. It referred to a type of government in which people, acting as voters faced with a genuine choice between at least two alternatives, are free to elect others who then act in defence of their interests: that is, represent them by deciding matters on their behalf. Much ink and blood were to be spilled in defining what exactly representation meant, who was entitled to represent whom, and what had to be done when representatives snubbed those whom they were supposed to represent. But common to the second historical phase of democracy was the belief that good government was government by representatives. Thomas Paine's intriguing remark, 'Athens, by representation, would have surpassed her own democracy', provides a vital clue to the entirely novel case for representative democracy that was made forcefully by late eighteenth-century publicists, constitution makers and citizens. Often contrasted with monarchy, representative democracy was praised as a way of governing better by openly airing differences of opinion - not only among the represented themselves, but also between representatives and those whom they are supposed to represent. Representative government was praised as a way of freeing citizens from the fear of leaders to whom power is entrusted; the elected representative temporarily 'in office' was seen as a positive substitute for power personified in the body of unelected monarchs and tyrants. Representative government was hailed as an effective new method of apportioning blame for poor political performance - a new way of encouraging the rotation of leadership, guided by merit and humility. It was thought of as a new form of humble government, a way of creating space for dissenting political minorities and levelling competition for power, which in turn enabled elected representatives to test their political competence and leadership skills, in the presence of others equipped with the power to sack them. The earliest champions of representative democracy also offered a more pragmatic justification of representation. It was seen as the practical expression of a simple reality: that it wasn't feasible for all of the people to be involved all of the time, even if they were so inclined, in the business of government. Given that reality, the people must delegate the task of government to representatives who are chosen at regular elections. The job of these representatives is to monitor the spending of public money. Representatives make representations on behalf of their constituents to the government and its bureaucracy. Representatives debate issues and make laws. They decide who will govern and how - on behalf of the people.

As a way of naming and handling power, representative democracy was an unusual type of political system. It rested upon written constitutions, independent judiciaries and laws that guaranteed procedures that still play vital roles in the democracies of today: inventions like habeas corpus (prohibitions upon torture and imprisonment), periodic election of candidates to legislatures, limited-term holding of political offices, voting by secret ballot, referendum and recall, electoral colleges, competitive political parties, ombudsmen, civil society and civil liberties such as the right to assemble in public, and liberty of the press. Compared with the previous, assembly-based form, representative democracy

greatly extended the geographic scale of institutions of self-government. As time passed, and despite its localised origins in towns, rural districts and large-scale imperial settings, representative democracy came to be housed mainly within territorial states protected by standing armies and equipped with powers to make and enforce laws and to extract taxes from their subject populations. These states were typically much bigger and more populous than the political units of ancient democracy. Most states of the Greek world of assembly democracy, Mantinea and Argos for instance, were no bigger than a few score square kilometres. Many modern representative democracies - including Canada (9.98 million square kilometres), the United States (9.63 million square kilometres), and the largest electoral constituency in the world, the vast rural division of Kalgoorlie in the federal state of Western Australia that comprises 82,000 voters scattered across an area of 2.3 million square kilometres - were incomparably larger.

The changes leading to the formation of representative democracy were neither inevitable nor politically uncontested. Representative democracy did not have to happen, but it did. It was born of numerous and different power conflicts, many of them bitterly fought in opposition to ruling groups, whether they were Church hierarchies, landowners, monarchs or imperial armies, often in the name of 'the people'. Exactly who 'the people' were was a vexed point that produced much mayhem. The age of representation witnessed not only a remarkable revival of the old language of democracy. The word itself was given new meanings that would have struck ancient observers either as oxymoronic or as plain nonsense. The second age of democracy saddled itself with new epithets. There was talk of 'aristocratic democracy' (that first happened in the Low Countries, at the end of the sixteenth century) and new references (beginning in the United States) to 'republican democracy'. Later came 'social democracy' and 'liberal democracy' and 'Christian democracy', even 'bourgeois democracy', 'workers' democracy' and 'socialist democracy'. These new terms corresponded to the many kinds of struggles by groups for equal access to governmental power that resulted, sometimes by design and sometimes by simple accident or unintended consequence, in institutions and ideals and ways of life that had no precedent. Written constitutions based on a formal separation of powers, periodic elections and competing parties and different electoral systems were new. So too was the invention of 'civil societies' founded on new social habits and customs - experiences as varied as dining in a public restaurant, playing sport or controlling one's temper by using polite language - and new associations that citizens used to keep an arm's length from government by using non-violent weapons like liberty of the printing press, publicly circulated petitions, and covenants and constitutional conventions called to draft new constitutions. Municipal government flourished in some quarters. A culture of citizenship rights and duties was born. Remarkably, this period also spawned - in the cooperative and workers' movements in the Atlantic region, for instance - the first talk of 'international democracy'.

The age of representation unleashed what the French writer and politician Alexis de Tocqueville famously called a 'great democratic revolution' in favour of political and social equality. Spreading from the Atlantic triangle, this revolution often suffered setbacks and reversals, especially in Europe, where it was mainly to collapse in the early decades of the twentieth century. The democratic revolution was fuelled by rowdy struggles and breathtaking acts, such as the public execution in England of King Charles I. Such events called into question the anti-democratic prejudices of those - the rich and powerful - who supposed that inequalities among people were 'natural'. New groups, like slaves, women and workers, won the franchise. The formal abolition of slavery marked off this period from the world of assembly democracy, which often rested on slavery. At least on paper, representation was eventually democratized, stretched to include all of the population, at least in those countries where it was attempted. But such stretching happened with great difficulty, and against great odds. Even then it was permanently on trial; in more than a few cases, the United States and Spanish American countries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included, the definition of representation was actually narrowed by withdrawing the right to vote from certain groups, particularly black and poor and indigenous people. Not until the very end of this second phase - during the early decades of the twentieth century - did the right to vote for representatives come to be seen as a universal entitlement. That happened first for adult men and later - usually much later - for all adult women. But even then, as the experiences of totalitarianism and military dictatorship were to show, the opponents of democratic representation fought hard and with considerable success against its perceived inefficiencies, its fatal flaws and supposed evils. They demonstrated that democracy in any form was not inevitable - that it had no built-in historical guarantees.

### ***Monitory Democracy***

What is happening to democracy as we know and experience it today? Do the world's democracies have a rosy future? Are they suffering decline, or transformation into something that resembles 'post-democracy'? Does democracy remain a viable and desirable way of life? Or is it destined to join the dodo, the forests of Easter Island and our polar ice caps in the land of extinction?

What gives these questions such pique and prescience is the incompleteness of present-day democracies. They resemble an experiment whose final results have yet to be tabulated. When looking at where democracies around the world may be heading, *The Life and Death of Democracy* plays the role of time's advocate. It sets out to sharpen our sense that the history of democracy is still being made as the world's clocks tick, as each sunrise gives way to each new sunset. It does this by sketching, through the eyes of an imaginary historian writing fifty years from

now, the ideas, characters, events and institutions that together have been powerfully shaping the fortunes of democracy for some decades. This story-telling technique involves looking back on our times from a point in a distant, fabled future. It calls on readers to imagine what a sober observer of our age will in future say about us. It is, of course, only one way of looking at present-day trends. But by making our own times feel a bit more distant from us, it offers the advantage of training our minds on things that we may not have seen. It challenges us to consider trends that may be genuinely new, or deeply threatening - and poorly understood, or wholly overlooked.

The technique of putting imaginary eyes in the back of our heads, so that we can look on our times half a century from now, prompts us to scrutinise differently the worldwide rebirth of democratic politics that took place immediately after World War Two. The grand renaissance was not the product of the 1974 carnation revolution in Portugal, or the 1989 velvet revolutions in central-eastern Europe, as is still commonly thought. It is a process much older than that, and it is by no means finished, even though it has already pushed democracy beyond familiar horizons, into unfamiliar territory. The most obvious development is that democracy has become a global force. For the first time in history, not only are the language and ideals and institutions of democracy becoming familiar to people living within most regions of the earth, regardless of their nationality, religion or civilisation. And not only is there new talk of 'global democracy', as well as references to democracy as a 'universal value' (to repeat the words of the Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen). For the first time, racial and xenophobic prejudice has begun to be extracted from the ideals of democracy, such that many democrats around the world now find themselves embarrassed or angered by talk of 'backward', 'uncivilised' or 'naturally inferior' people - which is how they commonly talked well into the fateful decade of the 1930s.

The climate change in favour of democracy is certainly impressive. Since the end of World War Two, dictators everywhere have been battered by bad weather, the force of which can be measured by rereading the classic American novel *Democracy*, written in the late nineteenth century by Henry Adams. Its heroine, Madeleine Lee, finds herself fed up with the corrupting effects of power struggles, intrigues and general wheeling and dealing in Washington, DC. 'Democracy has shaken my nerves to pieces', she says, resigned, with a deep sigh. 'I want to go to Egypt.' Within the new era of democracy, under pressure from a great global democratic revolution, not even countries like Egypt are today safe havens for those afraid or sick of democracy. After devastating setbacks during the first half of the twentieth century - in 1941 there were only eleven democracies left on the face of the earth - democracy has bounced back from oblivion. It survived aerial bombing and threats of military invasion and economic and moral collapse in countries like Britain, the United States and New Zealand. Against amazing odds, it took root in India, where the world's first ever large-scale democracy was successfully created with the support of materially

impoverished peoples of multiple faiths, many different languages and low rates of literacy. Democratic ideals and ways of life came to southern Africa and resurfaced in parts of Latin America and throughout central-eastern Europe. For the first time in its history, democracy became a global political language. Its dialects are now spoken on every continent, in countries as different as India, Egypt, Australia, Argentina and Kenya. Struggles for democracy have erupted in the least likely places. In the early years of the twenty-first century, there was a cedar revolution in Lebanon, a rose revolution in Georgia, an orange revolution in Ukraine. The spirits of democracy came alive in Japan and Mongolia, Taiwan and South Korea. They even stalked the halls and passageways of China, Burma and North Korea, and knocked loudly on their bolted doors.

The aggregate worldwide trends in favour of what loosely passes for democracy have been so striking that one influential report (produced by Freedom House) even speaks of the twentieth century as the Democratic Century. It points out that in 1900, monarchies and empires predominated. There were no states that allowed universal suffrage and multi-party elections; there were merely a few handfuls of 'restricted democracies', only twenty-five of them, accounting for just one-eighth of the world's population. By 1950, with the military defeat of Nazism, and with decolonisation and post-war reconstruction under way in Europe and Japan, there were twenty-two democracies. They were home to nearly a third of the world's population. By the end of the twentieth century, the report notes, 119 countries (out of a total of 192) could be described as 'electoral democracies', with eighty-five of them - 38 per cent of the world's inhabitants - enjoying forms of democracy 'respectful of basic human rights and the rule of law'. The report says that democracy is now within reach of the entire world. 'In a very real sense', runs the conclusion, 'the twentieth century has become the "Democratic Century".' It adds: 'A growing global human rights and democratic consciousness is reflected in the expansion of democratic practices and in the extension of the democratic franchise to all parts of the world and to all major civilizations and religions.'

The conclusion of the report flirted with the art of seduction. It cleverly tapped the prevailing common-sense view that ordinary people, and not dictators supposing themselves to be extra-ordinary people, should rule; and by dressing up its definitions and concealing its methods, the report tried to prove that all the evidence now pointed to a global victory for representative democracy. The Life and Death of Democracy takes a radically different, more down-to-earth view of where democracy is heading. By putting things into a longer historical perspective, and by using different definitions and a more nuanced framework of interpretation, it proposes that present-day trends are quite different from, more contradictory and certainly much more interesting than has been supposed by far-fetched - and short-sighted - reports of the Freedom House kind.

So if glib exultations of its success are not in order, what is actually happening to democracy? It is true that during the past seventy years democracy, considered as both fact and ideal, has become more powerful and popular than at any moment since it began as a wishful thought in ancient Syria-Mesopotamia, Phoenicia and the cities of Mycenae and the Greek world. Contemporary democracies, led by the United States, have come to exert world power and world influence. The 'democracy club' (the alliance of democratic states first proposed by the former United States Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright) has together put the name of democracy on the map, and on trial, in all four corners of the earth. The number of democratic states has more than doubled in a generation. During this third era of democracy, dictators, who seldom need pretexts, have everywhere dressed up in democratic clothes. Forced to bow to fashion, most of them - Hu Jintao, Vladimir Putin, Colonel Gaddafi and Lee Kuan Yew for instance - claimed to be democrats, all the while using the language of democracy to cover their tracks. Meanwhile, following the collapse of communism, all the older democracies, including those like Germany that had once slipped into ruin, managed to keep out of trouble. That country in fact played an important role in the creation of the European Union, the world's leading experiment in regional integration, a new multi-layered political community that is itself committed, amidst much controversy among citizens and frequent confusion among policy makers about the appropriate rules and regulations, to the principle and practice of fashioning cross-border democratic structures, some of them without precedent in the history of democracy.

The European experiment with extending democracy across borders is a fitting symbol of another trend within the world of actually existing democracy. It is a most striking trend, in which the basic institutions and legitimating spirit of representative democracy have been undergoing major permutations for nearly a generation. In a striking departure from the normal way of seeing things, this book proposes that the era of representative democracy is passing away, that a new historical form of 'post-representative' democracy has been born, and is spreading throughout the world of democracy. One telling symptom of this historic change is the way democracy is nowadays defined and valued. Once seen as given by the grace of a deity, or by a God, or as founded on some other first principle, such as Man or History or Socialism or Truth - all detailed in the pages that follow - democracy is coming to be viewed much more pragmatically, as a handy and indispensable weapon for use against concentrations of unaccountable power, and their obnoxious effects. In the new era of democracy that is dawning, the word itself comes to have a new meaning: the public scrutiny and public control of decision makers, whether they operate in the field of state or interstate institutions, or within so-called non-governmental or civil society organisations, such as businesses, trade unions, sports associations and charities.

Other changes in the real world of democracy are happening as well. For some six decades now, assembly-based and representative mechanisms have been

mixed and combined with new ways of publicly monitoring and controlling the exercise of power. In the new era of democracy, representative forms of government do not simply wither, or disappear. It is mistaken to think that they are heading for oblivion, for the old representative mechanisms that operate within the framework of territorial states often survive, and in some countries they even thrive, sometimes (as in Mongolia, Taiwan and South Africa) for the first time ever. There are also plenty of efforts to revitalise the standard institutions of representative government, for instance by fostering civic interest in the work of politicians, parties and parliaments, as has been attempted during the past two decades in the clean-up and public accountability and civic involvement schemes (known as *machizukuri*) in Japanese cities such as Yokohama and Kawasaki. But for a variety of reasons that are traceable to the devastating effects of World War Two, and that now include mounting public pressure to reduce corruption and foolish abuses of power, representative democracy is morphing into a type of democracy radically different to that our grandparents may have been lucky to know. For compelling reasons that will become apparent, *The Life and Death of Democracy* christens the emerging historical form of democracy with a strange-sounding name: 'monitory democracy'.

What is meant by 'monitory democracy'? Why the word 'monitory', with its connotations of warning of an impending danger, admonishing others to act in certain ways, or checking the content or quality of something? A vital clue in responding to these questions and understanding the changes that are under way is this fact: the years since 1945 have seen the invention of about a hundred different types of power-monitoring devices that never before existed within the world of democracy. These watchdog and guide-dog and barking-dog inventions are changing both the political geography and the political dynamics of many democracies, which no longer bear much resemblance to textbook models of representative democracy, which supposed that citizens' needs are best championed through elected parliamentary representatives chosen by political parties. From the perspective of this book, the emerging historical form of 'monitory' democracy is a 'post-Westminster' form of democracy in which power-monitoring and power-controlling devices have begun to extend sideways and downwards through the whole political order. They penetrate the corridors of government and occupy the nooks and crannies of civil society, and in so doing they greatly complicate, and sometimes wrong-foot, the lives of politicians, parties, legislatures and governments. These extra-parliamentary power-monitoring institutions include - to mention at random just a few - public integrity commissions, judicial activism, local courts, workplace tribunals, consensus conferences, parliaments for minorities, public interest litigation, citizens' juries, citizens' assemblies, independent public inquiries, think-tanks, experts' reports, participatory budgeting, vigils, 'blogging' and other novel forms of media scrutiny.

All these devices have the effect of potentially bringing greater humility to the established model of party-led representative government and politics. The same humbling effect is reinforced by the spread of monitory mechanisms underneath and beyond state borders. Forums, summits, regional parliaments and human rights watch organisations, as well as open methods of cross-border negotiation and coordination (OMCs) and peer review panels, of the kind practised respectively by the member states of the European Union and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, all begin to play a role in shaping and determining the agendas of government, at every level.

Experiments with spreading democracy through the institutions of civil society, into areas of life beneath and beyond the institutions of territorial states, are also much in evidence, so that organisations like the International Olympic Committee, whose membership is otherwise self-selecting, are governed by executive bodies that are subject to election by secret ballot, by a majority of votes cast, for limited terms of office. With the help of a new galaxy of communication media, including satellite television, mobile phones and the Internet, the public monitoring of international organisations of government is also growing. Bodies such as the World Trade Organization, the United Nations, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) find themselves under permanent or intermittent scrutiny by their own legal procedures, by outside bodies, and by public protests. In the age of monitory democracy, loud calls for 'global democracy' can be heard. And for the first time ever, there are even creative efforts to 'green' democracy. Time and money and energy are invested in building bio-monitoring institutions geared to the principle of public scrutiny of those who exercise power over our biosphere, which in effect is granted a virtual vote, a right to be represented in human affairs. There are growing numbers of examples of these experiments in 'democratising' our interactions with the world of nature, in whose affairs we act as if we are an outlaw species, with criminal tendencies. Independent monitoring bodies responsible for whole geographic regions and civic organisations sponsored by friends and protectors of the earth are cases in point. So, too, are newly established independent science and technology assessment bodies. An example is the Danish Board of Technology, a body rooted in much older Danish traditions of public enlightenment through networks of adult education (folkeoplysning) but designed, in the new circumstances, to enable high-profile public consultation exercises, and to raise the level of parliamentary understanding of citizens' hopes and fears, in matters ranging from genetically modified food and stem cell research to nanotechnology and laboratory experimentation on animals.

### ***Bad Moons***

In contrast to those policy makers, activists and scholars who suppose that the fundamental choice facing contemporary democracies is that between accepting the terms of Westminster-style electoral democracy and the embrace of more

participatory forms of 'deep' and 'direct' democracy - in effect, a choice between embracing the present or returning to the imagined spirit of Athenian democracy - The Life and Death of Democracy carves out a third possibility, one that has much contemporary history on its side, an option, the growth of 'monitory democracy', that needs to be recognised for what it is: a brand-new historical form of democracy. All the trends towards monitory democracy described later in this book illustrate the pertinent points: that what we mean by democracy changes through time; that democratic institutions and ways of thinking are never set in stone; and that exactly because they are the most power-sensitive polities ever known to humanity, democracies are capable of democratising themselves, for instance by inventing new ways of ensuring equal and open public access of citizens and their representatives to all sorts of institutions previously untouched by the hand of democracy.

Proof positive of the pertinence of these points is the unexpected coming of democracy to India. At a time when most democracies had been wiped from the face of the earth, the invention of democracy there proved that dictatorship and totalitarianism were not politically necessary, as many insisted at the time. Indian democracy shot other goats of prejudice. Awash with poverty of heartbreaking proportions, millions of Indian citizens rejected the view of their British masters that a country must first be deemed economically fit for democracy. They decided instead to become economically fit through democracy, so proving that the humble could inherit the earth, that the 'law' of the survival of the politically strongest and economically fittest was by no means absolute.

The change was of epochal importance. It extended the hand of democracy globally, to potentially billions of people who had one thing in common: they were not European. India defied the prevailing rule that democracy could take root only where there was a *dêmos* bound together by a common culture. India proved just the opposite. It showed that self-government was needed to protect a lively, loquacious society, one brimming with different languages and cultures, and therefore different definitions of the polity itself. The result was democracy with a real difference. The country soon invented and harnessed a wide range of new devices for publicly monitoring and checking the exercise of power. Panchayat self-government at the local level, the empowerment of women, the rise of regional anti-caste parties headed by iridescent figures like Mayawati, non-violent civil resistance (*satyagraha*) and compulsory quotas for minority groups are among the best known. Others include participatory budgeting, 'yellow card' reports, railway courts, student elections, fast-track courts known as *lok adalats*, water consultation schemes and public interest litigation.

It is hard to find a political language for speaking about the long-term significance of these inventions. Certainly Indian politics bears little resemblance to either textbook accounts of representative democracy or to the parliament-

centred, Nehru-led Congress model of democracy, which after all supposed that citizens' needs were best championed through elected parliamentary representatives chosen by political parties. The Life and Death of Democracy shows that the sixty-year-old Asian democracy is not just the world's largest democracy - a convenient cliché - but also its most compound, turbulent and exciting prototype. Defined by various older and newer means of publicly monitoring and contesting power and representing citizens' interests, at all levels, it reinforces the conviction of this book that democracy can be improved by changing people's perceptions, and by humbling those who exercise power over others, and that the seeds of greater public accountability can be planted everywhere, from the bedroom and the boardroom to the battlefield.

But now it is time for the sceptic's question: how viable are all these different trends feeding the new age of monitory democracy? Can it survive either the mounting pressures on its institutions, or the efforts of its sceptics, critics and enemies to throw it into question, even to weaken or destroy outright its grip on the hearts and minds of many millions of people around the world?

The Life and Death of Democracy does not suppose that monitory democracy is leading us to paradise on earth. It pays attention to the way that trends in its favour are to a varying degree subject everywhere to counter-trends. It minces no words. It shows that democracy is nowadays plagued by market failures and social inequality. It is troubled by the visible decline of political party membership and, especially among young people and the disaffected poor, fluctuating turnout at elections and growing disrespect for 'politicians' and official 'politics', even boycotts and satirical campaigns against all parties and their candidates. Not for the first time in its history, but now with considerable venom, fun is understandably being poked into the face of democracy, as in this popular jibe from Japan: 'What's the best way to restore the public's faith in parties and governments?' asks a television chat-show presenter. 'The best way', answers a panellist, 'is first to let the political system collapse.' Whether and how democracies can adjust to the new world of campaign mega-advertising, organised lobbying, political 'spin' and corporate global media - the question of whether democracy might even disappear into the black holes of what in Italy and France are called 'videocracy' and 'telepopulism' - is proving equally challenging. Just as perplexing is the issue, felt strongly in countries as different as India, Taiwan and Indonesia, of whether and how democracies can come to terms with their own 'multicultural' foundations. The coming of an age of 'silver democracy', in which growing numbers of citizens live to ripe old ages in conditions of growing material and emotional insecurity, is likely to be just as daunting. Then there are the deep-seated trends that cut like knives into the bodies of democracies everywhere: trends for which there are no historical precedent and no easy solutions, like the rise of the United States, the world's first ever military empire that operates on a global scale and does what it does in the name of democracy, often in tension with Russia, China and the other authoritarian states that have no love or respect for democracy. Equally perilous

trends include the spread of destructive uncivil wars; the step-by-step wrecking of this planet's biosphere; and the spread of new weapons systems with killing power many times greater than that of all democracies combined.

In paying careful attention to these difficulties within the current - unfinished - phase of democracy, this book tries to move beyond mere history, for the sake of history. It is no work of antiquarianism. It makes a spirited case for travelling backwards and forwards in time, for thinking differently about democracy, the better to grasp its past triumphs and failures, its current predicaments and its probable futures. The book supposes that democracy has no built-in historical guarantees; that its future is bound up with what has happened in the past, and with what is happening in the present; and that the history of democracy is therefore the business of everybody, not just of interest to antiquarians, or to professional historians. Among the big points developed within *The Life and Death of Democracy* is that the times are ripe for a comprehensive history, simply because democracies as we know them are sleepwalking their way into deep trouble. This book shows how democracies of the past have suffered and died under several bad moons. It shows as well that another bad moon is now rising over all democracies. Whether in the United States or Britain, Uruguay or Japan, democracies are confronted by problems for which there are no historical precedents, or current solutions. It follows from this approach that the continuation of democracy as a special way of life will require it to change - in response not only to new problems for which there are currently no solutions, but also to old irritants, like widening gaps between rich and poor, continuing discrimination against women, religious and nationalist intolerance, and political figures who give a bad name to democratic politics because they corrupt laws by helping themselves to greenbacks in brown envelopes.

The vexing thought that democracy as we now know it in all its geographic and historical variations might not survive indefinitely, that it could slit its own throat or quietly take its own life in an act of 'democide', even that it could be overpowered and killed off by outside forces that escape its attention, runs counter, of course, to much recent optimism about the global triumph of democracy. This book's strategy of challenging humbug is deliberately strident. For in weighing up the probable long-term effects of a wide range of deep-rooted problems, *The Life and Death of Democracy* gives voice to what growing numbers of people quietly think: that despite all the huffing and puffing, the so-called global triumph of democracy may well turn out to be a campfire on ice. The book explains why the great democratic renewal that first began in India now breeds worldwide anxieties about whether democracy itself can cope with its own problems, let alone its adversaries. In probing these anxieties, the book does not draw easy conclusions. It does not favour simple-minded partisanship. It most certainly stands on the side of democracy, with new arguments. But it is not apologetic for its illusions, follies and weaknesses. In supposing that the most obscure phase in the history of democracy is now, the book argues the need to rethink its fundamental features, including present-day trends and definitions of

the term. With an even hand, and one eye constantly on the past, the book tries to expose the worrying lack of clarity about what democracy means today, and why, if they are lucky, future generations will enjoy its fruits and find it indispensable. The book also comes up with a new set of reasons for thinking that democracy is a superior method of government - a good way of life that in principle can be embraced and applied by our entire planet.

The whole approach owes a debt to the great nineteenth-century American poet and writer Walt Whitman. He famously noted that the history of democracy could not be written because democracy as he and others knew it was not yet properly built. Time proved him right. And so from the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, and the possible survival or destruction of a brand-new type of democracy, the same point can be put differently: we do not know what will become of monitory democracy because its fate has not yet been determined.

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