

*Campfire Democracy?*¹

John Keane

Observers sometimes claim that since democracy involves people getting together as equals, to decide things for themselves, it has in effect always been around, even in the earliest hunting-gathering societies. The claim has older provenance. Its roots stretch back to the 1940s, to the efforts by the Polish-American anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, in his wartime book *Freedom and Civilization* (1944), to define these societies as examples of ‘proto-democracy’. According to Malinowski, the capacity of people to form political communities is more or less a universal human quality. So also is the knack of developing independent, functionally autonomous institutions that both facilitate non-violent co-operation among divergent social interests and prevent the concentration of power in a few hands. In this respect, modern representative democracies stand on exactly the same continuum as Palaeolithic cultures, in which ‘there is no ballot, no vote, yet a general public approval and acceptance. There is very little centralized power, which gives results as good if not better than when such power is placed in the hands of authorities elected and controlled by the people’ (228-229).

Patrick Watson and Benjamin Barber made a similar observation in *The Struggle for Democracy* (1988). ‘All over the world’, they wrote on the eve of the ‘velvet revolutions’ that rocked central-eastern Europe, ‘we find evidence that towns and villages have developed forms of democratic social organisation that strikingly resemble one another.’ Democracy is human; or, to be human is to be fit for democracy. During a field research visit to Nigeria, they found confirmation of this view in the words of a Nigerian monarch, the Oba of Benin, who traced back his own and his people’s history to at least the twelfth century CE. ‘We believe’, said the monarch, ‘we can’t brush aside traditional institutions for the simple reason that our customs and traditions, our traditional values, were not just written out like your constitutions. They evolved from the heart of the people. From the religion of the people’ (69-70).

A scholarly two-volume work by Ronald M. Glassman, *Democracy and Despotism in Primitive Societies* (1986) states the same thesis, at length. While Glassman is aware that early kinship systems were riddled with hierarchies structured by criteria such as gender and age, he nevertheless thinks of our earliest ancestors as the forerunners of democracy as we experience it today. This is because among the ‘unique species characteristics of human beings’ is the propensity for democracy: ‘consciousness plus intelligence, plus language communication, produce the possibility of democracy’ (45). But what is democracy? For Glassman the term refers to ‘decision making through *discussion*, and *rational* processes of legitimation’. It is deliberation guided by such core principles as popular participation in making rules and punishing rule breakers; the application of strict limits upon the exercise of power and leadership; and the use of rules designed to preserve group order as debatable and amendable. In

¹ Retrieved from www.thelifeanddeathofdemocracy.org

hunting-gathering societies, he continues, the felt need to co-ordinate both the search for food and defence against invasion spawned the growth of ‘campfire democracy’ (46-53). It was a form of self-government founded upon the ‘popular assembly’, the ‘male council’ and mechanisms for guaranteeing unanimity. Campfire democracy stimulated informal discussion of perceived problems: ‘the men, the women, the old, the young – everyone discusses the problem informally. Everyone makes his or her opinion known.’ Campfire democracy also depended upon formal procedures for reaching agreement, above all the practice of adult men sitting ‘in a circle around a campfire in the center of the band’. Their job was to ‘attain unanimity or unanimous approval of the political course finally emergent from the formal debate’. Campfire democracy minimized the use of ‘physical dominance and fear’. It knew nothing of majority rule or minority rights, or the harsh punishment of deviants. ‘Social pressure is brought to bear on all dissenters who continue to resist the decision reached’, says Glassman. ‘Women as well as men are talked to, persuaded, chided, cajoled into unanimity.’

Is there any substance in this way of thinking about ‘proto-’ or ‘campfire’ democracy? Much evidence speaks against the whole idea. The implied teleology lurking within the prefix ‘proto-’, the inference that campfire assemblies were the first of a kind, a prototype of what was to follow, begs tough questions about their historical connections with latter-day democracies. The inference supposes, in other words, that in spite of all the differences there is an unbroken evolutionary chain that links the earliest forms of assembly with contemporary representative forms of democracy, as if the peoples of the !Kung and Pitjantjatjara were the original brothers and sisters of James Madison, Winston Churchill, Jawarhalal Nehru and Barack Obama. That is implausible. The free use of the term ‘proto-democracy’ risks falling into the trap of calling too many societies ‘democratic’, just because they lack centralised institutions and accumulated monopolies of power, or because they prohibit centres of violent oppression, blatantly illegal or camouflaged, against which people have no redress or appeal.

Matters are not helped by the anachronistic use of the word with Linear B roots, ‘democracy’. The anthropological record shows quite clearly that neither the word nor anything resembling it was ever used during campfire assemblies. But that is a minor point compared with the least obvious but most consequential objection: by calling campfire gatherings ‘democratic’ there is a great danger of overlooking or understating the *strange originality* of democracy as a way of naming and handling power.

Throughout *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009) it is emphasised that the experience of democracy both requires and reinforces people’s shared sense of the contingency or mutability of the world - its rejection of claims that matters to do with who gets what, when and how in life are determined by ‘natural’ or God-given or deity-determined processes, or by mere chance. Democracy stimulates people’s awareness that they do not need to be bossed about by powerful others, and that in some measure they have the ability to shape and structure their lives, as equals who are capable of living together and deciding in common how they are to live during their time on earth. Democracy thus supposes human’s release from pure determination by forces natural and supernatural. It does not necessarily demand the practical rejection of belief in transcendental or sacred standards (the history of

democracy is full of examples of actors and customs and institutions which thrive on belief in the sacred). But for a society to qualify as 'democratic' it must contain a basic minimum of mechanisms that foster self-reflexivity, the awareness that is and ought are not identical, that things do not have to be what they currently are, or seem to be.

It is true that those who speak of 'proto-democracy' have been guided by good intentions. Malinowski himself explicitly acknowledged that the incorporation of Palaeolithic peoples in the analysis of democracy would help counter the prejudice that they were "'savages" with blind passions' and 'slaves to custom, warlike and cruel' (241). He had a point. By favouring the inclusion of hunting-gathering societies in the history of democracy, he and other scholars have sought to overcome the long-standing prejudice that dismisses these people as 'backward', 'uncivilised' and generally inferior to us. It is also true that those who have spoken of 'proto-democracy' never intended to overlook the fundamental quality of democracy, its propensity to 'de-nature' power relationships and to resist bondage, in the name of equality. Yet that is exactly what they have done, minimally by exaggerating the degree to which hunting-gathering societies cultivated the capacity to see through the so-called nature of things.

In a fine study of the Maori of New Zealand, Marshall Sahlins' *Islands of History* (1985) emphasises that hunter-gatherer societies are typically in the powerful grip of cosmic myths that structure everyday life and adjust it to contingent circumstances, in effect by interpreting, harnessing and controlling their contingency. He makes the important point (against Evans-Pritchard and other anthropologists) that it is a mistake to see these societies as 'frozen', or as without 'history'. That condescending view needs to be replaced with an understanding of how different cultures have different senses of historicity. But even when hunter-gatherer societies are seen in this fresh way, the evidence he presents strongly suggests that these societies are *different* - not necessarily inferior to - political orders defined by institutional mechanisms that have the effect of stirring up people's felt sense of contingency of the power relations that shape their lives.

Within the world of the Maori, for instance, Sahlins shows that while many relationships were constructed by choice, desire and interest, the level of 'openness' to history was different than anything that we are used to. The ongoing, daily interaction between new and old ways of doing things was structured by communities of meaning that ensured that everything ultimately appeared to its members as if it were unfolding by means of an unending process of eternal return. The present and future were recurrent manifestations of a past that was very much alive. 'Ontogeny "recapitulates" cosmogony' (59).

Much the same picture emerges from studies of indigenous societies in neighbouring Australia. As usual, generalisations are as risky as they are difficult: in 1788, when the British colonisers began to arrive in force, there was no single Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders nation; and no shared language. There were perhaps 500 tribes; each spoke a different dialect and typically occupied more or less geographically separate areas. The diversity was the product of prior indigenisation, but also partly the effect of differential contact with non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples, for instance Indonesian and Macassan traders and fishing peoples. Yet what is clear is

that these aboriginal societies and the spaces they inhabited were neither *terra nullius* (as was conventionally supposed in official circles prior to the 1992 judgment *Mabo vs Queensland* in the High Court of Australia) nor ‘primitive nor ‘stateless’ societies. Their destiny was neither inferiority nor extinction.

It is true that these societies had no system of government in any institutionalised or hierarchical sense; and that there was no single body that made laws and no hierarchy of courts or other enforcing authorities. These were most definitely ‘societies against the state’ (the famous formulation of Pierre Clastres’s *Société contre l’État* [1974]). Power was handled largely through informal and loosely organised means; and although these societies were infused with a strong sense of gerontocracy, they were always heavily dependent upon consensus and balance, not force. There were tribal elders (whether they or councils of elders held sway is still disputed) but no chieftains and no organised political class. Laws were ‘weak’ and had no separate status, although without doubt there were mechanisms for resolving disputes and nurturing order.

From the point of view of the history of democracy, these conflict resolution methods are interesting – exactly because they underscore the strange originality of democracy as a political form and way of life. Common to these hunting-gathering societies are mechanisms that have a striking effect: the *closure of the political community to novelty*. The ways and means of naming, handling and resolving disputes about who gets what, when and how within the community were infused with a powerful sense of the primacy of past events and living-dead characters. It was taken for granted that their instructions had to be obeyed, above all because dangerous consequences would otherwise follow, as surely as night follows day, or sun follows rain. The presence of the past within these events and characters was powerfully reinforced by an unshakable sense of dependence upon the living landscape, usually to the point where normally the community saw itself as an extension of the sacred landscape. This strong spiritual and physical dependence upon the biosphere was mediated by a host of mythical characters of the Dreamtime, and by religious rites, songs, and the possession of sacred objects (known among the Loritja, the Illpirra and other peoples as *tjurunga*) and places and special knowledge vested in a few men and women of each local group. There is much evidence that harsh penalties were applied to those who violated these sacred rules. Various means were invoked: informal customs such as ridicule and gossip; inquests; thigh wounding; death by spearing; and blood feuds that often extend over many years. The means of punishment also included the dispatch of avenging parties (such as the Aranda *atninga*, where the attackers fight mainly with words, not weapons); compensation in the form of goods; sorcery; deprivation of mortuary rites; secret meetings of ritual leaders; and the ceremonial running of a gauntlet of blunted spears (an example was the *magarada* of northern Arnhem Land). Alleged offenders were also brought to trial before councils, such as the *tendi* of the Lower River Murray peoples. Ceremonies designed to restore social balance and order were also common. An interesting example was the *bugalub* ceremony found in north-eastern Arnhem Land. It was a ritual washing ceremony that was believed to heal dissension and to produce mutual goodwill among the disputants, as well as provide entertainment for the rest of the community not directly involved in the dispute. People gathered around specially prepared ground in the main camp, outlined with mounds of sand, within which a hole had been dug to represent a sacred waterhole connected to the living-dead persons responsible for hosting the rite.

Secret-sacred songs were sung, one after another, usually to the accompaniment of clapping sticks and didgeridu. During the singing, women jumped up and danced, in preparation for the moment of final healing, when the prime parties to the dispute (most often they were men) finally entered the 'waterhole', to be showered with water and invocations of the mythical beings connected with the ceremonial site.

These and many other customs and rituals are described in exquisite detail in Ronald and Catherine Berndt's *The World of the First Australians* [1964]. This study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is important, not just because it demonstrates clearly that these peoples were neither 'backward' and 'uncivilised' nor caught in the unbreakable grip of 'kinship' nor a 'people without politics'. Read in terms of the history of democracy, this study also sketches at length a more disturbing point: these hunting-gathering societies were very different from the conquering civilisation that later appeared from over the horizons of Europe. Armed with strange customs, institutions and destructive weapons, this civilisation triggered patterns of resistance that have had the long-term consequence of preparing the way for the white citizens of a democracy to feel shame, to say sorry and to strive for thoroughly original – neo-democratic - ways of reconciling two incompatible modes of power.