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Book Review: Albert Weale, *Democracy*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 270 pages.

Comments on Albert Weale's Democratic Theory

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Albert Weale's second edition of *Democracy* introduces the reader to numerous discourses within Western democratic theory.[1] It initially approaches the subject of democracy with the conception that,

> those political systems that we know of as democracy can be best understood in normative terms as institutional arrangements embodying the values of common interests, political equality and a recognition of human fallibility. Other values commonly associated with democracies—including consent, autonomy and popular sovereignty—are either at odds with democracy or should play only a subordinate role in our normative understanding [page xiv].

This, of course, immediately raises the concern as to where the author is couching the "normative," and as can be seen by scrutinizing the literature drawn upon in his work, it appears that this discussion is firmly rooted in "Western" ideology. As the work progresses, we see again that the majority of arguments are concerned with the theoretical debates and problems that have arisen when discussing a few different conceptions of "Western" democracy (outlined primarily in chapter 2) and institutions or practices commonly associated with those conceptions. Thus, the largest criticism of the work is that it comes across as parochial and does not include a much greater number of democratic typologies. The volume would have benefited from trying to acknowledge this provinciality and perhaps from a change of its title to *Western Democracy*.

However, and most impressively, Weale seems to have come to this conclusion himself in the epilogue of the work, an important section of his argument. He recognizes the parochialism in "Western" democratic theory:

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> Sir Ernest Barker was being over-optimistic when he asserted that democracy was to be found in all forms of society in which there was not the alien imposition of a cult of leadership. The flight from responsibility is a common enough human response to many situations, and trust in leaders then becomes all too easy. However, in many societies in many different places at many different times, the practices associated with the collective discussion and resolution of common problems have been adopted and have proved successful. In this sense, there is nothing culturally specific about democracy. To practise the ancient art of collective government under conditions of equality and a recognition of fallibility is a challenge for all societies [page 253].

Although one may have reservations with the argument that methods of political communication were adopted (probably they were there all along), the point the author makes is a strong one. *Democracy*, despite the multiplicity of ways it is understood and practiced, belongs to all peoples. This is considered contestable with what one may call "old" democratic theory: that parochial and presumably orientalist narrative which had democracy come out of ancient Greece and mature during political engagements in Europe and North America. A "new" argument has been emerging, and Weale's epilogue is well suited to the narrative that democracy belongs to no one and that it is common to all humans. Taking this brief description of this linearity in his work, we may infer that perhaps the author's intent was to take us from what is currently known and debated in the "Western" literature to what we should be (and certain individuals probably now are) thinking. Should this be the case, Weale's work is a brilliant coup. Weale's other works include *The New Politics of Pollution*,[2] *Democratic Citizenship and the European Union*,[3] and "New Modes of Governance, Political Accountability and Public Reason."[4]

Critical Praise

Democracy describes several important discourses normatively associated with democratic theory, namely, the justifications for democracy; differences in deliberations, consensus, and political equality; the role of civic participation as a depiction of democracy or as a central aspect of democracy; the scale of

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[2] *The New Politics of Pollution* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1992).

[3] *Democratic Citizenship and the European Union* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[4] "New Modes of Governance, Political Accountability and Public Reason," *Government and Opposition* 46, no.1 (2011): 58-80.

conceptions to systems in representational theory; difficulties with aggregation, justifying as well as establishing unanimity and majority rule; the role of constitutionalism, rights, and laws; and who is included in a citizenry and how that citizenry is to be conceptualized (the still unresolved boundary issue). The work also discusses international relations and the role of democratic ideals in this system. Because of this, *Democracy* is not merely pedagogically valuable, but also it serves as a nice entry point into the "Western," and in certain extensions global, body of literature on democracy.

Perhaps best by the author is the clarity provided in each discourse he addresses. Concepts are well defined, there is little if any ambiguity, and the literature is effectively situated in his explanations. Chapter 7 ("Aggregation, Unanimity and Majority Rule") is a particularly well-written chapter, which raises a number of difficult issues in how a variety of democratic systems organize decision making.

Overall, this work makes an important contribution to certain discourses within democratic theory which concern a few conceptualizations of democracy. Issues, mainly from "Western" experiences and theory, are effectively conveyed to the reader. This and the work's complex density are highly commendable.

Constructive Criticism

As can be seen in the introductory section of this review, Weale would have done well to have presented the volume in a more precise manner: one that reflected the work's emphasis on "Western" thought. There is also the argument that this work left out a multiplicity of democratic typologies and historical democracies which challenge the idea that we might know what democracy is, something still contested by scholars such as Dunn. It can be said that democracy is loosely understood as an idea, a word, and a set of institutions. Each of these is varied and complex, and boasts its own history. Dunn argued that because of this variance, democracy is far too shapeless, and therefore we cannot claim to understand democracy's history as "democracy" at present is not defined.[5]

It would have been good to see a bit more engagement concerning Bellamy's argument,[6] as special interests are still considered to be strong in a system stressing limited government. Bellamy argued that measures of checks and balances within government are "devices for ensuring that popular power

[5] John Dunn, interview by author. See Jean-Paul Gagnon, "An Interview with John Dunn: Comments on the Developments in the History of Democracy," *Journal of Democratic Theory* 1, no. 2 (May 2011), http://www.journalofdemocratictheory.com/articles/Vol1Iss2.html (accessed June 6, 2011).

[6] Richard Bellamy, *Liberalism and Pluralism: Towards a Politics of Compromise* (London: Routledge, 1999), 184-185.

is not usurped by special interests."[7] Given the problems robustly elicited in the extant literature (for example by John Keane) concerning representative and republican democratic systems, one might hold that this point was overly optimistic. There are also issues with the following paragraph and Weale's dissection of it:

> One common way of speaking about democracy is to think of it as a system of popular sovereignty. This was the way that MacCormick formulated the problem in the quotation I gave at the beginning of this chapter. Such an approach attaches the idea of the rightful ruler to the idea of the people. Can this conjunction of ideas be made intelligible, however [pages 184-185]?

Should we involve Keane's argument that, in a democracy, there are no rulers,[8] the discussion (and that following it) of sovereignty in this quote has strong connotations of representational typologies. If we were to consider sovereignty as something to be decided by a citizenry, and if we were to consider there to be no rulers in democracy but rather only office holders, we diffuse power in a manner that makes ruling rather difficult, if not improbable, which might effectively convey one central aspect of democracy: equality. Naturally, a difficulty with this criticism is that Weale's work was published before Keane's, which is why the criticism is most likely an anachronism. It, nevertheless, would be of significant interest to see how Weale might address the issue.

Another difficulty with the work can be found on the bottom of page 202. The first sentence: "So far I have argued that there has to be a constitutional basis for democracy," is problematic. It seems to suppose that a constitution first must be in place before a democracy can take institutional shape or perhaps be practiced. This point can be challenged by reason that democracy, in whichever form it may be, is something that comes before constitutions or is perhaps something that, when observed, can depict the implicit constitution of a people in the form of their homogeneous cores developed through history. Of course, this argument probably works only at the local level and contrasts with the pattern of tracking certain conceptions of democracy as a diffusion of power from few elites to many elites, with little involvement from the wider public beyond legitimizing this form of regime (which seems to be a position, and a good one, that Weale has taken in the work).

We also see on page 207 in chapter 9 three specific points that can be debated:

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[7] Ibid., 184.

[8] John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 652.

1. "So far we have defined democracies as political systems in which important decisions of public policy depend...on public opinion." Why only important decisions? It would perhaps have been better to state that we might be at a stage wherein all decisions concerning public policy depend on public opinion.
2. "...it is possible to define the public narrowly or broadly...." Should we define a citizenry, or rather observe it and let it define itself?
3. "Thus ancient Athens is typically called a democracy, but women, slaves and metics (resident aliens) were excluded from the rights of citizenship. The exclusion of such a large proportion of the population might lead someone, with good reason, to withhold the name of democracy from the system. Similarly, up to the time that Switzerland gave the vote to women in 1971, we might want to say that it was not a democracy, despite the extensive participationist practices and system of proportional representation." In the discussion of democracy in ancient Athens as well as in the Cantons of Switzerland, we gain the important challenge as to whether these systems should have called themselves democratic or should continue to be called such. The question is raised due to their definitions of equality and of who could be a citizen, but this is anachronistic. (I am not, however, in agreement that these forms of government were correct in excluding so many. In a previous work I have argued that Athens, in particular, may have lost a great deal politically by not including women, slaves, and metics). Despite what we now consider to be poor performances on the scales of equality, participation, and inclusion, these systems are historic typologies of democracy (or perhaps more accurately classical conceptions of republicanism),[9] as decisions concerning public policy were still being decided by greater numbers and in a manner that (as far as we now know) stressed communication.

It also would be interesting for the author to address the argument of whether a people is capable of conceptualizing itself. Granted, at present, and especially in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, there already is a legal construct determining who is and who is not a citizen as well as what rights coincide with this status. But how was this determined? Surely not in a nonelitist democratic manner that stressed deliberative periods, greater inclusion perhaps in the form of several referenda, and a series of votes in the lower and upper houses (should we consider Westminster democracies). Defining the boundaries of citizenship should be

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[9] See Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011), 20.

determined by citizens and not by elites or, even with the best intentions, by political theorists.

> *Democracy*, as an ideal, involves the members of a political community participating in the government of that community. This is sometimes described in terms of "self-government". In ancient Athens, it took the form of citizens ruling and being ruled in turn. In the modern world, it takes the form of the people choosing those representatives who are to govern and whose tenure in office depends upon electoral accountability. These two conceptions of democracy—the ancient and the modern—differ from one another in many respects, but in both cases it is assumed that we can identify a body of persons, continuing over time and in a particular place, who constitute a people [page 227].

A central difficulty with the above paragraph is that it leaves out many other relevant democratic typologies. We see, for example, that monitory democracy (an anachronism), which goes beyond electoral accountability, is left out. There is also some difficulty with the assumption that we can, over time, define a people. It is—should we take into consideration indigenous politics in Africa—quite difficult to define indigenous peoples, despite the fact that some have lived on certain lands for hundreds if not thousands of years. Given the rapid diversification of certain citizenries (the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Netherlands, Italy, China, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa serve as a few examples), it is problematic to assume that a people could be identified. What is certain is that there is a plurality, one with diverse wants and values which are hard to aggregate and which pose new burdens on electoral systems. Perhaps it comes down to a difference in understanding what constitutes a people (most certainly a challenge for this reviewer).

Conclusion

Despite the few difficulties that a reader might have with *Democracy*, it is an excellent text. There is a great deal to admire in Weale's efforts and it is obvious how much work has gone into producing the second edition. Nevertheless, it is still recommended that the reader understand that this work is firmly anchored in a segment of "Western" thinking about democracy and that there are other narratives to consider.