

“WE ARE ALL DEMOCRATS NOW . . . ”

WENDY BROWN

“Welcome Back, Democracy!”

—Headline, article on Obama election, *The Beaver*
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Democracy as Empty Signifier

Democracy has historically unparalleled global popularity today yet has never been more conceptually footloose or substantively hollow. Perhaps democracy’s current popularity depends on the openness and even vacuity of its meaning and practice—like Barack Obama, it is an empty signifier to which any and all can attach their dreams and hopes. Or perhaps capitalism, modern democracy’s nonidentical birth twin and always the more robust and wily of the two, has finally reduced democracy to a “brand,” a late modern twist on commodity fetishism that wholly severs a product’s salable image from its content.¹ Or perhaps, in the joke on Whiggish history wherein the twenty-first century features godheads warring with an intensity that ought to have been vanquished by modernity, democracy has emerged as a new world religion—not a specific form of political

power and culture but an altar before which the West and its admirers worship and through which divine purpose Western imperial crusades are shaped and legitimated.

Democracy is exalted not only across the globe today but across the political spectrum. Along with post-cold war regime changers, former Soviet subjects still reveling in entrepreneurial bliss, avatars of neoliberalism, and never-say-die liberals, the Euro-Atlantic Left is also mesmerized by the brand. We hail democracy to redress Marx's abandonment of the political after his turn from Hegelian thematics (or we say that radical democracy was what was meant by communism all along), we seek to capture democracy for yet-untried purposes and ethoi, we write of "democracy to come," "democracy of the uncoun-
ted," "democratizing sovereignty," "democracy workshops," "pluralizing democracy," and more. Berlusconi and Bush, Derrida and Balibar, Italian communists and Hamas—we are all democrats now. But what is left of democracy?

Rule by the Demos

It cannot be said often enough: liberal democracy, Euro-Atlantic modernity's dominant form, is only one variant of the sharing of political power connoted by the venerable Greek term. *Demos* + *cracy* = rule of the people and contrasts with aristocracy, oligarchy, tyranny, and also with a condition of being colonized or occupied. But no compelling argument can be made that democracy inherently entails representation, constitutions, deliberation, participation, free markets, rights, universality, or even equality. The term carries a simple and purely political claim that the people rule themselves, that the whole rather than a part or an Other is politically sovereign. In this regard, democracy is an unfinished principle—it specifies neither *what* powers must be shared among us for the people's rule to be practiced, *how* this rule is to be organized, nor by *which* institutions or

supplemental conditions it is enabled or secured, features of democracy Western political thought has been haggling over since the beginning. Put another way, even as theorists from Aristotle, Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Marx through Rawls and Wolin argue (differently) that democracy requires the maintenance of precise conditions, rich supplements, and artful balances, the term itself does not stipulate them. Perhaps this is another reason why contemporary enthusiasm for democracy can so easily eschew the extent to which its object has been voided of content.

De-democratization

If it is hard to know with certainty why democracy is so popular today, it is easier to adumbrate the processes reducing even liberal democracy (parliamentary, bourgeois, or constitutional democracy) to a shell of its former self. How has it come to pass that the people are not, in any sense, ruling in common for the common in parts of the globe that have long traveled under the sign of democracy? What constellation of late modern forces and phenomena have eviscerated the substance of even democracy's limited modern form?

First, if corporate power has long abraded the promise and practices of popular political rule, that process has now reached an unprecedented pitch.² It is not simply a matter of corporate wealth buying (or being) politicians and overtly contouring domestic and foreign policy, nor of a corporatized media that makes a mockery of informed publics or accountable power. More than intersecting, major democracies today feature a merging of corporate and state power: extensively outsourced state functions ranging from schools to prisons to militaries; investment bankers and corporate CEOs as ministers and cabinet secretaries; states as nongoverning owners of incomprehensibly large portions of finance capital; and, above all, state power unapologetically harnessed to the project of capital ac-

cumulation via tax, environmental, energy, labor, social, fiscal, and monetary policy as well as an endless stream of direct supports and bailouts for all sectors of capital. The populace, the demos, cannot fathom or follow most of these developments let alone contest them or counter them with other aims. Powerless to say no to capital's needs, they mostly watch passively as their own are abandoned.

Second, even democracy's most important if superficial icon, "free" elections, have become circuses of marketing and management, from spectacles of fund-raising to spectacles of targeted voter "mobilization." As citizens are wooed by sophisticated campaign marketing strategies that place voting on a par with choosing brands of electronics, political life is increasingly reduced to media and marketing success. It is not only candidates who are packaged by public relations experts more familiar with brand promulgation and handling the corporate media than democratic principles; so also are political policies and agendas sold as consumer rather than public goods. Little wonder that the growing ranks of CEOs in government is paralleled by the swelling of academic political science departments with faculty recruits from business schools and economics.

Third, neoliberalism as a *political rationality* has launched a frontal assault on the fundamentals of liberal democracy, displacing its basic principles of constitutionalism, legal equality, political and civil liberty, political autonomy, and universal inclusion with market criteria of cost/benefit ratios, efficiency, profitability, and efficacy.³ It is through a neoliberal rationality that rights, information access, and other constitutional protections as well as governmental openness, accountability, and proceduralism are easily circumvented or set aside and, above all, that the state is forthrightly reconfigured from an embodiment of popular rule to an operation of business management.⁴ Neoliberal rationality renders every human being and institution, including the constitutional state, on the model of the firm and hence supplants democratic principles with entrepreneurial ones in the political sphere. In addition to dethroning the demos in

democracy, this transformation permits expanded executive state powers at the very moment of declining state sovereignty, about which more in a moment. Having reduced the political substance of democracy to rubble, neoliberalism then snatches the term for its own purposes, with the consequence that “market democracy”—once a term of derision for right-wing governance by unregulated capital—is now an ordinary descriptor for a form that has precisely nothing to do with the people ruling themselves.

But capital and neoliberal rationality are not the only forces responsible for gutting liberal democratic institutions, principles, and practices. Rather, fourth, along with expanded executive power, recent decades have witnessed the expanded power and reach of courts—domestic as well as international.⁵ A variety of political struggles and issues, including those emerging from domestic social movements and international human rights campaigns, are increasingly conferred to courts, where legal experts juggle and finesse political decisions in a language so complex and arcane as to be incomprehensible to any but lawyers specializing in the field. At the same time, courts themselves have shifted from deciding what is prohibited to saying what must be done—in short, from a limiting function to a legislative one that effectively usurps the classic task of democratic politics.⁶ If living by the rule of law is an important pillar of most genres of democracy, governance by courts constitutes democracy’s subversion. Such governance inverts the crucial subordination of adjudication to legislation on which popular sovereignty depends and overtly empowers and politicizes a nonrepresentative institution.

Fifth, along with the domination of politics by capital, the overtaking of democratic rationality with neoliberal rationality, and the juridification of politics, globalization’s erosion of nation-state sovereignty as well as the detachment of sovereign power from nation-states is also crucial to the de-democratization in the West today.⁷ If nation-state sovereignty was always something of a fiction in its aspiration to absolute supremacy, completeness, settled jurisdiction, mo-

nopolies of violence, and perpetuity over time, the fiction was a potent one and has suffused the internal and external relations of nation-states since its consecration by the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. However, over the past half century, the monopoly of these combined attributes by nation-states has been severely compromised by ever-growing transnational flows of capital, people, ideas, resources, commodities, violence, and political and religious fealty. These flows both tear at the borders they cross and crystalize as powers within, thus compromising nation-state sovereignty from its edges and its interior.

When states remain fiercely agentic amidst their eroding sovereignty, when they detach from the unique double meaning of sovereignty in democracies—popular and supervenient—there are two especially important consequences. On the one hand, democracy loses a necessary political form and container and, on the other, states abandon all pretense of embodying popular sovereignty and hence carrying out the will of the people, a process already inaugurated by the neoliberal governmentalization of the state already mentioned. With regard to the first, democracy, rule by the people, is only meaningful and exercisable in a discreet and bounded entity—this is what sovereignty signals in the equation of popular sovereignty with democracy. Democracy detached from a bounded sovereign jurisdiction (whether virtual or literal) is politically meaningless: for the people to rule themselves, there must be an identifiable collective entity within which their power sharing is organized and upon which it is exercised. Of course, the vastness of the nation-state already limits the kinds of power sharing that makes democracy meaningful, but when even this venue gives way to postnational and transnational fields of political, economic, and social power, democracy becomes incoherent.

With regard to the second, states detached from sovereignty become rogue states in both their internal and external dealings. The reference point for ordinary exercises of state power is neither rep-

resentation nor protection of the people (the latter being the classic liberal justification for state prerogative power). Rather, faintly echoing the *raison d'état* of the old realists, contemporary states substitute for pursuit of the prestige of power a complex double role as actors within, facilitators of, and stabilizers for economic globalization. In this context, the people are reduced to passive stockholders in governmentalized states operating as firms within and as weak managers of a global order of capital without, an order that has partly taken over the mantle of sovereignty from states. Nothing made this more glaringly apparent than state responses to the finance capital meltdown in the fall of 2008.

Finally, securitization constitutes another important quarter of de-democratizing state action by Western states in a late modern and globalized world. The ensemble of state actions aimed at preventing and deflecting terrorism in Israel and India, Britain and the United States are often mischaracterized as resurgent state sovereignty, but, like state bailouts of capital, are actually signs of the detachment of state from sovereign power and have everything to do with this loss of sovereignty. Facilitated by neoliberal displacements of liberal political principles (liberty, equality, the rule of law) for an emphasis on costs, benefits, and efficacy, the security state reacts to eroding and contested state sovereignty with a range of inadvertently de-democratizing policies, from suspended rights of movement and information access to racial profiling to increased zones of state secrecy and permanent undeclared wars.

In sum, for the people to rule themselves, they must be a people and they must have access to the powers they would democratize. Globalization's erosion of nation-state sovereignty undermines the former and neoliberalism's unleashing of the power of capital as an unchecked world power eliminates the latter. But, if "actually existing democracy" is in a woeful state, let us consider what, if anything, remains of democracy's *raison d'être*.

Democratic Paradoxes

As is well known, ancient Athenian democracy excluded 80–90 percent of the adult Attican population from its ranks—women, slaves, free foreign residents, and others who did not meet the strict lineage requirements for citizens. These exclusions of Western democracy in its cradle were extreme, but not the exception. Democracy as concept and practice has always been limned by a non-democratic periphery and unincorporated substrate that at once materially sustains the democracy and against which it defines itself. Historically, all democracies have featured an occluded inside—whether slaves, natives, women, the poor, particular races, ethnicities, or religions, or (today) illegals and foreign residents. And there is also always a constitutive outside defining democracies—the “barbarians” first so named by the ancients and iterated in other ways ever after, from communism to democracies’ own colonies. In our time, the figure of “Islamicism” comforts democrats that they are such, even and perhaps especially in the face of de-democratization in the West. Thus has an overt antiuniversalism always rested at the heart of democracy, suggesting that if the imperial dream of universalizing democracy materialized, it would not take the shape of democracy.

If premodern, republican democracy was premised on the value of ruling in common—rule by the common for the common—and hence centered on a principle of equality, the promise of *modern* democracy has always been freedom. Modern democracy has never pledged equality except in the most formal sense of representation (one person—one vote) or equal treatment before the law (not a necessary entailment of democracy, rarely secured in practice, and irrelevant to substantive equality). Rather, it is Rousseau’s difficult wager—that we surrender ungoverned individual liberty for collective political power, and this in order to realize our individual free-

dom—that lies at the heart of the normative supremacy claimed by democracy. Indeed, individual freedom remains democracy's strongest metonymic associate today even while its promise of rule by the people is often forgotten.⁸ Only democracy can make us free because only in democracy do we author the powers that govern us.

In modernity, freedom understood as self-legislation is presumed a universal human desire, if not, as Kant, Rousseau, and Mill had it, the quintessence of being human. Indeed, it is modernity's birth of the a priori free moral subject that establishes democracy as the only legitimate modern Western political form. This is the figure of the subject that made and continues to make democracy's legitimacy literally incontestable. At the same time, the white, masculine, and colonial face of this subject has permitted and perpetuated democracy's hierarchies, exclusions, and subordinating violences across the entirety of its modern existence. Thus does an overt and perhaps even necessary unfreedom rest at the heart of democracy, suggesting that if the imperial dream of freeing all people was to materialize it would not take the shape of democracy.

The Impossibility of Freedom

Modern democracy's normative presumption is self-legislation attained through shared rule of the polity; the sovereignty of the subject is linked to the sovereignty of the polity, each securing the other. But legislation of what, rule of what? Theorization of a range of normative (formally nonpolitical) powers combined with devastating critiques of the Kantian subject have together rendered freedom especially complex and elusive in late modernity. What powers must we govern, what must we legislate together, what forces must we bend to our will to be able to say we are even modestly self-governing or self-legislating? Answers to these questions have divided democrats across the ages. At one end, liberals make elected representation for

lawmaking the core of the matter, along with sharp limits on the transgress of individual activities and ends. At the other end, Marxists insist that the means of existence must be collectively owned and controlled as a first condition of human freedom. Radical democrats emphasize direct political participation while libertarians would minimize political power and institutions.

Once we surrender the conceit of the a priori moral subject for an appreciation of the panoply of social powers and discourses constructing and conducting us, it is impossible to be sanguine about the liberal formulation. Popular assent to laws and representatives is insufficient to fulfill democracy's promise of self-legislation. Instead, we would have to seek knowledge and control of the multiple forces that construct us as subjects, produce the norms through which we conceive reality and deliberate about the good, and present the choices we face when voting or even legislating. Power understood as making the world and not simply dominating it—or, better, domination understood as fabrication and not only rule or repression of the subject—requires that democrats reach deep into polyvalent orders as powers for the grounds of freedom. The simple idea that we and the social world are relentlessly constructed by powers beyond our ken and control immolates the liberal notion of self-legislation achieved through voting and consent. And yet the notion of democratically ruling all the powers constructing us is absurd: it approximates pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps or grasping from without the psyches through which we experience and know the world. So democracy, to be meaningful, must reach further into the fabrics of power than it ever has and, to be honest, must give up freedom as its prize. From this angle, democracy could never be achieved but is only an (unreachable) aim, a continuous political project; democratization commits its signatories to sharing in the powers that make, order, and govern them, but is perpetually unfinished.⁹

As troubling to the liberal formulation as the Foucauldian- and Derridean-inspired concerns with forms of power other than law

and command is the force of capital in making and arranging democratic subjects, already discussed. What can democratic rule mean if the economy is unharnessed by the political yet dominates it? Yet what could be more of a fantasy than the notion of subordinating a global capitalist economy and its shaping of social, political, cultural and ecological life to democratic political rule or, for that matter, to any political rule?

In sum, apart from state power, both capital and a range of less forthrightly economic normative powers must be reckoned with when considering prospects for redemocratization today. History features no success, or even sustained experiments, with democratizing either. So continued belief in political democracy as the realization of human freedom depends upon literally averting our glance from powers immune to democratization, powers that also give the lie to the autonomy and primacy of the political upon which so much of the history and present of democratic theory has depended.¹⁰ Alternatively, this belief entails thinking and practicing democracy with a realist's acute attention to powers democracy has never before tried to theorize, address, or subdue.¹¹ For the second possibility, a sharper break with liberalism's monopoly on the term *democracy* is hard to imagine.

Do Humans Want Freedom? Do We Want Humans to Be Free?

There is one last contemporary challenge for those who believe in popular rule, perhaps the most serious challenge of all. As we have already said, the presumption of democracy as a good rests on the presumption that human beings want to be self-legislating and that rule by the demos checks the dangers of unaccountable and concentrated political power. But, today, what historical evidence or philosophical precept permits us to assert that human beings want, as

Dostoyevsky had it, “freedom rather than bread?” All the indications of the past century are that, between the seductions of the market, the norms of disciplinary power, and the insecurities generated by an increasingly unbounded and disorderly human geography, the majority of Westerners have come to prefer moralizing, consuming, conforming, luxuriating, fighting, simply being told what to be, think, and do over the task of authoring their own lives. This was the conundrum for the future of liberation first articulated by Herbert Marcuse in the middle of the last century.¹² And if humans do not want the responsibility of freedom, and are neither educated for nor encouraged in the project of political freedom, what does this mean for political arrangements that assume this desire and orientation? What extreme vulnerability to manipulation by the powerful, along with domination by social and economic powers, does this condition yield? Plato worried that improperly ordered souls in charge of their own political existence would author decadence and unchecked licentiousness, but there is a more evident and worrisome danger today: fascism authored by the people. When nondemocrats are housed in shells of democracies, clutched with anxiety and fear in an increasingly unhorizoned and overwhelming global landscape, and ignorant of the workings of the powers that buffet them, how can they be expected to vote for, let alone more actively pursue, their own substantive freedom or equality, let alone that of others?

On one side, then, we face the problem of peoples who do not aspire to democratic freedom and, on the other, of democracies we do not want—“free” peoples who bring to power theocracies, empires, terror or hate-filled regimes of ethnic cleansing, gated communities, citizenship stratified by ethnicity or immigration status, aggressively neoliberal postnational constellations, or technocracies promising to fix social ills by circumventing democratic processes and institutions. Contouring both possibilities is the problem of peoples oriented toward short-run gratifications rather than an en-

during planet, toward counterfeit security rather than peace, and disinclined to sacrifice either their pleasures or their hatreds for collective thriving.

Rousseau so deeply appreciated the difficulty of getting a corrupted people oriented toward public life that his commitment to democracy is often seen to have impaled itself on the project of converting such a people into democrats. There are many ways of understanding what he meant by “forcing someone to be free” but all converge on suspending the commitment to freeing the subject in order to realize that commitment. Today, however, it is hard to imagine what could compel humans to the task of ruling themselves or successfully contesting the powers by which they are dominated.

Possibilities

Does the poor fit of popular rule with the contemporary age add up to a brief for abandoning left struggles for democracy and soliciting left creativity in developing new political forms? Or does it, instead, demand sober appreciation of democracy as an important ideal, always unavailable to materialization? Ought we to affirm that democracy (like freedom, equality, peace, and contentment) has never been realizable, yet served (and could still serve?) as a crucial counter to an otherwise wholly dark view of collective human possibility? Or perhaps democracy, like liberation, could only ever materialize as protest and, especially today, ought to be formally demoted from a form of governance to a politics of resistance.

I am genuinely uncertain here. **What I am sure of, however, is that this is not a time for sloganeering that averts our glance from the powers destroying conditions for democracy.** Encomiums from left philosophers and activists to “deepen democracy,” “democratize democracy,” “take back democracy” “pluralize democracy” or invest ourselves in a “democracy to come . . .” will only be helpful to the

extent that they reckon directly with these powers. We require honest and deep deliberation about what constitutes minimal thresholds of democratic power sharing, whether and why we still believe in democracy, whether it is a viable form for the twenty-first century, and whether there are any nonchilling alternatives that might be more effective in holding back the dark. Is there some way the people could have access to the powers that must be modestly shared for us to be modestly self-legislating today? Is the freedom promised by democracy something humans want or could be taught to want again? Is this freedom likely to yield the good for the world? What kind of containment or boundaries does democracy require, and, if these are not available, is democracy still possible? If we were able to arrive at answers to these questions, there still remains the most difficult one: how the demos itself could identify and reach for the powers to be handled in common if democracy is to become anything more than a gloss of legitimacy for its inversion.