Preface

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It used to be thought that democracy was invented in ancient Greece. The Greeks were certainly the first to use the word, but this book helps us see that the practice of coming to decisions only after consulting those involved was much more widely known. It also shows that the will of the people can be ascertained in a variety of ways. In small groups, it is possible to have direct democracy by means of a meeting of all the members. In larger groups, one has to have representation, perhaps by heads of households in the simplest case. But such a system of 'automatic representation' may clearly fail to embody the voice of the young, or of women. Any form of representation involves a system of selection of the representative, either by a show of hands or, in a 'literate' society, by the vote, by marking a paper or a potsherd with that of the candidate of one's choice. Such a type of universal democracy did not exist in Greece where women, slaves and non-citizens were excluded from the vote.

To study the history of democracy is to trace the story of organised human society. The simplest human community consists of a clan, as recently among the aboriginal inhabitants of Australia. Such units display little delegation of authority, so that the question of representation and authority hardly exists. Decisions were taken by consultation among heads of families, who had the responsibility of discussing issues with their respective families, otherwise there was minimal coordination of a deliberate kind. The idea of coming to decisions without consulting those involved was practically unheard of.

The next level of complexity beyond the horde has been seen, in political anthropology, as the acephalous society, which again has no overall leadership, and so little call for delegation or for 'rule'. Typical of such societies are lineage systems in the African model where authority and decision making take place in the segments of society. There is thus no overall authority or system of governance that can be subject to the rule of the people; each individual being represented in every collective decision by a household or lineage head in a manner of 'automatic representation'. In such systems, individuals do not generally have a choice of their representative, who is born into the role. But not in every case. Among the LoDagaa of northern Ghana, a leader for joint farming activities is needed, especially when marriages take place, and an exceptional farmer (*kukuor na*) emerges for the occasion. More lasting is the role of 'chief of the bow' (*taamyuur na*), who leads the community in hunting and possibly in war. He is known as a practised hunter or warrior and is called upon to take the

initiative. Another example exists among the nomadic Bakhtiari of Iran today. When they decide to move camp, each major tent is approached for its views. Only then do they start, with one man designated to carry out the collective decision. But this leadership is context specific, is often temporary and is achievement oriented. When the crop is harvested, the hunting successful or the camp relocated, such leadership is suspended and 'automatic representation' returns.

It is at the third level, that of centralised government, that the question of representation arises most critically. Even in highly centralised and autocratic societies, decision making may involve consultation and leadership can be representative. For instance, an Asante chief in West Africa would have his council of elders representing the constituent lineages. Each of his councillors would express their opinion on a current issue and this would be summed up by the chief, known as 'the man who speaks last'. His role was not to make a decision on his own but to incorporate the opinion of others, who would themselves have been in touch with their own lineage members. Not all of these decisions were taken 'democratically' after consulting all members, but, on the other hand, they were taken responsibly, not arbitrarily.

Moreover, even where centralised states are governed 'despotically', the decisions at a local level may be subject to such consultation, if not to election. It has often been alleged that the early Near Eastern and Asian city-states and empires were so-called despotisms at a national level, but much evidence has emerged about the important role of assemblies in local decision making. The invention of writing in the Bronze Age created not only a new dimension of stratification, but permitted the growth of knowledge, thought and action, what is often referred to as 'civilisation'. Voting as we know it was part of that written culture in that it involved inscribing one's name on a potsherd to ensure that one's choice was recorded. In Greece not everyone was eligible to vote; women, slaves and foreigners were excluded and the privilege was tied to participation in the army. Nonetheless, it is unclear whether such early civilisations should be judged in terms of their autocratic governments or their local democratic dimensions.

Equally, it is difficult to characterise monarchical societies as these may also be democratic lower down. Monarchies are *ipso facto* non-democratic, since they do not allow for the choice and therefore the change of leader – the position is ascribed by heredity rather than achieved by actions. In Europe democracy was forced on monarchs by the necessity of getting their subjects' consent to engage in war and to the financial contributions it required for the exchequer; the Crown was forced to pay attention to the opinion of the multitude. In England the monarch's prime minister took over more and more responsibility and became responsible to an elected Parliament that could raise taxes from the bourgeoisie not simply from the aristocracy, thus giving birth to a 'constitutional monarchy', which we refer to as a democracy. But although this particular form is peculiar to Europe, the consultation or even the rule of the people is evidently not.

A republic, on the other hand, does away entirely with the hereditary monarch, giving formal responsibility to elected representatives, that is, to a democracy; the head and others being chosen by popular vote. What has become critical for procedures of representative democracy is how often the selection is carried out and for how long a

representative's mandate is valid. In the best of all possible worlds, the voter would be consulted on every issue, but that is clearly impractical except by way of on-going referendums. In most cases we have to accept that our representative thinks on roughly the same lines as we do, and hence the importance of political parties to reflect one's views. The mandate usually lasts about four years, but in Carthage and Phoenicia a new representative was elected every year, ensuring that he was in closer touch with his constituency. Another problem confronting representative democracy is the extent of consultation. In the United Kingdom, universal suffrage, which we now think of as intrinsic to the concept of democracy, was instituted only in 1928. It is a concept that is often linked to the notion of military service. Today, debates continue about how and to whom the franchise can be further extended. Also an issue is the fact that even in modern republics, there is a tendency for the voter to opt for a measure of continuity of leadership (as with the Kennedys), which is the opposite of what should take place in an elective democracy. Power holders often try to retain their position within the family, even when they have attained it by the ballot box or by a coup followed by popular confirmation, so that democracy gradually slips into dictatorship or oligarchy. There is often some conflict between the continuity of kinship and elites, and the alternation or choice intrinsic to democracy.

These issues, and a great many more, are comprehensively treated in this encyclopaedic work, which presents a very different view of democracy's history than that normally held in the West. Although many claim democracy is peculiar to Europe and its offshoots (the United States, Australia, etc.), consultation and the rule of the people are evidentially not. Indeed, the intent of this book is to show the worldwide extent of democracy, which over the last couple of centuries has been erroneously regarded as a distinct feature of Europe. Democracy may be a characteristic of our way of life, but it is certainly not confined to the West. As democracy spreads out across the world and gains both advocates and opponents in every corner, it is worth remembering its deep and universal roots.