Introduction

Democracies are not impervious to ruin. On 3 July 2013, barely one year after his inauguration as Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi was ousted in a bloodless and widely backed coup. Amid increasing claims of a creeping authoritarianism exhibited in his rule, worried citizens and opposition politicians openly called for Morsi's resignation and then removal. Days following his first anniversary in office, the Egyptian military intervened. Spurred on by the popular support, and fearful that the country would be further destabilised by mass protests, General Abdul Fatah al-Sisi issued Morsi's government with an ultimatum: either meet the democratic demands of the Egyptian people or the military will move to suspend the country's constitution. Three days later, Morsi was forcibly removed from office. Adly Mansour, Egypt's Chief Justice, was promptly named as the country's interim president. But far from restoring order, as many believed this essentially 'democratic' coup would, Egypt descended further into chaos. The violence which the military had hoped to quell intensified. Lives were risked and lost. Casualties mounted. And democracy, even now, seems a faraway prospect.

As Egypt's political saga continues to play itself out, commentators have already begun asking what this latest episode says about the sustainability of democracy. Democrats who have long rejected the claim that democracies can be destroyed by their own citizens and political leaders are now having to think again as the Arab Spring gives way to Autumn rage. True, democracies are sprouting up globally in unexpected places. But that may mean little if what we are seeing in places like Egypt turns out to be a sign for what might happen elsewhere. Should this be the case then it may be time for those who support democracy to stop trumpeting on about how sustainable a practice democracy is.

This book does just that. It argues that democratic failure is a prospect that remains very much entrenched both within the idea and ideal of democracy. Democratic self-destruction – or democracy

DEMOCRACY AGAINST ITSELF

against itself – is a possible outcome of democratic politics. Ignoring this prospect does not make democracy more sustainable. If anything, the opposite is true. Now more than ever, as more and more countries become democratic, our attention needs to turn to how we sustain this essentially unsustainable idea.

This being the premise, citing Joseph Goebbels may for once be oddly fitting. While no doubt gloating about what his government had managed to achieve, Goebbels stretched reality only just when he reminded the world that: 'This will always remain one of the best jokes of democracy, that it gave its deadly enemies the means by which it was destroyed.'¹ Forgetting for one moment his other big claim – 'If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it' – and what we have are words to the effect that democracy is a precarious thing. Its precariousness, more to the point, emanates from within: from its own citizenry, their elected leaders and the institutions of popular rule. Democracy is the very thing, if we take Goebbels seriously, that can bring democracy to its knees. Or, as the Australian historian Robert Moss once said, 'democracy can be destroyed through its own institutions'.²

This idea – that democracies can terminate themselves – speaks not only to democracy's inherent corruptibility. It also, more worryingly, conjures up the image that democracy may be less sustainable than we have become accustomed to believe. As a system of governance that actively encourages those acting on its behalf and in its name to do as they please, democrats are liable, when fulfilling their civic duties, to blur the distinction between help and hindrance. Democrats can act against democracy just as they can act for democracy – often because what they are doing is acting on their own behalf.

In this regard, democracy is a lot like water, as Moss observed.³ While both entities can endure an assault to their core – democracy through opposition and water through heat – there comes a point when neither will be able to withstand the onslaught without lasting consequences. Indeed, just like water when boiled, Moss argues a democracy is made to tolerate criticism and alteration to its basic principles and processes without undermining the fact that it remains a democracy. To some extent, a democracy will be further refined when its citizens and their elected leaders question each other and challenge time-honoured principles – which is no different to water when boiled. But that only holds true to a point. Once boiled, water will eventually vaporise and transform into steam just as democracy,

INTRODUCTION

when pushed far enough by its own citizens, will eventually begin to unrayel. Perhaps its undoing will only be temporary given that debate, dissent and emendation will likely not be silenced for long, even if formal opposition in the aftermath becomes more difficult to front under a system of governance less favourable to popular rule. But however temporary that suspension turns out to be, the point here is that democracies can suffer from debilitating crises of their own making. They can, by being democratic, self-destruct. Yet this analogy also holds true in another sense. Much like water that has been left to vaporise through the process of evaporation, democracy will suffer at the hands of its own constituents when debate and emendation to basic democratic principles are restrained during times of emergency. Repressed in this way, citizens become marginalised. They lose interest and faith in democracy. At both ends of this continuum then democracy faces a real threat: a threat that emanates from within - from its own citizens, from those they have elected to represent them and from the freedoms and institutions that together make democracy function.

Democracy against itself may sound a highly abstract notion, something which should be considered unlikely to trouble modernday democracies in practice. But we know this is not so. In reality, the prospect that democracy might go off the rails, (mis-)guided by citizens with fickle desires and little political foresight, is not an altogether unreasonable idea. In fact, when re-articulated in less academic terms, what we are effectively dealing with is a set of practical questions that all democratic polities will at some stage be forced to confront. These questions, for example, ask us to think seriously about such matters as: In what ways can non- or anti-democratically inclined citizens employ legitimate democratic avenues to reject or fundamentally challenge democracy? How should pro-democratic citizens respond to cleavages bent on exceeding and replacing democracy in its current state with 'a superior form of politics' – especially when that politics is promoted in democracy's name and for its own good?⁴ Can radical democratic projects, and not just avowedly antidemocratic projects, ever be antithetical, harmful to democracy? Is the state ever democratically justified to defend democracy against its enemies by suspending citizens' rights and curtailing democratic freedoms? Or should a democratic state simply remain neutral, dutifully accepting the majority's decision where that decision has been reached in a free and fair manner? In short, the overarching question which this book asks and tries to answer is whether a democracy can

DEMOCRACY AGAINST ITSELF

ever elect – without the resort to widespread violence and intimidation, that is, without the resort to widespread anti-democratic measures – to end its own tenure in a legitimate, democratic way?

In asking these questions, this book wants to remind readers of what has become a largely forgotten fact. Until quite recently, democracy has been thought of as taboo. Deemed by the greatest thinkers as an inherently flawed system of government, democracy was condemned as dangerous; bound to fall victim to its own lofty ideals and the excessive freedoms it afforded to citizens. This insight, as Roger Barrus, John Eastby, Joseph Lane, David Marion and James Pontuso write in their book, *The Deconstitutionalization of America: The Forgotten Frailties of Democratic Rule*, is now lost. Instead, the reverse has become truth:

Dazzled by the successes of the United States and other democratic societies, modern democrats tend to look at the rise and eventual triumph of democracy as inevitable. This view is highly distorting, of both past and present politics. On more than one occasion in the past, the fate of democracy has hung in the balance; there was nothing inevitable about its success.⁵

The mature democracies of the United States, Western Europe and Australia are all 'of a fairly recent vintage', writes Jeffrey Isaac.⁶ It was not that long ago when democracies gave way to war and precipitated a totalitarian wave responsible for such atrocities as the Holocaust. In more recent times, democratic politics has too been held responsible for its own undoing, specifically in several notable 'third wave' democracies which suffered from a 'reverse-wave' of democratisation. With a byzantine bureaucratic labyrinth, famous for producing governmental gridlock and a disgruntled or apathetic citizenry, it is possible to see how populist appeals on both the Left and Right can gain traction in a democratic milieu and begin to look appealing. When this happens, citizens can be at the forefront of a movement which, disguised in democratic garb, seeks the destruction of democracy.

Democrats thus need to realise that what makes democracies 'democratic' – their openness, toleration and pluralism – can also make them susceptible to being challenged, undone and destroyed. That this is possible is because, at its core, democracy is uniquely political. Premised on the 'public evaluation' of its basic tenets and central principles, democracy is rule by opinion, contest and dissent.⁷ In such an environment, no so-called 'unpolitical good' is exempt

INTRODUCTION

from questioning which, in theory at least, is another way of saying that all things are political. Democracy is no different to 'an impetuous river that incessantly overflows its bed'. It is 'a practice largely in search of itself, struggling beyond pasts and presents in which it was unrealized (both for many people and across many domains of life) and in the face of futures threatening to retrench its achievements and aspirations. This makes democracy a potential danger given that it may just as easily induce less democracy as greater democratisation.

There is no safe path that democrats can tread that is not at the same time pockmarked with potential pitfalls. All democracies are 'balancing' acts. ¹⁰ At one end, demagogues and extremists are free to vie for the popular vote. At the other end, elected leaders and the state struggle to retain the established constitutional order. Though in most cases constitutional safeguards make it extremely difficult to move too far in either direction, circumstances have transpired and enabled democrats to generate the needed momentum to unsettle existing political conventions. Popular votes and constitutional referendums have been cast to halt democratic politics. Governments have suspended the very freedoms and rights which enabled democracy to flourish in the first place.

Taking the notion of democracy against itself seriously, this book tells the story of democracy's end in a novel manner: one which blends theory and example to demonstrate how democracy can sow the seeds of its own destruction simply by being democratic. Drawing on selected readings of the decline of democracy in ancient Athens and the Weimar Republic, two controversial but classic cases where democrats acted against their democracy, the book will then offer its diagnoses on how two distinct contemporary democracies - those in the United States and China - may follow this trajectory of decline and self-destruction. Finally, the book will end by examining the threats that attend the growing initiatives to globalise democracy through the recent Occupy Movement. From these cases, the book will extrapolate the key conditions and characteristics of democracy that make it prone to self-destruct, offering insights along the way into how democracies can, in the course of being democratic, ieopardise their own existence.

Notes

1. See Gregory H. Fox and Georg Nolte, 'Intolerant Democracies', Harvard International Law Journal (vol. 36, no. 1, 1995), 1; Samuel

DEMOCRACY AGAINST ITSELF

- Issacharoff, 'Fragile Democracies', *Harvard Law Review* (vol. 120, no. 6, 2007), 1408.
- 2. Robert Moss, *The Collapse of Democracy* (London: Abacus, 1977), 12, emphasis original.
- 3. Ibid., 35.
- 4. Tony Fry, Design as Politics (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2011), 5.
- 5. Roger M. Barrus, John H. Eastby, Joseph H. Lane Jr, David E. Marion and James F. Pontuso, *The Deconstitutionalization of America: The Forgotten Frailties of Democratic Rule* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 5.
- 6. Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 22.
- 7. Nadia Urbinati, 'Unpolitical Democracy', *Political Theory* (vol. 38, no. 1, 2010), 65.
- 8. Miguel Abensour, "Savage democracy" and "principle of anarchy", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (vol. 28, no. 6, 2002), 708.
- 9. Romand Coles, Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xi.
- 10. John L. Safford, *Democracy is Dangerous: Resisting the Tyranny of the Majority* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002), viii, 156.