Commentary

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Geographic Tunnel Vision and the Past and Future of Democracy

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Abstract: In the twenty-first century, the democracy bequeathed by the past confronts major, diverse challenges. In thinking about how it might be reimagined, it is important to look beyond conceptions of democracy that are associated with a distinctive Western tradition, indicated at an early point by Athens two and a half millennia ago. Recent scholarship has questioned some clear connection of that specific ancient experience with the democracy that has developed since the late eighteenth century, challenging in several ways what might be called "epistemic exclusion." One challenge concerns a long debate about Athenian uniqueness. A second concerns how the founding generation of modern democracy thought about, or did not think about, Athenian practices. A third concerns whether a broader geography of influence has infused the entire modern history of democracy in which much innovation has happened in peripheral places in hierarchies of wealth and power. These reflections have implications for where to look for good ideas to construct a better democratic future.

Keywords: democracy; Athens; ancient Greece; Western civilization

1 Introduction[1]

As the half-millennium of European overseas empire was coming to an end in the generation following the Second World War, the geography of democracy was

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rapidly expanding as well. Democracy was widely understood to mean possession of political institutions resembling those of the wealthy Western European and North American countries. In the 1970s, Mediterranean Europe's authoritarian regimes were replaced by democratic ones. In the 1980s and into the early 1990s, Latin American generals went back to the barracks, as a common expression had it. In 1989 and continuing for the next few years, European Communist regimes were swept into history's dustbin. In the 1990s, Africa's post-colonial political systems became more competitive. Decades-old dictatorships in Asian places fell, too. In Eastern Europe and in what was widely called the Third World, political leaders were aspiring to political institutions that had seemed part of a Western tradition of rule and were often succeeding in their aspirations. Yet from early in the next century, democracy seemed under attack from many quarters and by the new century's third decade, many were wondering how to defend it, or fix it, or reinvent it, or whether Western political traditions were not for them.

In thinking about how democracy might be reimagined in the twenty-first century, it may be helpful to think beyond conceptions of democracy often associated with a distinctive Western tradition, whose distinctiveness, so it was sometimes said, was indicated at an early point by Athens two and a half millennia ago. Since the word "democracy" had by the late twentieth century come to stand for something highly valued, these claims were suffused with a celebratory spirit of appreciation for an admired distant ancestor of today's democracies.

This essay reviews a good deal of recent scholarship questioning in a variety of ways some clear connection of that specific ancient experience with what got to be called democracy since the late eighteenth century. The word is plainly an Athenian coinage, but very little else about any ancient legacy to the modern democracy that issued from the revolutionary big bang of the late eighteenth century is nearly so clear. One challenge concerns a long debate about Athenian uniqueness. A second concerns how the founding generation of modern democracy thought about, or did not think about, Athenian practices. A third concerns whether a much broader geography of influence infused the entire modern history of democracy. These reflections have implications for where to look today for good ideas to construct a better future.

Here is a roadmap of the argument. I will begin by briefly glancing at three awesomely learned surveys published or republished in the 1990s that reflect the scholarship of previous decades. I will then survey more recent scholarship that seriously undermines a bundle of powerful and mistaken ideas connecting distant and recent history: *Athenian democracy was an early sign of a distinctive Western democratic vocation, an inspiring legacy for later Western thinkers, and a key*

influence on the founders of modern democracy in the Age of Revolution of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These are components of what Julian Go (2023) has called "epistemic exclusion." I conclude by drawing out some implications for thinking about the future of democracy.

2 Distinguished Exemplars

Here are three important efforts to situate modern democracy in a global and historical perspective that appeared as the Cold War began to recede into the past.

In Finer's (1997) magisterial three posthumous volumes on *The History of Government*, the chapter on classical Greece began: "With the Greeks we enter a new world. It is impossible to exaggerate the originality of this astounding people." He went on to quote classicist Peter Levi (1980, 107) to the effect that in the fifth century BCE, there was "an explosion of light which affected everything and still does so today. Europe is the result, and Greece is the key." Finer went on: "These Greek polities speak to us in a modern idiom." Since his account went on to argue that the Athenian model was "a dead-end," doomed by its small geographic scale either to be devoured by expansionist neighbors or to alter its own character to remain viable by expanding its reach, why does it matter to modern democracy at all? Finer: "they invented democracy" and, once invented, "the notion was there and was ideationally transmitted to nineteenth-century Europe." The transmission was ideational, not continuity in actual practice. The word remained but "by the end of the second century AD" the "*practice* of democracy sank out of existence" (Finer 1997, 90–91, 316, 384; italics are Finer's).

World historian William McNeill's (1991) account of *The Rise of the West* went further. It is a work originally from the Cold War era but the 1991 edition includes a thoughtful autocritique that builds on scholarship more recent than its first appearance in 1963. After a detailed scrutiny of the economic, political, religious, and artistic characteristics of classical Greece (paying attention to variation, so that Ionia is distinctive, Sparta not confounded with Athens, and the like), he contended that a half-millennium before the Common Era, "the ruling institution, the polis, was firmly rooted," an enduring "mold" for later development.

> Certain of the most fundamental characteristics of that mold were indeed to remain basic to all subsequent European culture. Greek thought, art, literature, and institutions have always remained a sort of norm for Western civilization, which successive ages have variously modified, but never entirely abandoned. (1991, 217)

Summarizing Athenian accomplishments as of 500 BCE and looking downstream, McNeill tells his readers that

> ...the Athenians were thus ideally situated for cultural creativity. The admiration of all subsequent ages attests the use they made of their opportunity. (1991, 258)

For democracy scholars a particularly influential and controversial voice is Samuel Huntington's. He analyzed democracy as something that has ebbed and flowed in huge multicountry waves in the twentieth century (1991). This was followed by his more elaborate account of the cultural dimensions of democracy's global geography (1996). He argued (1996, 69–70) that by the late twentieth century the major global conflicts involved the "clash of civilizations," of which one was "the West," distinguished by features that included "much" that was inherited from "Classical civilization."

Huntington (1991, 299) contended that "[t]he evidence supporting the Western culture thesis is impressive, if not totally persuasive," summarizing three of his key points: 1) democracy originated in the West; 2) "[s]ince the early nineteenth century, most democratic countries have been Western"; and 3) beyond the North Atlantic, "democracy has been most prevalent in former British colonies, countries with heavy American influence, and more recently, former Iberian colonies in Latin America." Not only, Huntington continued, has Western culture been "peculiarly favorable to democracy," but some other important cultures are particularly inimical, first and foremost Confucian and, less unequivocally as a body of ideas, Islamic, although he saw the empirical evidence of recent political practice as clear (1991, 307): "with one exception, no Islamic country has sustained a fully democratic system for any length of time."[2]

These theses seem to me essentially mistaken. These late twentieth-century views have been severely challenged by varied, more recent scholarship in fundamental ways: Over centuries, Western writers down to the Age of Revolution were far more likely to see Athenian democracy as an instructive negative model than a positive one; when Athens, more recently, has been admired, it has been for wildly varying things; aspects of its democracy, moreover, were very much not unique, in Antiquity or later on; and those that were unique were by that very fact not the common heritage of the West and were not taken up at the foundational moment of modern democracy. I will develop these points below by drawing on that more recent work.

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2 Since the lone exception Huntington recognized was Turkey, where hopes for democratization went unrealized in the twenty-first century, the empirical observations about democratization on which Huntington leans have only been reinforced.

3 Much of What Was Written about Athenian Democracy, Starting with the Athenians, Was Negative, Including the Works That Would Have Been Read by Those Who Created the New Institutions That Came to be Called Democracy in the Age of Revolution

Most of what was passed on to the future by ancient commentators was critical or even hostile, rather than admiring, accounts of how Athenian democracy worked. Not only Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon, but many, in the view of classicist Paul Cartledge, would have agreed with Alcibiades (as reported by Thucydides) that Athenian practices amounted to "acknowledged lunacy" (Cartledge 2016, 158). What those whose education included ancient authors would have been learning about Athenian democracy would have been largely negative down to the Age of Revolution, as Roberts (1994) shows in great detail. Polybius,[3] for example, a major source for later political theory, worked in the service of a rising Rome toward tightening the hold of the new Roman rulers by extirpating democratic self-governance in Greece and elsewhere and preventing its resurgence. He was an observer of Roman destruction of defeated sites: Carthage in North Africa, Numantia in Spain, Corinth in Greece (Cartledge, 249–58).

Josiah Ober (2001) argued that much of Greek political thought was the work of antidemocratic partisans of oligarchical rule, who constructed sophisticated critiques of democracy as they contemplated the re-emergence of the democratic rule they disliked after two oligarchical seizures of power in Athens failed to institutionalize a stable oligarchical order; Athenians mysteriously kept sticking to democracy despite all the good reasons no one should care for it. Just as one might argue that the great creativity of twentieth century Marxists was provoked by a need to explain why the gravediggers inevitably produced by capitalism had not managed to actually dig its grave (not yet in 2024 either), Ober contends that the great Greek political thinkers were provoked into creativity by the inability of its foes to kill democracy off despite its numerous undesirable attributes.

3 Polybius was influential for his enthusiasm for the "mixed government" that much later found adherents in English-speaking places – a mixture of monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements each of whose separate vices were checked by the other two – and appreciated in the new United States as a source for the idea of "checks and balances." He may have been the first to use "mob rule" as a category (Cartledge 2016, 258).

The late eighteenth-century designers of the new institutions that came to shape modern democracy were therefore no admirers of Athens. When they looked to the distant past for inspiration they looked elsewhere, perhaps to Rome. Roberts (1994, 184) tellingly pointed to the Roman catchwords of the day – *E pluribus unum* and *Novus Ordo Seclorum* – that still decorate U.S. currency two and a half centuries later; and Cartledge (2016, 293) wryly suggested that the greater reverence of the U.S. founders for Roman than Greek models explains "why Washington, D.C. is blessed with a Capitol Hill and the U.S. constitution with a Senate, and not with an Acropolis or Boule."[4] In the judgment of Roberts (1994, 157), "Greek history was never to unseat Roman as the predominant field of ancient historical study, either in the eighteenth century or in any other."

There is some clear quantitative support for the greater hold of Roman than Greek Antiquity on the imagination of the Age of Revolution. And beyond. Google's Ngram Viewer allows one to examine the frequency of word use in a vast corpus of eight million digitized books, with a half trillion words in eight languages, as of 2011, since when the data set has greatly expanded to include words through 2019 (Michel et al. 2011, 176; Pechenick et al. 2015, 1). Simply counting English terms referring to classical antiquity shows that since 1775, and ever since, for that matter, terms referring to the distant Roman past occur more frequently than to the Greek past; similar results obtain for other European languages.[5]

4 The Boule, often translated as Council, was a body of 500 randomly selected citizens who, during their year of service, met about 300 times and hashed out the agenda for the Assembly open to all citizens that made major decisions. Boule participants received wages (after 462/1 BCE or so), allowing the poor to take part. Since no one was allowed to serve more than twice, in the judgment of Cartledge (2016, 111) most citizens would spend a year or two in this key role, and there were other public roles as well. It would be hard to decide whether it was the randomly-chosen Council or the Assembly that any citizen could attend, which was viewed the more negatively by the architects of modern democracy's institutions. From sometime after 508 BCE, the citizenry were divided into 10 groups (often poorly rendered in English as "tribes"), from each of which 50 citizens were randomly selected for the Council; the tribes were purposely designed to include people from all three of the recognized geographic subdivisions – the coast and port, the city center, and the countryside – so that the 50 tribal representatives were geographically inclusive. The initial arbitrary assignment of citizens to tribes was designed to cross-cut familial or neighborhood loyalties. The neighborhoods (or "demes") had their own participatory structures, so that when a citizen was not serving on the Council, he might well be participating in neighborhood public life (Cartledge 2016, 64–66).

5 I compared the sum of the frequencies of "ancient Greece," "ancient Athens," "Greek democracy," and "Athenian democracy," to the sum of the frequencies of "ancient Rome," "Roman Republic," and "Roman Empire." The relative salience of Rome over Greece throughout the period from the Age of Revolution to the present is also true of French, Italian, and Russian (substituting corresponding terms in those languages). In Spanish it is true through the Second World War after which the relative salience of Greece is higher and in German it holds except for the early twentieth century. Readers wishing to carry out their own counts can find the very user-friendly Ngram viewer at https://books.google.com/ngrams/. For

When the revolutionary generation did look back to Greek antiquity for ideas from which a better future could be forged, some historians have argued that they were more likely to turn for inspiration to Sparta (for its disciplined subordination of individuals to a law-bound political community) than to Athens' messy politics (Macgregor Morris 2004; also Shklar 1966). In the new United States, key figures like James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams inveighed against Athenian institutions as both mob rule and instruments for plundering the well-off, while late eighteenth-century French views, though often extremely negative (like Rousseau's) were more divided (Roberts 1994, 175–207). Nonetheless, French writers were much more inclined to draw lessons from Ancient Rome than from Greece, although from the early eighteenth century there was "a great debate between admirers of Sparta and proponents of Athens – not forgetting that it is still Rome in the vanguard of the ancient cities." Admiring heroic lawgivers, the French Revolution's deputies to the Convention met in a hall adorned with busts of both Spartan Lycurgus and Athenian Solon. And Athens was sometimes admired for its commercial spirit as much as for its political institutions (Payen 2021, quotation from 188).

The intense direct participation of Athenian citizens in ruling themselves was simply rejected by those who came to power in the Age of Revolution on both sides of the Atlantic as they constructed new institutions in which the political role of ordinary citizens was to intermittently choose those who would rule them, an arrangement repeatedly challenged by the social movement activism that has pushed against those institutions from that day to the present (Markoff 2019). The equalizing force of random selection of citizens for major functions was also rejected in the plans for the new democracies, although an enfeebled echo survives in jury selection schemes.[6] Classicist Kostas Vlassopoulos addressed "the relationship between ancient and modern political thought and practice" and concluded that the modern "representative government was invented as a conscious counter-solution to the threat of democracy," raising the challenge of understanding how "a form of government that was invented as an antidote to democracy eventually come to be understood as a species, if not the quintessence, of democracy" (Vlassopoulos 2007, ix, 33). In the twenty-first century, democrats are at least as much the heirs of

discussion of the data, including important methodological cautions, see Michel et al. (2011), Nunberg (2010), Pechenick et al. (2015), and Zhang (2015).

6 In the United States today random jury selection is modified significantly by the questioning and dismissal of prospective jurors as well as rules that bias the randomness (at my age, for example, I am allowed to opt out altogether). And the power of juries is very limited by the role of the judge in controlling what the jury is told and how it is told and the elaborate, esoteric, and very detailed rules of procedure and sentencing. Cartledge's (2016) argument that the great leeway of an Athenian jury was one of the principal ways the people exercised power (the literal Greek meaning of democracy) would be impossible to make for the U.S. jury system.

those who challenged the new institutions of the end of the eighteenth century as of those who designed those institutions.

4 As States and Social Movements Came to Identify with Democracy in the Nineteenth Century and Beyond, Praise for Athenian Practices Became More Common, but Precisely What Was Praised Varied a Good Deal

In Victorian Britain, Athens could exemplify public-spirited citizens. In the new United States, Athens showed how a Republic could successfully challenge older Empires, although it also showed that democracy could readily be brought down by internal strife (Richard 2021, 203); but in late nineteenth-century Britain, writers appreciated Athens' Empire as an endorsement of their own (Roberts 1994, 256–90). In the antebellum Old South, racist ideologues saw Athenian slavery as the foundation of Athenian freedom and held that what permitted some to think great thoughts was that others were compelled to menial labor (Osterweis 1948, 94). Nazi intellectuals took Plato's Republic as an inspiring model of the state they hoped to build (John and Willems 2021, 542). In the early twenty-first century, an eminent classicist could find that Athenian practices throw into sharp relief "the managed, hollowed-out or empty democracy we actually and foreseeably have" and notes a resemblance between emerging practices in the new global movements of our time and the Athenian example (Cartledge 2016, 307, 312). Some twenty-first-century champions of creating deliberative bodies of randomly selected citizens may invoke Athenian predecessors (Sintomer 2021, 490–91). Today's anarchists may find it an inspiring example of egalitarian citizen participation in collective self-determination (e.g., Fuller 2016).[7] Since the nineteenth century, Athens has often been taken as a positive model, but variously of civic engagement, racialized democracy, imperial rule, artistic brilliance, challenges to shallow and thin democratic government, and the practicality of anarchism, an indication that democracy has always been and remains more what philosopher WB Gallie (1956; see also Markoff 2017) called an "essentially contested concept" than something that has been part of a univocal

7 For anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin (1982, 131), Athens was "society incarnated into an assembled community of free individuals who directly formulate and administer policy" and "was organized to obstruct political professionalism, to prevent the emergence of bureaucracy, and to perpetuate an active citizenry *as a matter of design* [emphasis in original]."

tradition stretching back across two and a half millennia.[8] Miller (2018) shows how different from one another have been notable modern instances of practices reasonably called democratic, a further complication for the claim of some single tradition.

Not only was there no single-stranded ancient legacy, but looking back at ancient practices and ancient ideas was hardly uniquely "Western." Muslim scholars across centuries were more likely to be reading classical thinkers (in Arabic translation) than Christians were, and only in the Renaissance were these ancient Greek texts widely known in Western Europe. K. Anthony Appiah (2016, 7) observed that "the classical traditions that are meant to distinguish Western civilization from the inheritors of the caliphates are actually a point of kinship with them." And it is learned Byzantines, too, who knew these classical writers, did not need translations of their own native tongue, and whose copying of manuscripts kept ancient texts from disappearing. Peter Adamson (quoted in Jones (2017)) argued that one motive for medieval Muslim scholars was one-upmanship, to demonstrate that they were better custodians and interpreters of ancient Greek texts than their Greek-speaking Byzantine rivals. In Adamson's estimation, in tenth-century Baghdad "readers of Arabic had about the same degree of access to Aristotle that readers of English do today," not something that could be said of Western Europeans of that time. In consequence, when the new Scholasticism took root in the Christian West, and its proponents sought acquaintance with ancient thinkers, they studied Ibn Rushd (or, as they called him, Averroes) for his translations of Aristotle; in further consequence, this gave fuel to Scholasticism's Christian critics who attacked it for its association with this, and other, Muslim thinkers. This is an intellectual thicket in which it's hard to see some clearly demarcated, distinctively "Western" strand.[9]

8 For much more on how Athens was viewed in later millennia, see Piovan and Giorgini (2021).

9 The translation project of Greek into Arabic from the eighth century on, the important Greek influence on Arabic-language philosophy, the later translation of Arabic work into Latin, the Arabic translations as a source of later Christian reflection on ancient Greek thinkers, the major influence of Ibn Rushd on medieval Christian Scholasticism, and the strong criticism of Scholastics by rival Christian thinkers for their display of Islamic influences are treated in Adamson (2015), Adamson and Taylor (2005), and Gutas (2000). The multiplicity of all this confounds one-word labels: as Adamson (2015:1) pointed out, "many important philosophers in the Islamic world were not Muslims" but wrote in Arabic, and philosophy in the Islamic world was also "written in languages other than Arabic, especially Syriac, Hebrew, and Persian." On the classical heritage of medieval Byzantium (later Constantinople) see Nelson (2010). The places that for centuries showed most interest in ancient Greece were places in which ancient Greeks had taken an interest. Amartya Sen (2006, 52) wryly notes that ancient Greeks were more likely to be curious about the intellectual cultures to their east or south than to their north and west commenting on "the greater interest the ancient Greeks themselves showed in talking to ancient Iranians, or Indians, or Egyptians (rather than chatting up the ancient Ostrogoths)."

Noting that modern "Islamic" and "Orthodox" civilization also had a Classical heritage, Huntington (1996, 70). tells his readers that this was "nowhere near to the same degree the West did." Huntington did not tell those readers by what indicators they should judge the Islamic heritage from antiquity less than the Western, but presumably he did not have in mind the centuries when the Baghdad caliphate was encouraging translation of Greek authors into Arabic.

5 The Claim that Athenian Political Practices Indicate Something Uniquely Part of a Western Heritage Needs to be Seriously Questioned, Although the Claim of Uniqueness is Something the Greeks Themselves Passed On

Most ancient authors may not have liked democracy very much, but some of them were sure that it was something uniquely Greek. As Benjamin Isakhan (2011, 20) summarized this view, both a rare champion of democracy like Herodotus and a critic like Thucydides agreed that this was a key difference from the Persian archenemy, explained by Aristotle through the innately slavish character of those unfortunate not to be Greek.

5.1 Other Greek Places

Some scholars are persuaded that even among Greek places, democracy was only "fully realized" in Athens. As Kurt Raaflaub (2007, 185) put it, "The uniqueness of Athens consisted not merely in the emergence of democratic self-consciousness, not just in the extension of political power to the propertyless thetes, but also in the interlocking and mutually reinforcing institutional mechanisms the Athenians created to make this diverse and dynamic polity work" and emphasized "the use of the lot, rotation, pay for office, and the principle of *ho boulemonos.*"[10]

10 *Thetes*: poorer but free Athenians. *Ho boulemonos*: literally, a person who wishes, standing for the principle that any citizen who wished to do so could participate.

On the other hand, Greeks themselves categorized the institutions of many other Greek places as *demokratia*. The most comprehensive survey of such places in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE for which there is enough evidence to allow scholarly judgement is Robinson's (2011, esp. 222–30).[11] He shows that there were local analogues for institutions sometimes held to be characteristically Athenian such as a citizen assembly making ultimate decisions, popular juries with what he calls "irreversible authority," severe punishment of powerful people regarded as misfeasant, brief tenure in office, and strong rhetorical commitment to freedom and to equality; they are widely found among *poleis*. Athens' wealth and power may have been unique in Greece, and its democracy certainly constituted the best-known instance.[12] But for Robinson, it makes sense to write of Greek democracy, not just Athenian. Would a more granular classification help? Relentless creator of subcategories, Aristotle distinguished four types of *demokratia*, with Athens in the most extreme among them: as Cartledge (2016, 146) concludes: "the democracy of Athens was not only the best documented: it was also an outlier, far removed from any Greek norm, and not to be confused with such."[13]

11 In previous work, Robinson (1997) argued that aspects of democratic practice occurred in other Greek places as well and that, therefore, "there is no need to search for traits or circumstances unique to the Athenians if one wishes to account for the emergence of Greek democracy generally" (1997, 129). The opposed position is argued by Kurt Raaflaub (2007, 10), who makes the case that "fifth-century Athenian democracy was unique" and needs to be explained by circumstances unique to Athens at a specific moment.

12 The democracy of Athens remains the best-known instance in our own time as well thanks to the uniquely detailed *Constitution of Athens*, the product of a database on the governments of over 150 Greek places assembled by Aristotle and his students, of which all but a large part of the Athenian section remains lost.

13 Classicists remain uncertain about when the word *demokratia* began to be used and are therefore even less certain by whom, in what context, and why the word was coined, or even just what the coiner meant (since the term could either mean that "the people" taken as a whole held power, or that the poor did (Cartledge 2016, 74, 82). But it does appear that sometime in the fifth century BCE, discussion about the evolving ways of self-governance in Athens were helped along by a new word. It would be nice to know at just what moment in the ongoing deepening of Athens' democracy, Greek writers began to find this new word useful, but even if this is not known, it suggests they thought something was happening in Athens that had not been done before.

5.2 Beyond the Question of Athenian Distinctiveness[14] among Greek Instances, However, the More Difficult, and More Important, Question is Whether the Geography of Democratic Innovation is Much Broader[15]

Occupying a special place is the evidence from Ancient Mesopotamian and Mediterranean places, especially those that preceded the Greek polis, since such evidence could suggest that Ancient Greek practices may have had models more ancient still.[16] But even somewhat later places may give evidence of possible older traditions those places drew on. Making a strong case that claims of Athenian uniqueness are overdrawn is Benjamin Isakhan (2011), surveying aspects of governance in the Ancient Middle East that might reasonably called democratic. In that region, he finds assemblies that "presided over judicial decisions, debated issues of core concern to their community, such as war and peace, and elected the leaders of both the divine and earthly realms" (21). Some of these elements existed even in Assyria, despite its long-enduring reputation for despotic brutality (Isakhan 2012). To the argument that Mesopotamian evidence is too fragmentary to support such strong claims, Isakhan (2011, 19) ripostes that much of what is known about Greece, too, is inferred from fragmentary texts. Other ancient places that had popular assemblies, conceptions of authority limiting top-down power, or opportunities to dissent include Ancient Israel, Mari, Phoenicia, and Phoenicia's offshoot, Carthage (Fleming 2004; Isakhan 2012; Stockwell 2012; Stasavage 2020, 34–36). Of this last instance, Polybius, on the scene when the Romans annihilated it, observed:

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14 Further complicating things, Athenian institutions were not static. Cartledge (2016, 145) wrote that Athens went through "four or more" significantly distinct institutional configurations and there is much more evidence on its workings from "the third quarter of the fourth century BCE" (Cartledge 2016, 16) than for earlier or later moments.

15 Exceptionally helpful for surveying the literature are two collections edited by Benjamin Isakahn and Stockwell 2011, 2012.

16 Raaflaub (2009) makes a detailed case that the techniques of Athenian domination of its empire were strongly modeled on the empire of its despised Persian archenemy. But Ober (2015, 354n15) is skeptical because those techniques (for example, punitive destruction) are commonly reinvented by empires with no connections among them. If "Athenian democracy" includes Athenian rule over others and not just how Athenians governed themselves, this Persian roots story would support the main argument of the present essay, but Ober's reservations are plausible. Other evidence of Persian cultural influence on Athens at the time of its democracy's flourishing is treated in detail by M. C. Miller (1997).

> *In Carthage the voice of the people had become predominant in deliberations*, whereas in Rome the senate was at the full height of its powers. For the Carthaginians, it was the opinion of the greatest number that prevailed; for the Romans, that of the elite of its citizens.[17]

Classicist Kostas Vlassopoulos (2007) synthesized the ancient evidence and argued that there was a significant overlap in the political life of many ancient Mesopotamian and Mediterranean places, including Greek places. There were city-state cultures and city identities in many, Greek or not. There were practices of self-government, including "political deliberation," settling of disputes "judged by courts comprising members of the citizen body," "collective representation of the city" in dealing with external authority, "institutions and practices for communal sharing of community resources," and urban neighborhoods with their own assemblies (2007, 101–22). Mesopotamian practices of local self-government were embedded in larger imperial structures of varying intrusiveness, but most Greek places also dealt with other powerful and sometimes intrusive places (and it was Athens that was a major intruder on other Greek places). A range of people participated in these assemblies, something true beyond Greece. Vlassopoulos tellingly quoted an exercise for training scribes from Nippur in the second millennium BCE that recounts a murder trial judged by an assembly that includes "a bird-catcher, a potter, two gardeners and a soldier" and suggested that the fact that this was a training exercise indicates that there was nothing out of the common here (2007, 111). Other classicists might well object that none of this demonstrates that the *combination* of collective power, egalitarian access to decision-making responsibilities (through lot or right for all to come), and intensity of participation that developed in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE was *not* unique, a point to which I will return, but it does indicate that many places to which Greeks applied the label *demokratia* had significant commonalities with other ancient places.[18]

So was there some multiply repeated adoption of democratic practices in Mesopotamian and Mediterranean Antiquity, including in Greek places, but not uniquely? In which case, should scholars of political organization speak of not just Athenian, but Greek roots of Western democracy, and not just Greek but

17 Lancel (1995, 115–20; Polybius quote: 118, emphasis in Lancel) wrote that the power of Carthage's assembly was growing even after the moment described by Polybius.

18 Vlassopoulos (2007, 104–5) also rejected the influential distinction made by Moses Finley between a Greek culture that sharply differentiated "slavery" from "freedom" and other ancient places that did not, by arguing that Mesopotamian sources also recognize this divide (The sharpness of the divide and the everyday presence of the enslaved, some have argued, supported an Athenian self-understanding as "free.") Whoever insists on hunting for ancient roots of modern democracy, Strauss (1998, 153) urged, "must look not only at Athens but elsewhere," noting specifically that "[o]ther ancient societies afforded certain kinds of freedom and equality, particularly to women, that Athens did not" and finds "doubly problematic" any claim of an "Athenian genealogy of democracy."

Mediterranean roots, and not just Mediterranean alone but also Mesopotamian? It is worth noting as well that there is evidence of such practices in places quite far from the Mediterranean and from Mesopotamia, too. Some Ancient Greek writers used their own categories in describing the social and political institutions encountered by the army of Alexander the Great when it reached northern India in 324 BCE, and Greek accounts were followed by Roman ones. They encountered communities where assemblies made decisions and prior monarchies had been superseded; they did not hesitate to use the word *demokratia* for many of these self-governing places far to the east, even though other writers had tended to see democracy as uniquely Greek. More recent scholars have tried to understand how broadly or narrowly these assemblies beyond Greece were constituted. Muhlberger (2011) reviews the difficulty of working with the available sources and opts for "quasi-democratic institutions" (2011, 49).[19]

But let us look beyond the Old World.[20] French and English colonists in North America encountered Creeks, Cherokees, Choctaws, Iroquois, Hurons, and others and learned of ways different from remembered Europe across the two centuries before some of those colonists threw off British rule and sought their own alternative ways in an act of revolutionary violence that is one of the launching points of modern democracy. Bruce Johansen (2012, 233) introduced his succinct survey of the European reaction to these groups: "Europe did not discover America, but America was quite a discovery for Europe." The peoples just named, and others, governed themselves as confederacies. Among the best known to the English settlers were the people they knew as the Iroquois or the Five Nations (eventually the Six Nations), whose constituent groups chose delegates to a central council, who had regular procedures for enacting amendable laws, whose formal leaders could be impeached for various norm violations, whose Great Law of Peace supported freedom of religious practice, and who had a right to ask the Confederacy Council for redress of grievances. Described in this way – I follow the summary of Johansen (2012) – one has to at least wonder whether the foundational figures of modern democracy on the Eastern side of the Atlantic found inspiration from the peoples among whom they lived as well as from some (supposed) continuous tradition stretching back two millennia.[21] At least Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson found much food

19 An important qualification: with the subordination of Greek places to Macedonian and later Roman empire, *demokratia* came to be applied to non-monarchical rule that earlier would have been categorized as oligarchy. As Cartledge (2016, 245) put it: "This later *demokratia* "involved some devaluation, if not actual degradation, of the word's original force and meaning."

20 Some of the following discussion draws on Markoff (2015).

21 Not just the Iroquois. The Huron had communities of up to 2,000 inhabitants and collectively were about 20,000 people. Trigger (2002, 80–96; quotations from 143) describes the decision-making of both the individual communities and the Huron collectively and, at both levels of government, the

for thought in these non-European institutions that fascinated them (Johansen 2012, also 1982). Moreover, images associated with Natives were often deployed by protesting British subjects in North America in displaying a rebellious identity. Generations of U.S. school children learn of the Boston Tea Party, when protestors dressed as Native Americans, but not many learn that the Tea Partyers sang:

Rally Mohawks, and bring your axes.
And tell King George we'll pay no taxes.
On his foreign tea (Johansen 2012, 238).

And startling knowledge of new (to them) New World practices impressed other Europeans, including in Europe, too. Here is a Spanish account from the 1580s:

> A number of the peoples and nations of the Indies have never suffered Kings nor lords of an absolute and sovereign sort. They live in common and create or ordain certain Captains and Princes for certain occasions only, during which time they obey their rule. Afterward, their leaders return to their ordinary status. The greatest part of the New World governs itself in this fashion. (Quoted in Brandon 1986, 13–14)

Of course, this is not the only form of government the Spanish found in the New World. Today's curious visitors to Mexico are likely to be anticipating seeing the material remains left by the extremely hierarchical Aztec or Maya empires. But before he got to the Aztec capital, Hernán Cortés encountered the Tlaxcalans, eager to throw off Aztec domination, and was struck that their "form of government … is almost like that of Venice, Genoa, or Pisa, because there is no one supreme ruler …. In undertaking wars, they all gather together, and thus assembled they decide and plan them" (quote from Stasavage' s [2020, 41] review of the recent scholarship that leads him to conclude "that Cortés was broadly right").

Awareness of others' practices, and seeing themselves in other's eyes, brought new ways Europeans might look at Europe. Appiah (2021), reviewing recent reinterpretations of large trends in human history, incisively calls attention to some sixteenth-century testimony from France. Montaigne (2022 [1580], 190) recounts the reaction of three Tupi men of Brazil, brought to Rouen in 1562 at the same time as twelve-year-old King Charles IX was visiting. The Tupi described the three things they were struck by. They marveled that "large men with beards – strong and armed … would obey a child." They also marveled at the coexistence of

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institutionalization of the principle that no "individual or group could be committed to a particular course of action unless they personally had consented to it." This meant decision-making by consensus, following extensive discussion in which proposals were modified until consensus was achieved, and it also meant that formal leaders had no coercive authority. "Only public opinion, not leaders, might intimidate individuals or groups into supporting, or at least not opposing, a policy of which they did not approve."

"some men overstuffed with all sorts of rich commodities" while others "were begging at their doors, emaciated from hunger and poverty"; it seemed especially strange to the Tupis that those "in such desperate need could put up with such an injustice and did not seize the others by the throat or set fire to their houses." Whether Montaigne is putting this critique in the mouth of one of the indigenous people of the New World or is repeating what he heard through an inadequate intermediary ("so ill an interpreter"), it's an instance of how eye-opening such encounters could be.[22]

As accounts of the cultures, institutions, and practices of the New World, along with observations of Africa and Asia proliferated, Europeans' imagination of new possibilities expanded, triggered by but not limited to novel empirical data. Some, like Thomas More in 1516, began to imagine utopias with improved social and political arrangements (Arciniegas 1986).[23]

It was not only in North America, but wherever they went, that Europeans could have observed democratic practice, because, as Muhlberger and Paine (1993) argued in the still-new *Journal of World History* that had been launched but a few years earlier, institutions embodying practices reasonably called democratic have existed at the local level on every continent inhabited by human beings. They point to councils in Uganda and Nigeria,[24] republican government in India (encountered a long time ago by Alexander's army), self-government by Buddhist communities, and the collective management of temples and clan affairs in Chinese villages (that coexisted with the imperial institutions that so impressed Max Weber and many other Western scholars).[25]

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22 Montaigne reflects on the difficulty of communicating with those of distinct culture and language and wryly commented on the remaining thing his Tupi sources had found noteworthy: "To my intense annoyance, I have forgotten the third," an early cautionary methodological lesson in the importance of good field notes (Montaigne 2022 [1580]).

23 In an enormous book urging rethinking the history of human social and political arrangements, anthropologist David Graeber and archeologist David Wengrow (Graeber and Wengrow 2021) opend with an extended argument that a Huron critique of European institutions, as encountered by them in French North America, played a major role in sparking Europeans to rethink their own arrangements in the Age of Enlightenment. Almost immediately upon the appearance of Graeber and Wengrow's work, a huge critical literature was swirling about it, of which one important example is Appiah (2021).

24 There is a literature on both the diversity of precolonial African political institutions and the diversity of forms of subjugation under various imperial centers. For a survey, see Owusu (2012). A classic collection is Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940).

25 Muhlberger and Paine (1993, 32) pointed to such institutions in ancient Scandinavia, Malaysia, medieval England, the Burmese highlands, central Europe, and precolonial New Zealand, in addition to places already mentioned here. Although they write of "quasi-democratic institutions," they also explain that this term may obscure that their "examples are roughly as democratic as those cities considered democratic by Aristotle" (Muhlberger and Paine (1993, 26, 28n10).

European colonizers might subordinate or eliminate such institutions, for example, imposing central rule in African places where it had not previously existed – for ease of control and revenue extraction – and then later claim the indigenous needed Europeans to teach them about the democracy of which they had been supposedly ignorant. But challenging the "it-all-came-from-the-West" story is research by Giuliano and Nunn (2013), drawing on systematized ethnographic materials[26] that demonstrate that where there were past traditions of local democracy, scores on a widely-used measure of modern national democracy are higher. This finding was deepened analytically by Bentzen, Hariri, and Robinson (2017), who show that what matters is whether locally dominant indigenous groups had village democracy, like the Ashanti of today's Ghana, whose popularly chosen ruler was removable. By contrast, the Baganda of today's Uganda, whose authoritarian practices were privileged by the British colonial authority, did not sustain such a tradition.

Their summary of their statistical analysis: "a substantial and robust association between indigenous political institutions and contemporary national regimes" (Bentzen, Hariri, and Robinson 2017, 710). But they also show colonial disruption: Colonies of long duration and colonies with large numbers of colonial settlers are less likely to exhibit this persistence of local democracy (Bentzen, Hariri, and Robinson 2017, 705–6). Stasavage (2020) has drawn on this work in trying to develop a common framework for thinking about local, traditional, indigenous democracy and the national practices of the modern era. What this research demonstrates is that precolonial political practices left a legacy for postcolonial practices of the recently independent national states, despite the intervening colonial period. Postcolonial democracy owes something to precolonial practice and not just to what European colonizers inspired or imposed.

Surveying the issues reviewed here, anthropologist Jack Goody (2006, 50), put it this way: "Democracy is assumed to be a characteristic of the Greeks and opposed to the 'despotism' or 'tyranny' of their Asiatic neighbors." And Goody concluded: "The Greeks, of course, invented the word 'democracy,' possibly were the first to give the term a written shape for others to read, but they did not invent the practice of democracy" and pointed his readers to the LoDagaa of Ghana among whom he did fieldwork.

26 Both statistical analyses used the worldwide ethnographic materials assembled by George Peter Murdock and the Polity IV dataset.

6 An Error in Logic

Beyond the empirical evidence that seriously challenges the claim that ancient roots of modern democracy stretch back to Athens, and not to other places, including places incorporated into Europe-centered empires since the late fifteenth century, there is a serious logical error that is even more fundamental. New empirical evidence might, in principle, alter the picture just painted (although the more recent evidence runs in the direction of supporting it). But to the extent that Athens was unique, even to the extent of standing apart from other ancient Greek places, those putatively unique features not only distinguish Athens from other past instances of practices reasonably called democratic, but distinguish Athens radically from every twenty-first-century democratic state. In fact, the founders of modern democratic states in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were at pains to distinguish what they were creating from ancient democracy. They limited the role of popular input into national decision-making to occasional opportunities to choose the incumbents of office in a structured national state and did not, at first, call their new system democracy. Differently put, evidence of Athenian uniqueness actually undercuts, rather than sustains, any claim that it is an earlier indicator of some distinctive Western tradition that starts in Greece and winds up with the rich democratic allies of today, the concept Appiah (2016, 11) summarized as "Plato to Nato."

Finding some unique features would hardly be a demonstration of a distinctly Western democratic vocation. Suppose we could list all the Athenian practices that together make up a combination uniquely existing in Athens. Dismissing the evidence for the existence of democratic practices in other places if the full package is not found there would also eliminate every twenty-first-century democracy, too. If one dismisses evidence of citizen voice in Ancient Mesopotamia, of an egalitarian ideology in Ancient Israel, of assemblies in Ancient India, or, for that matter, of local decision-making in countless villages on every inhabited continent, because these merely carry some democratic features and not the full Athenian package, we should also dismiss the modern democracy of the national states launched at the end of the eighteenth century, too, since our contemporary governing institutions are not much like those of Athens either. The achievement of some measure of electoral accountability to citizens of those in control of a vast state apparatus, a central component of what is often meant by democracy today, involves a set of practices radically different from the direct-decision-making by citizens, a very large proportion of whom would serve a very intensive time in governing roles, and who had no huge state apparatus to supervise at all. While many have doubted that anything resembling Athens would be feasible on a scale larger than an ancient

city-state, others have questioned whether any Greek polis was a state at all, point out the rural character of many of them, and therefore see "city-state" as a misnomer. That's how unlike any modern national state, even democratic ones, Athens actually was (Cartledge 2016, 37–38).

It is a familiar irony that many Athenians and many twenty-first century Americans would be most unlikely to recognize the other's practices as democratic, because they violate important tenets of their own. Americans would find incompatible the exclusion of Athenian women from political participation, the presence of a large enslaved population, and the limited nature of countervailing institutional checks on the power of decision-making bodies, and might well be dubious as well that Athens, even in the Athenians' own classificatory terminology, was anything other than an "oligarchy" – rule by the few – by virtue of how many people did not participate in rule. Athenians might well have no idea how to classify the United States at all, or any twenty-first century national democracy, since all involve huge, powerful bureaucracies that make these states quite different than what fit into any ancient political categories. Beyond that, in our twenty-first century democratic states, many spend their adult life working within an authoritarian hierarchical structure, in our factories, corporations, and universities (for example) (Anderson 2017). This is radically incompatible with Athenians' strong negative valuation of being under the authority of another; Athenians might well be astonished that anyone could call this way of life "democracy," including the professors lecturing on U.S. democracy in such universities. But beyond irony, this is another indication that "democracy" remains an essentially contested concept.[27]

Manville and Ober (2023; quotations from 3) argue that the common element in all democracy is that there is "no boss," that "[d]emocracy pertains when extensive, socially diverse bodies of citizens govern themselves, accepting no ruler except for one another." The political histories of classical Athens and the contemporary U.S. can be brought into a common framework, even though *how* they govern themselves, *who* are understood to be citizens, and *what policies* those citizens establish can vary radically. As classicist Mogens Herman Hansen (2005, 22), put it: "Not one single Athenian institution seems to have left its mark on posterity neither in the Middle Ages nor in the Early Modern period." And looking ahead to the Age of Revolution, he added: "There seems to be no field of government in which modern representative

27 In defining democracy one might lean on Wittgenstein's notion of *family resemblance*, the idea that a group of things can be connected via overlapping similarities despite no single defining feature being necessarily common to all of them (Wittgenstein 2009, 67–77). This would still leave alive the questions of what was, and was not, unique to Athens and how similar or different are the twenty-first century political systems likely to be called democracy. One of the keenest of its scholars, Josiah Ober (2017) suggested an answer in seeing Athens as embodying a kind of democracy without the individual-rights-based liberalism with which modern democracies have been intertwined.

democracy has learned from studying the Athenian example." And Hansen added as well that "during the last generation" some are claiming Athenian inspiration, but these admire Athens not as the foundation of what we have today but as showing the way towards the possibility of something better. Hansen is mistaken, however; those constructing the new political systems in the Age of Revolution *had* learned from studying the Athenian example – they learned what not to do. Consider *Federalist* no. 55, making the case for the superiority of the new U.S. Constitution over ancient practice: "Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates; every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob." Or *Federalist* no. 63, noting that "the true distinction" between ancient government and the new governments being enacted in the new country "lies in the total exclusion of the people, in their collective capactity, from any share in the latter," the typography ensuring that readers would not miss how different from ancient democracy was the new creation.[28]

7 Twenty-First Century Questions: Why Should Any of This Matter? Some Reflections on the History of the Future of Democracy

In the twenty-first century, democracy faces many challenges and its future is uncertain. Does a backward look help? There are important, large scholarly debates where getting this democratic history right matters. The canonically classical sociological thinkers tended to see Western history as linking an ancient Western past to a dynamically modern present of which political democracy is a facet, while treating the rest of the world as thereby deficient. The conflation of two questions fueled the emergence of social science disciplines during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the wealthy countries in what is now called the Global North. Haunted by the conviction that the present day was in many ways very different

28 A central theme in Manville and Ober (2023) is that all democracy, including that of Athens and of twenty-first century instances have in common a spirit of compromise that makes possible the endurance of a common self-governing political community among citizens who passionately disagree on policies. They point out that one delegate to the Constitutional Convention praised "Solon who gave the Athenians not the best Govt. he could devise; but the best they [would] receive." Jefferson also claimed Solon as a model of forbearance, essential for continuing as a community. But even if we attribute some impact of ancient wisdom on some of the founding generation of modern democracy (as opposed to discovering in practice that their own profound divisions made compromise necessary) this still would not demonstrate any learning from antiquity about specific procedures, policies, or definitions of citizenship (Manville and Ober (2023, 162, 194), especially as much of that remembered ancient wisdom was about what was wrong with Athenian practice.

from the past and noting the growing economic disparities of a West and a Rest, nineteenth-century thinkers sought to explain this distinctive, modern Western present in terms of some distinctive Western past. Something about that past would explain why modernity, eventually, happened here and not somewhere else and these conflated questions – modern distinctiveness and Western distinctiveness – were central to Sociology's canonical theorists (Seidman 2013), whose developing answers drew on their own study of Antiquity (McCarthy 2003). These questions raise the further question of what history is worth studying, and therefore bears on the structures of knowledge of the social sciences. Very helpful is Go (2023) on what he strikingly calls "epistemic exclusion."

I conclude here by noting how this simplification of democracy's history amounts to geographic tunnel vision with regard to resources for building democracy's future in our time. I shall do so by sketching how the future of democracy was seen from the Age of Revolution onwards.[29]

In the course of revolutionary upheavals on both sides of the Atlantic at the end of the eighteenth century, people began to use the term "democracy" for the new institutions being brought into existence. The word evoked a distant past, a collection of practices being enacted in the present, and a future that inspired hope in some and fear in others. Significant aspects of the subsequent history of democracy can be understood as responses to the recurrent propensity of democratic political life to generate hopeful and fearful futures and innovative efforts to realize or prevent those futures. Such efforts have intermittently but very importantly redefined democracy since the 1780s.

Ideas about the future have shaped the debates of recent decades about democracy. When the defeat of the fascist powers eight decades ago was followed over the next generation by the ending of a half-millennium of overseas empire, hope for a more democratic world blossomed. Scholars debated whether what mattered most was economic development, supposed to mute destructive conflict with its larger pie to divide, or participation in something like what was called "Western culture," the supposed bedrock of essential democratic values. The central question animating much of this literature was to understand under what circumstances places in Latin America, Asia, and Africa might come to develop political institutions that resembled those already achieved in Western Europe, North America, and a few other places. The desired future was prefigured by the present state of the politically, economically and culturally favored places, three fortunate circumstances thought

29 The next few paragraphs draw on Markoff (2019) and borrow some of its language but take its arguments in new directions.

to support each other; scholarly debate was about how to get there. A significant complication in this story is that important actors favored other futures.

It seems an error, however, to limit thinking about the history of the future to trying to understand why some countries came to develop institutions that resemble those of countries currently called democratic ones. The role of the future in the entire history of modern democracy suggests a significantly enlarged and more challenging research agenda. Let us date modern democracy from the 1780s, when serious political struggles began to be described as "democrats" versus "aristocrats," the first term a new coinage and the second used with much greater frequency than earlier. Despite their origins in revolution, when the new elites in both the United States and France wrote down the rules for their future political systems, the role of most people was to be very limited, largely confined to showing up to vote for those who would make the laws while many others were not to vote at all.

Up to this point, democracy was more often than not a very negative term among those whose education drew on the unhappy lessons drawn from Antiquity, very much including ancient authors.[30] The lessons were many: democracy would invite insurrection in which the better-off would be expropriated by the resentful lower classes; the elites would be encouraged to recruit plebeian followers and would fall on each other; if ordinary people actually acquired power, they would make foolish or wicked choices; and it was hopelessly impractical for a large modern country lacking the local community of the ancient city-state. Nonetheless, rather than simply describe the new institutions being forged on both sides of the Atlantic as the *rejection* of ancient democracy during the Age of Revolution, people soon began to speak of those institutions as a *new kind* of democracy, without the defects of earlier versions.

In August 1789, the French National Assembly issued a *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* as a first installment towards a constitution. The Assembly declared it acted as the "representatives of the French people," that "No body and no individual may exercise authority that does not emanate expressly from [the Nation]," and that citizens would participate "by themselves or through their representatives." It left unresolved the ways in which citizens would choose representatives and in what ways citizens would participate in person (Déclaration 1789). But the finished constitution of 1791 made clear that participation in person was to be

30 Historians are only now toward the beginning of explaining how the once notorious and deeply contested term "democracy" began its trajectory toward its late twentieth-century status as a virtual synonym for legitimate political order. Recent landmark contributions taking the story into the mid-nineteenth century include Innes and Philp (2013 and 2018). John Dunn's long engagement with this still puzzling story continues to inspire (for example, 2014).

minimal, confined to the act of voting for representatives. In both the U.S. and France, moreover, representation was filtered through a multistage process.

But not everyone accepted the plan. In France, urban neighborhoods were being run by frequently-meeting, decree-issuing, and weapon-wielding citizen activists, disinclined to abandon the making of their own history. In the countryside, although the National Assembly announced "the abolition of the feudal regime in its entirety," villagers continued to mount insurrections for years to the disappointment, anger, and bafflement of the legislators.

Even when those foundational revolutionary explosions faded into the past, challenging movements did not end for several reasons. First, the basic legitimating claim of popular sovereignty justified action by the supposed sovereign rulers – "the people." Second, institutionalizing contestable elections as a key mechanism fostered movements as well. Elections make numbers of adherents matter, diffuse skills in political organizing, and get political actors thinking in longer time perspectives and about more complex campaigns than putting together a one-shot, local insurrection. Election-contesting parties and social movements are frequently intertwined, and both are often engaged in connecting local, national, and transnational issues.

Third, democracy recurrently generates strong emotions around its eternal failures to live up to its promises, while it also generates hope that these failures can be remedied. Anger and hope in combination are great energizers of movements. Movements challenging the democracy that has been inherited in the name of a democracy still to be created have been a dynamic aspect of the subsequent history of democracy, a history therefore animated by a vision of a better future.

And fourth, the foundational texts announced openness to future change. The new constitutions contained an element of self-subversion by providing amendment mechanisms for generating a more perfect future and were launched amid talk of rights that were only partly spelled out in those foundational texts, opening the possibility that there were other rights that could be claimed by some future generation. Or rather the certainty that there were other rights. Everyone who grows up in the U.S. has learned the lines about the rights of every human being: "among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." No words are more important in this text than "among these." There are other rights for the future to figure out.[31] We are invited to find our own words.

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31 The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was understood to be merely "a provisional text" from a work in progress (Baker 1990, 269; Rials 1988; Van Kley 1994, 72). Note that the new French constitutions that rapidly succeeded each other in the revolutionary years contained revised declarations of rights.

Consider the revolutionary constitution of Pennsylvania from the fall of 1776, whose authors were setting down their plan "for governing their future society" for "the people of this State, and their posterity." It very importantly provides that their plan could be altered "in such articles as shall hereafter on experience be found to require improvement."[32] Democratic claims have been empowering rulers since the late eighteenth century and by the late twentieth century were doing so on a greatly expanded geographic scale; but these democratic claims have also made it difficult for rulers to wield their power unhindered by challengers demanding improvements.

So beyond asking which other parts of the world will establish and maintain practices that are similar to those in countries currently recognized as democracies, scholars need to be wondering about which sorts of practices will *reshape* what is meant by democracy in the future, in which places these are being developed, and with what consequences. The historical record by no means suggests that those places will invariably be in the current wealthy democracies or in places at the apex of the world distribution of power and wealth. Women's suffrage, for example, was rejected by every new democracy of the revolutionary era but has become a practice of all democratic states today. This was often an innovation in semiperipheral or peripheral locations (Markoff 2003). To take up a few haphazard examples, women got equal voting rights in New Zealand before they did in Britain, in Finland before they did in France. Just consider for a moment that Thai women voted on equal terms with men in local elections in 1897. A survey of the state of democracy in, let us say, 1890 that only asked to what extent people were adopting British or French or U.S. practices would have missed some of the places where democracy was being *reinvented*.

Away from the usual geography of power, there are important movements that have often been forgotten. It is common to think of nineteenth-century democratic developments in Latin America as essentially derivative, of borrowing from U.S. or European models, and without much long-term success at that. But the matter is more complex when one considers that the new states of Spanish America for the most part rejected Europe's aristocracies and monarchies and were well in advance of the U.S. in abolishing slavery. There were movements in nineteenth-century Latin America that did not see themselves as copying Europe or the United States but that did see themselves as in the vanguard of a transnational struggle for democracy (Sanders 2014). It would be good to know more, and to know about many more places. Consider for an instant the Plan de Iguala of 1821, a Mexican project for a new government that stated: "All the inhabitants of New Spain, without any distinction between Europeans, Africans, or Indians are citizens … and have access to all

32 Constitution of Pennsylvania, Sept. 28, 1776, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/pa08.asp.

employments according to their merits and virtues." Linda Colley has shown that this text struck a responsive chord among the excluded in Ireland and that it was published in the *Calcutta Journal*, India's first daily newspaper, along with other Latin American constitutions (Colley 2021, 139–41, 145–46).

We scholars need to do more than ask why it is that countries today vary in the degree to which their political institutions resemble those of other countries currently held to be democratic ones, a question that has generated much splendid research. We also need to be thinking about the ways in which new institutions and practices may come into existence that will, again, redefine democracy. If we start to think about which practices, carried out in which places, could be where democracy is being reimagined, we enter a very different kind of investigation, and may need new conceptual and methodological tools. There are many ideas out there for reinventing democracy in today's time of disappointment in the political institutions from yesterday, from modifications in voting procedures to new mechanisms for participation, among which "participatory budgeting" has already occasioned a large, splendid literature, and new forms of citizen self-organization as well. Ideas for reshaping democracy in quite fundamental ways sometimes push in very different directions. Note that when the President of the United States on January 6, 2021, encouraged his assembled supporters to stop with violence the installation of his successor, he called on them to defend democracy (Naylor 2021).

After 1989, some contended that democracy as then practiced in some wealthy countries was now firmly established as the universal model for a desirable political future. But by the third decade of the twenty-first century, such certainty about a democratic future has been looking increasingly dubious – as demonstrated by the authoritarian turns in some places, vigorous authoritarian movements in others, and the frequency with which citizens of established democracies had become extremely critical of their own country's practices.[33] A variety of serious challenges with troubling implications for democracy are increasingly evident. These challenges include the transfer of decision-making to transnational bodies with little accountability to publics, enhanced state capacities for surveillance of citizens (often promoted under the guise of fighting crime or terrorism or disease), and the evident failure of governments, including democratic ones, to protect citizens from transnational financial meltdowns, new pathogens, or global climate change. The vast efforts of people to escape from poverty and violence to places with less poverty and violence are raising big issues on a world scale of inclusion and exclusion from basic human rights.

33 There is extensive empirical documentation of this unhappy trend. See, for example, the annual reports of Freedom House showing a global erosion of democracy from the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century (for example, Repucci 2020), a trend that, as of this writing, has not abated.

Faced with these challenges, many hope for a reanimation of democracy and we could scour the past in the hope of bringing back some moment we feel sadly lost or some other moment that seems a promising start that was never built upon. Or we could look to create something else. The historical record suggests that for more than two centuries, the new democracy of the future was often not invented in the established centers of wealth and power, even though the wealthy and powerful places sometimes played pivotal roles in the diffusion of new practices (Markoff 1999). New practices keep being created. For example, there are some interesting examples of countries where non-citizen residents can vote in all elections, whether local or national: Uruguay, New Zealand, Chile, Malawi, and Ecuador, none world centers of wealth and power and none in Western Europe or North America. The earliest to do so was Uruguay in 1934 (Altman et al. 2023). If the rarity of adoption of this practice makes it hard to imagine that it would expand further, recall how improbable voting rights for women seemed for decades after the launching of modern democracy. Of course, in our time the forces advocating moving in the opposite direction are very powerful, too, with proposals for making democracy less inclusive, as in the promise of presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2024 to abolish birthright citizenship in the U.S. The future directions of democracy are unknown. As we grope for ideas about what a better future might look like, and how we might get there, it would help if we saw a much wider world, rather than limit our vision to a tunnel running from a prosperous Aegean city two and a half millennia in the past to the wealthy troubled democracies of today, and consider a broader array of human collective efforts at self-rule.

Existing democracy will continue to be challenged by proponents of democratic renewal who hope to move towards superior futures as well as by movements that hope to ward off futures that will be worse. We scholars need to study not only the global diffusion of the institutions that are now called democratic but also to examine those hopes and fears about tomorrow, the innovative practices they impel, and their multiple, geographically and temporally diverse, sources of inspiration.

8 Conclusions

It no longer seems plausible to see the political practices of Ancient Athens as a unique and shining early high point in a distinctive Western democratic tradition. When later Western thinkers looked back at Athens, including during the Age of Revolution that launched modern democracy, they looked askance, not in admiration, often echoing ancient Greek criticism. For centuries, those looking back included Muslims and Orthodox Christians, not just Western Europeans. In the nineteenth century and more recently, when social movements, political parties, and

states were increasingly likely to identify with democracy, Athens did receive more favorable notice, but just what was admired varied widely. Recent research and syntheses, moreover, have been showing that very generic claims of Athenian democratic distinctiveness are doubtful: quite a number of places at various times seem to fit the rather broad use of *demokratia* of ancient writers, not just ancient Greek places and not just European places, some of which were noticed by empire-building Europeans many centuries later. And finally, the more convincing the specific claims of Athenian uniqueness, the less doubtful, are beside the point: the truly exceptional features of Athenian democracy remain just as exceptional in our time as they were in their own moment. For those who hope for democracy in our twenty-first century, it seems likely that continued fascination with how Athenians ran their affairs two and a half millennia ago has little to do with fondly recalling a distinguished progenitor of our own cherished institutions, but much to do with longing for something radically different, and better, than what we feel stuck with. And we also need to look for inspiration beyond Athens.

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