

## DEMOCRACY AS IDEAL AND DEMOCRACY AS STRUGGLE

RICHARD BOURKE

School of History, Queen Mary University of London  
E-mail: [r.bourke@qmul.ac.uk](mailto:r.bourke@qmul.ac.uk)

---

*Toward Democracy* traces a remarkable journey across two continents. Its aim, as the subtitle indicates, is to chart “the struggle for self-rule” in European and American thought. Its scope and erudition are at once imposing and inspiring. Not only has the author mastered several historical literatures, he also demonstrates considerable knowledge of a range of primary materials spanning ancient, European and American history.

The book begins, chronologically, with the democracy of the ancient Greeks before shifting its focus to the New England townships of the seventeenth century. The story next moves to the English Civil Wars and then through the intellectual culture of the European Enlightenment before turning to the American and French Revolutions. It concludes with an overview of nineteenth-century developments. Throughout, as the Introduction makes plain, Kloppenberg is determined to avoid teleology. His resolution here is welcome, since teleology is exactly what his title seems to promise. Yet in framing his narrative in terms of a journey *toward* democracy, it is important to realize that there is no prescribed direction of travel guiding the story as a whole: “The history of democracy has never been unilinear, nor its outcome foreordained” (14). We shall see that there is a difference between a linear trajectory and a development that is preordained.

Kloppenbergr reiterates and clarifies his point on the penultimate page of his study: “Democracy will always be unfinished”, he writes (709). If democracy in its final form is never going to arrive then there can be no question of teleological progression. Yet this conclusion sits uncomfortably with an earlier statement in the book. “Even if the history of democracy has not culminated in triumph,” Kloppenberg argues, “it does possess a certain directionality” (14). How are we to reconcile these assertions? On the one hand democracy is a story without end, and so its *telos* must be undetermined. On the other hand it has come ever closer to being realized, and so its history can be narrated in terms of advancement toward a goal.

It may be that Kloppenberg thinks that the endless deferral of a goal means that progress in a given direction cannot be teleological in nature. Yet this, surely, would be a mistaken assumption. For instance, it might be claimed, as Tocqueville proposes in *Democracy in America*, that progress toward democracy is “a providential fact” (*un fait providentiel*) without the journey reaching its destination.<sup>1</sup> So it is possible to think of history as guided by a plan without its terminus ever quite arriving. In that case our fate would unfold toward a specified end point without us finally securing its attainment. Is this what Kloppenberg’s title actually implies—that history has been moving in a definite direction without any plausible hope of consummation?

Kloppenberg would surely reject this account of his project. His message might accordingly be interpreted as follows: it so happens that the past four centuries have seen the steady growth of democracy, yet this development was in no sense “foreordained.” If nothing has been predetermined, then it must have happened by chance. On this reading, conflicting purposes over time have fortuitously resulted in the rise of democracy. At times Kloppenberg’s treatment seems to point in this direction. The book, he tells us, is concerned with “contested meanings” (3). Therefore democracy must be a purely contingent outcome arising from the process of contestation. A diverse assortment of values was in contention, we are told—self-government and popular sovereignty among them. A struggle over their significance thus drove progress toward democracy.

If this is right then we need to ask how the struggle in fact proceeded. *Toward Democracy* is confident about its point of departure: “Athens emerged as a full-fledged, self-conscious democracy in the years following 508 BCE, when Cleisthenes was recalled to power by the people of Athens” (28). Here the author relies on widely shared historiographical assumptions. However, the evidence of the historical record is altogether less categorical. Cleisthenes, as far as we can tell, never used the word *democratia*. According to Herodotus his reforms were framed in terms of *isonomia* (equality under laws) and *isegoria* (equal right to free speech).<sup>2</sup> It is true that Herodotus, writing three-quarters of a century after the fact, went on to equate Cleisthenes’ *isonomia* with *democratia*.<sup>3</sup> But Greek historiography was riddled with its own anachronisms, and self-conscious democracy—as, for example, Christian Meier and P. J. Rhodes have argued—might not have emerged until late in the 460s BCE, after the Persian Wars and the abolition of the Areopagus Council.<sup>4</sup>

1 Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique, tome premier* (Paris, 1868), 7.

2 Herodotus, V, 78.

3 Ibid., VI, 131.

4 Christian Meier, *Die Entstehung des Politischen bei den Griechen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1980); P. J. Rhodes, *Athenian Democracy and Modern Ideology* (London, 2003).

While Kloppenberg is clear about what he sees as the advent of democracy, he is more cagy about how he understands its character. This is reflected in how he represents its sources. “Democracy in Greece originated in religious practice,” he claims (27)—yet no evidence is presented for what *prima facie* is an odd claim. The Homeric world is also viewed as a preparatory moment on the ground that “individual choices” were prized in the wider culture and that some form of “assembly” is recorded as having existed (28). Yet one might enjoy free choice under any number of regimes, and the Athenians never reduced the meaning of their democracy to mere participation in the *ecclesia*. Sparta—never a democracy—had an assembly too.

Solon is also significant for Kloppenberg: transforming Athens in the decades before the birth of Cleisthenes, he is alleged to have opened the door to what later became democracy (28). However, since democracy lay on the far side of two revolutions in government one might just as well say that Solon prepared for the tyranny of Peisistratus.

The process by which the democracy of Athens was formed will forever remain shrouded in obscurity, and so conjecture can hardly be resisted. Yet this does not free us from the obligation to specify what we are speculating about. What were the essential features of ancient democracy? On this question Kloppenberg’s text is surprisingly thin. There are, of course, some good reasons for reticence. As A. H. M. Jones pointed out back in 1953, much of our understanding of the Athenian constitution depends on the testimony of those thinkers who were most critical of democracy—the “Old Oligarch,” Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is possible to exaggerate the gravity of this problem. Every historical source stands in need of critical assessment given the partiality of its perspective. Despite the generality of this problem, historians of Athens since at least the Second World War have underlined what has seemed to them the *peculiar* distortions for which these classic texts are presumed to have been responsible. Yet this caution betrays an ideological bent as much as it reveals a difficulty with the sources: unable to accept that Thucydides or Plato might have had their own good reasons for distrusting ancient democracy, scholars have often treated their accounts of popular rule as mere vehicles for systematic prejudice.

Avoiding any detailed reconstruction of the classic historical and philosophical accounts of democracy, Kloppenberg opts instead to pick out some features that he deems fundamental: sortition, equality and autonomy (30). This selection leaves a lot of further work to be done. For a fuller picture we would still need to reconstruct the various theories of equality and their relations to the idea of autonomy. More importantly, in addition we would have to understand

---

5 A. H. M. Jones, “The Athenian Democracy and Its Critics”, *Cambridge Historical Journal* 11/1 (1953), 1–26.

the relation of these pivotal norms to the institutions of Athenian public life. *Toward Democracy* does not tell us much about the constitutional structure of ancient Athens, or about how sortition actually functioned. The book is silent on the Law Courts and the Council of 500, is sketchy on the operation of the Assembly, and does not deal with the hundreds of magistracies that administered the city—without which we cannot fathom what democracy in practice meant.

This is hardly fatal to Kloppenberg's bigger picture since (as he puts it himself) "no direct line connects early Greek democracy to more recent forms of self-government" (27). This seems correct, but what are its consequences? Kloppenberg's phraseology leads us to expect an account of the indirect links that bridge the chasm between ancient and modern democracy. Instead we get an excursus through various episodes in intellectual history spanning Cicero, Polybius, Augustine, Aquinas, Marsilius of Padua and Calvin, none of whom was a product of a democratic culture nor had very much to say about democracy as a regime form. Yet there is one theme on which this diversion has an important bearing. Whereas ancient democracy developed in the context of "pagan" societies, its modern form first evolved in the midst of Judeo-Christian culture. Augustine, Aquinas and Marsilius exercised some influence on the character of Christian morality and political thought, and on that basis they might be said to have played a role in the history of democracy. However, any number of past values might have impacted on the rise of democracy without us assuming that they were integral to its formation.

Nonetheless, for Kloppenberg, Judaism and Christianity are directly important to the tale he tells since they created conditions under which "reciprocity" would ultimately prosper, and reciprocal "respect" is seen as enabling democratic government (40–41, 709). However, if this thesis tells us something about Kloppenberg's understanding of the background culture against which modern democracy developed, it tells us nothing about its debts to the ancient world. By the time *Toward Democracy* arrives at the age of Enlightenment, which is presented as having set the scene for the rebirth of democratic government, all concern with even a mediated connection to the ancients has been quietly dropped. Montesquieu, Hume, Rousseau and Smith are conjointly billed as having "helped inspire the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century" (192). Yet the fact that even Rousseau castigated Athenian democracy draws no comment when it is mentioned in the text (233). Between them, Kloppenberg's leading figures of the Enlightenment are credited with linking ideas of autonomy and sympathy with the possibility of self-government. As a result, they are presented as having fostered the conceptual universe in which democracy would ultimately emerge. But the lines of causation are left unspecified, with the result that the central chapters of the book conjure with a medley of concepts that

might just as easily be associated with the consolidation of monarchy as with the formation of modern democracy.

The reason for this vagueness is not difficult to discover. It is a consequence of the fact that there is no direct connection between the political ideas of the Enlightenment that Kloppenberg singles out and what we would recognize as democracy today. Montesquieu thought democracy was a phenomenon of the past whose main interest lay in its contrast with the present. Hume and Smith evidently accepted this summary verdict. All three of them were interested in how one might combine constitutional monarchy with an element of popular representation in the state. Yet such a program has no necessary connection with democracy. By contrast, Rousseau was indeed interested in democratic sovereignty, and thought about how to combine this with aristocratic government, but this bears little relation to nineteenth-century democracies or to the successor regimes that proliferated throughout the next hundred years. Rousseau was endlessly invoked during the French Revolution, but what is notable is that his views were persistently traduced. It can be shown, as Richard Tuck has done, that Rousseau's terminology enjoyed widespread currency after 1789, but that is different from assuming that his ideas were being used.<sup>6</sup>

One curious but striking feature of Kloppenberg's study is the amount of ground that it manages to cover without pointing to any discussion of the governing concept with which it is concerned. Nonetheless, as he delivers his rich assortment of observations we are told that it was with the American and French Revolutions that democracy in its modern sense appeared. Yet Kloppenberg never convincingly demonstrates this claim. In his chapter on the achievement of American independence he cites a few stray references to democracy in the press, but never a systematic analysis of the phenomenon as contemporaries understood it (314–15). One suspects that this is because it was not their overriding concern. Kloppenberg is right that Americans explored a range of relevant items—like popular sovereignty, representation, self-government and the separation of powers. Yet none of this translates into a debate about democracy. This strikes me as a recurrent problem with the book: it explicitly conflates “popular sovereignty” and “self-government” with “democracy” when surely there is no warrant for this move. These terms did ultimately come to enjoy a certain interchangeability in the nineteenth century, but this certainly cannot be said of the preceding two hundred years.

In a long and engaging chapter on the American Constitution, Kloppenberg finally turns to contemporary discussion of democracy when he tackles James Madison's thoughts on the vulnerabilities of popular government. A republican

---

6 Richard Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy* (Cambridge, 2016), chap. 3.

constitution needs security against democracy, Madison argued in the tenth issue of the *Federalist Papers*.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere he clarified exactly what he meant by saying that democracy needed protection against its own “inconveniences.”<sup>8</sup> Politics should be based on popular power, Madison was contending, yet the power of the people still had to be controlled. So, by the late 1780s, democracy was in some sense being brandished as desirable—in the context of an argument that it had to be shielded against itself.

From very specific interventions of this kind, Kloppenberg proceeds to draw a general conclusion: he sees the American Revolution as democratic in nature. He then proceeds to make an even larger claim: the American Revolution “caused” the French (457). This thesis stands in the tradition of R. R. Palmer’s famous work on *The Age of Democratic Revolution*.<sup>9</sup> In the process it perpetuates Palmer’s tendency to streamline. For all his due deference to the idea that democracy was born through a process of contestation, Kloppenberg’s tendency is to fixate on a core “ideal”: “Democracy has been—and remains—an ethical ideal rather than merely a set of institutions” (4). This ideal, we are told, has disparate components—equality, autonomy and popular sovereignty being central. These are portrayed in turn as taking various potential forms. Yet we learn little about the different incarnations they enjoyed, and nothing about the competing principles with which they combined to deliver the modern edifice of democracy. We are promised a history replete with irony in which good intentions generate adverse consequences; however, the actual narrative bears more resemblance to a tale of frustrated idealism.

Although Kloppenberg successfully fends off teleology, his story still comprises the kind of continuous development that he is anxious in principle to avoid. He professes an aversion to linear progression but never recounts any process of deviation or deflection. His approach leaves him exposed to the temptations of anachronism and prolepsis despite his determination to evade both. Democracy, we are told on the first page of the Introduction, was swept forward “by waves of popular passion” (1). We are left with the image of a conceptual “germ” that proceeded to conquer the world. In the short term, of course, there was defeat. Although democracy “inspired” the Revolution in France, it soon foundered as the country was plunged into deepening conflict. This outcome is explained by the claim that the inspirational ideal was not supported by the requisite enabling “premises,” which Kloppenberg summarizes as a commitment

---

7 Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison, *The Federalist*, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis, 2001), 46.

8 James Madison, *Writings*, ed. Jack N. Rakove (New York, 1999), 92–3.

9 R. R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800* (Princeton, 1959–64), 2 vols.

to pluralism, deliberation and the spirit of accommodation (6). The original ideal was interrupted in its tracks, but not modified, refabricated or transformed.

Is it true that the French Revolution was animated by a *democratic* ideal? Kloppenberg presents no evidence to demonstrate that it was. In the first year of the Revolution, leading figures in the national assembly like Mirabeau and Condorcet endorsed the prospect of a “reformed monarchy” (484). So too, of course, did Burke—who for Kloppenberg figures as the outstanding antagonist of modern democracy (506, 525). Adding to the veritable complexity of the period, Sieyès was certainly a staunch opponent of the nobility and a champion of representative government, but he remained throughout a vocal critic of democracy. Rather than presenting us with a theory of democracy advocated by supporters of the Revolution at the time, *Toward Democracy* tends to reason by analogy and association. In this vein, we are told that Article 6 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen “called to mind” the ideas of Rousseau (493). Similarly, Robespierre’s promotion of a conception of the common good was “akin” to his understanding of the general will in the *Contrat social* (496).

*Toward Democracy* is an impressively ambitious investigation of a fundamental component of the modern world. It will occupy a central place in the study of democracy, and serve as a reference point for future attempts to write its history. But the author’s causal analysis is hampered by his normative commitments. “This book does not seek to provide a theory of democracy,” Kloppenberg declares at the start (4). Yet surely this is exactly what he supplies—not so much a theory of how democracy was formed and justified, but a vindication of a particular ideological attachment along with the religious principles that allegedly help to sustain it. It is thrilling to discover that philosophical history is still being written—but here the history is driven by the philosophical principles, whereas the philosophy should emerge from the historical narrative.