

Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy

John Dunn

London: Atlantic Books, 2005, 246 pp.

It is uncommon for a theoretical discussion of democracy to resonate throughout everyday political discussion. The removal of dictatorial regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq created a rare opportunity for political scientists to remind us of the historical thread connecting democratic theory with practice. Despite the devastation and dashed expectations of the Iraq war, in particular, one should now be able to point, at the very least, to a better and more widespread understanding of the democratization process and to exactly what it is that we in the West mean when we declare a political system to be a “democracy,” or a nation to be “democratic.” Regrettably, that particular window of opportunity has almost closed. Especially in book-length form, substantive examinations of either the meaning of democracy or the means by which democratization occurs have been noticeable by their absence. Fareed Zakaria’s *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* stands out as a welcome exception.

It is into this enormous, and enormously controversial, void that John Dunn has courageously stepped. As with most of his previous work, this text is not to be absorbed at lightning speed. Political theory that is both enlightening and well written causes, even requires, the reader to pause frequently to absorb and reflect upon the author’s weightier points. *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* is firmly situated in the best of that scholarly tradition. The depth and breadth of the text, while welcome from the reader’s standpoint, is unsurprising given the author’s pedigree. John Gray has described Dunn as “the most important political theorist currently at work in England.” As Professor of Political Theory at Cambridge University and Fellow of King’s College, John Dunn has had a productive and influential academic career. If Gray has overdone his praise of a peer, he is not far off the mark. *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* and *The Political Thought of John Locke* are among Dunn’s most important contributions.

In *Setting the People Free*, Dunn tells the astonishing story of democracy. It is the story of a word, the story of an idea, and the story of a range of widely varying practices associated with that idea. His quest is to answer two enormous questions. First, why does democracy loom so large today? Second, why has the state form known as modern representative capitalist democracy won the competitive global struggle for wealth and power? For Dunn, “Democracy has come to be our preferred name for the sole basis on which we accept either our belonging or our dependence. What the term means . . . is that the people hold power and exercise rule. That was what it meant at Athens, where the claim bore some relation to the truth. That is what it means today, when it very much appears a thumping falsehood” (p. 51). Dunn holds to the view popularized by the Austrian émigré economist, Joseph Schumpeter, who

maintained that electoral democracy as practiced in Western nations is, in truth, the “rule of the politician.” Modern political history, according to Dunn, has been a long, slow, resentful reconciliation to this obvious falsehood, “a process within which democracy has often proved a far from preferred term for political identification” (p. 51).

In Dunn’s words, his story of democracy

sets out to explain the extraordinary presence of democracy in today’s world. It shows how it began as an improvised remedy for a very local Greek difficulty two and a half thousand years ago, flourished briefly but scintillatingly, and then faded away almost everywhere for all but two thousand years. It tells how it came back to life as a real modern political option, explaining why it first did so, under another name, in the struggle for American independence and with the founding of the new American republic. It shows how it then returned, almost immediately and under its own name, if far more erratically, amid the struggles of France’s Revolution. It registers its slow but insistent rise over the next century and a half, and its overwhelming triumph in the years since 1945 . . . Within the last three-quarters of a century democracy has become the political core of the civilization which the West offers to the rest of the world. Now, as never before, we need to understand what that core really is. As do those to whom we make that offer [pp. 13–14].

Dunn explains how, for more than 2,000 years, democracy remained a noun designating a system of rule. Not until the late 18th century did democracy transform itself into a noun of agency (a “democrat”), an adjective which expressed allegiance (“democratic”), and a verb (to “democratize”), which described the project of refashioning politics in its entirety to meet the standards set by the idea of popular self-rule.

Once the armies of the kingdom of Macedon ended the Athenian experiment with democracy, the conclusions drawn about democracy were overwhelmingly negative. For example, Thomas Hobbes, as a 17th century monarchist, wrote at some length against democracy. He saw democracy as disorderly, unstable, and dangerous. Over the last two centuries, conventional wisdom has completely changed. Dunn finds that “[t]he survival of democracy as a word . . . came less from its continuing capacity to elicit enthusiasm than from its utility in organizing thought, facilitating argument and shaping judgement. . . . What survived from ancient democracy . . . was not a set of institutions or practical techniques for carrying on political life. It was a body of thinking” (pp. 38–39).

The American and French revolutions brought democracy back to life in the late 18th century. Although the “two crises differed in their causes, their rhythms and their outcomes . . . each has marked the history of democracy ever since in indelible ways” (p. 72). Tom Paine’s *The Rights of Man* defended the French Revolution as a triumph of, in Alexander

Hamilton's phrase, "representative democracy," that is, a system of indirect rule by representatives chosen for the purpose by the people. Paine saw the relative success of the American democratic experiment as a reassuring precedent. According to Dunn, for Paine, "This novel creation united all the advantages of a simple democracy, but it also avoided most, if not all, of its notorious disadvantages" (p. 113).

More controversially, but convincingly, Dunn argues that it took the French Revolution to turn "democrat" into a partisan label and a badge of political honor. Democracy as a word and as an idea acquired political momentum only after 1789, when politicians began to speak of democratizing the societies to which they belonged. Dunn stresses that it was, above all, Maximilien Robespierre, the Svengali of the Jacobin Terror, who brought democracy back to life as a focus of political allegiance, as an organizing conception of an entire vision of politics. For Robespierre, "Not only is virtue the soul of democracy, it can only exist inside this form of government" (p. 117). Hence, Robespierre's "judgement that democracy is the mandatory form for legitimate rule" (p. 119).

By the early 19th century, in the wake of the Jacobin Terror, Benjamin Constant's writings argued for modern representative democracy over ancient participatory democracy, an argument that rapidly gained adherents.

Dunn draws the necessary contrast between Athenian direct democracy and representative democracy. Modern representative democracy has changed the idea of democracy almost beyond recognition. He explains that, today,

What we mean by democracy is not that we govern ourselves . . . It is that our own state, and the government which does so much to organize our lives, draws its legitimacy from us, and that we have a reasonable chance of being able to compel each of them to continue to do so. They draw it today from holding regular elections, in which every adult citizen can vote freely and without fear, in which their votes have at least a reasonably equal weight, and in which any uncriminalized political opinion can compete freely for them [pp. 19–20].

Dunn observes that "To reject democracy today may just be . . . to write yourself out of politics. It is definitely to write yourself more or less at once out of polite political conversation" (p. 41). Moreover, to cast doubt today over democracy's applicability and adaptability in all places at all times is to run the risk of partisan attack or institutional censorship. Dunn accurately narrates the evolution in our views down to the contemporary position of most policymakers that "any set of human beings . . . deserve and can be trusted with political authority" (p. 70).

From the writings of Jeremy Bentham, through Thomas Hobbes, all the way back to Aristotle, Dunn traces the debate over the institutional versus cultural explanations for democratic outcomes. In contrast to the Bush administration, Dunn makes a careful distinction between democ-

racy as an electoral instrument and the democratization process itself. He reminds the reader that “Democracy as a form of government and democratization as a social, cultural, economic and political process have very different rhythms. They are also subject to quite different sorts of causal pressures” (p. 179).

Dunn makes the critical observation that the adoption of universal suffrage throughout Western Europe two hundred years ago would not have produced political outcomes that would today be considered desirable or even satisfactory. Dunn uses the example of the Austrian Netherlands (now Belgium), where the democratic Vonckist movement performed considerable spadework for later democratic political leaders throughout the Low Countries and farther afield. Dunn has no doubt that “In Belgium . . . a democratic outcome chosen by a majority of the adult inhabitants would certainly not have meant the establishment and consolidation of a secular and democratic republic. The *pays réel*, given the opportunity, would have voted any such democracy down without a moment’s hesitation” (p. 91).

Substitute the modern-day Muslim world for the Austrian Netherlands of two centuries ago and the analogy holds all too convincingly. Any serious proponent of liberal, secular democracy would find little comfort in the outcome of Algeria’s democratic election some two centuries after the Vonckists nudged their own countrymen in a democratic direction. The demonstrated popularity of illiberal extremists across the Middle East, from the current Iranian president, to Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, to Palestinian Hamas, to the religious clerics who now dominate Iraqi politics, confirms Dunn’s contention that the introduction of democracy within an inherently undemocratic political culture produces political outcomes that favor undemocratic interests. This is a contention supported elsewhere by a wealth of comparative empirical data. Nevertheless, history teaches us that on occasion religious leaders can aid, rather than hinder, the democratic cause. The best example, discussed at length by Dunn, is that of Pope Pius VII, who in 1797, while still a cardinal, articulated a prelude to Christian Democracy, stating the case that democratic government was not inconsistent with adherence to the Gospel.

Uncharacteristically, but refreshingly, for a British political scientist, Dunn is realistic about the proven limitations of socialist economic planning. Dunn states that

No government can make a country prosper; but any government can ruin one; and most today are in a position to do so very rapidly and extremely thoroughly. Democracy’s real triumph, its victory over the last three-quarters of a century, has come in an epoch where the powers of rulers to damage an economy and harm the lives of entire populations have shown themselves greater than they have ever proved before [p. 135].

He observes that American political development has been aided immeasurably by a successful economic model. Not only do Americans depend upon this superior economic way of life; it is also from this economic liberty that they draw their political liberties. For Dunn, representative democracy has “established a clear claim to meet a global need better than any of its competitors” (p. 183). Hence, it is the form in which democracy has spread so widely since the end of World War II. Here, Dunn stresses a central element in the democratization process: democratic sustainability rests upon economic development. Dunn reminds us that democracy

could scarcely work for long anywhere where distinction must be sustained through stagnant or diminishing wealth, and has been widely and understandably abandoned, often with very little hesitation, in circumstances of this kind: in Europe of the 1920s and 1930s, in Latin America sometimes for decade after decade, in East or South East Asia, in Sub-Saharan Africa, sooner or later, almost everywhere [pp. 128–29].

In this context, the importance of economic development cannot be overstated. Democracy is reversible; without rising incomes and a thriving middle class, a reversal of democratic fortunes is more likely than not.

Dunn is clearheaded about the shape of Iraq’s democratic transition. The neoconservative theorists behind America’s current project to democratize the Middle East would have benefited from Dunn’s reminder that “The relation of freedom or liberty to any state form can be specious. In every state, freedom and liberty by necessity must be defined in the end, however intricately and courteously, on the state’s terms and by the state itself . . . What we affirm today, when we align ourselves with democracy, is hesitant, confused and often in bad faith” (p. 69). He expands on this point in the context of Iraq:

Under democracy, it must be the people of Iraq who decide whom or what they wish to befriend or oppose. They prove to differ bitterly with one another over the question; and very few of them seem drawn to American views on the matter. If democracy does in the end triumph in Iraq, even in the limited sense of establishing a continuing electoral basis for acquiring new governments, it will do so by a sequence of Iraqi choices, and with abundant mutual odium. It will also do so less by spontaneous imitation of the admired practices of an exemplary model, graciously offered by the present occupying powers, than through grudging acceptance of imposed terms of peace [p. 141].

In November 2002, President George W. Bush declared that “The global expansion of democracy is the ultimate force in rolling back terrorism.” Dunn does not dwell upon the obvious political irony of a Republican president elected on a noninterventionist foreign policy platform trumpeting a Wilsonian mission to civilize the Middle East. Yet, he

is pessimistic that the replacement of dictatorial states by democratic states will set the stage for peace and stability in the Middle East. Since Dunn completed his manuscript in the fall of 2004, Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder have documented, in *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War*, the empirical foundation underlying his pessimism.

In the end, *Setting the People Free*'s greatest contribution is that it demonstrates the applicability of history to our current predicament. Dunn shows that it is democracy's adaptability that has ensured its longevity and continues to ensure its relevance two thousand years after its birth. The historical litany of democratic false starts, disappointments, and outright failures expertly examined by the author also cautions us that continued success will require comparable patience, compromise, and realism.

Patrick Basham
Democracy Institute