

AFTER ATHENS - THE GENEALOGY OF MODERN DEMOCRACY

John Dunn 2005. *Setting the People Free. The Story of Democracy.*
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Let us just for matters of illustration take a brief look at the history of political terms from a “Darwinian” perspective. In doing so, the fact that the word democracy has ‘survived’ in the long evolution of the political vocabulary until today is rather surprising. Just compare the amazing career of the Greek *demokratia* with some of its forgotten terminological brothers and sisters like *ochlokratia* and *timokratia*; other terms like *oligarchia*, *aristokratia*, *tyrannis* or *monarchia* have not fared much better, being either reduced to a metaphor or a triviality. And from the Roman vocabulary, only republic and dictatorship have survived – but having been reduced to describing a political system, which got rid of a representative role for a king or a queen, and the second by having been turned into a negative term for any political system of permanent political oppression. It is as astonishing as true: the ancient misfit *demokratia* did survive as the fittest of all terms. Nowadays *demokratia* has become the etymological basis for naming modern political systems in hundreds of languages all over the world. At the same time, it inspires and raises the hopes of political actors all over the world.

Looking at key institutional features of modern liberal democracies like separation of powers or elections and representation, we

may wonder: Why did this not happen to Plato's *aristokratia*, why not to the Aristotelian *politia*, why not to the Roman *res publica* – three terms which, according to their ancient meaning, are more closely related to the political reality of modern democracies than *demokratia*? Most literature in the field of democratic theory does not spend a dime on such etymological puzzles. Democratic theorists seem to accept the tremendous semantic changes as a simple fact. Thanks to John Dunn's new book one of the most fundamental puzzles of democratic theory – the reasons for the terminological success story of *demokratia* – is brought back to our attention. The book starts by simply and explicitly raising the following question: Why and how was democracy able to survive its terminological rivals and companions? In the course of answering this question, Dunn also wants to explain the extraordinary presence of democracy in today's world.

Democracy's success unquestionably has become well-known. But imagine the tremendous extent of its success! For the first time in the history of the human species, there is one single and worldwide name for the legitimate basis of political authority. In our multi-lingual world, one single term serves to describe legitimate political order, endlessly transliterated or translated across all modern languages from an old European word. Why was one word chosen instead of a plurality of words in accordance with different historical backgrounds? Why a European word worldwide when the Chinese language offers appropriate terms as well? And why did it have to be an old Greek word? Why this particular term *demokratia* of all Greek words?

Dunn's book is a story of a single heroine (the author charmingly reminds us that the Greek *demokratia* is a feminine noun, p. 52). The four chapters of the book encompass the period from 'Democracy's First Coming' in ancient Athens to 'Democracy's Second Coming' at the end of the 18th century to 'The Long Shadow of Thermidor' in the 19th century until the overwhelming triumph of democracy in the second half of the 20th century. In his book, Dunn seeks to capture the main metamorphoses the term has undergone during these political processes and pays particular attention to unexpected setbacks, comebacks, and victories.

The first chapter tells the story of the Greek period of the word and how the negative image in the writings of Plato and Aristotle overshadowed its use from Roman times until the 18th century. Dunn gives the reader a concise interpretation of how Perikles, the Old Oligarch and later Plato and Aristotle perceived democracy.

In addition, he does not forget to mention the outstanding achievements and the political stability of Athenian democracy, contrasting this fact with the overwhelmingly negative view held by the leading philosophers of that time. Their historically incorrect negative view, however, came to dominate the political discourse for centuries after democracy's fall. The Romans painfully avoided the use of the term 'democracy' in order to interpret their own political arrangements. Later, authors like Polybios, Cassius Dio or Cicero simply parroted the old philosopher's condemnation. From the 1260s onwards, when the Greek word *demokratia* finally entered the Latin language in Moberbeke's translation of Aristotle's *Politics*, the term still had a negative connotation. The negative notion of the term became so notorious that even the authors of the Federalist Papers were eager not to refer to their political ambitions as democracy.

Dunn's first chapter is thrilling to read. However, the ancient part of his heroine-story does not include a more detailed search for the very first invention of the term. Dunn presents the competing ancient views in no particular temporal order, therefore supporting the conventional assumption that the popular translation of *demokratia* as 'rule by the people' indeed had been the original one. This leads to the hypothesis that the historical sources mainly differ in their concrete understanding of the '*demos*' and in their judgement of the form of government. No doubt about this – but there is more to this story. Two additional aspects of the ancient discourse should be mentioned, which would fit nicely into Dunn's detailed reconstruction of semantic metamorphoses, encouraged by performative strategies.

Dunn does not mention the linguistic fact that *demokratia* is not just a regular Greek *compositum*, but that it manifested itself during those days as an artificial word in clear contrast to the grammatical rules of the classical Greek language. It may sound awkward, but any translation taking into consideration the correct grammatical structure of *demokratia* is 'rule through the people' or 'having power over the people'. Such a translation obviously strangely differs from the way Perikles or later Aristotle used the term. How can this astonishing etymological fact be explained and how does this contribute to the success story of *demokratia*? The answer to this question leads us to another peculiarity I would like to add to Dunn's story. Even after nearly two centuries of thorough philological research, the invention and the original uses of the term democracy seem to puzzle the small community of scholars of the ancient world. However, what the sources seem to verify is another astonishing phenomenon: the

term *demokratia* was not used before or at least during the days of the constitutional revolution by Ephialthes and Perikles in 462/461 BC. Instead, the term was invented nearly three decades later, probably no earlier than between 435-430 BC. Thus, Athenian citizens lived with a new form of government for over a generation while still using the old term *isonomia* in order to name it.

In conclusion, two aspects may be added to Dunn's story. Firstly, the fact that the original inventors of *demokratia* invented the term for reasons of a distinct polemical intention should be acknowledged – the Old Oligarch illustrates how this took place. Secondly, it is remarkable that defenders of the new form of government such as Perikles – as illustrated in his famous funeral speech – used the new polemical noun much later and as a direct reaction to the invention of this negative 'ten-letter-word'. Instead of abolishing the term or dismissing the new swear word, Perikles neutralized the negative connotation of the term by mentioning it at the beginning of his whole speech and then adding new semantic components to the Athenian form of government. Later on, other orators chose the semantic strategy of turning *demokratia*'s original evaluative meaning upside down. They intentionally used the polemical swear word, stated their pride in the political inclusion of citizens in Athens or in other democratic *poleis* and added further features (such as liberty, commercial success or tolerance) to it. In doing so, the supporters of the new form of government changed both the content and the evaluation of democracy. It was an intelligent strategy, which may be seen as a historical parallel to the semantic history of the word 'gay' in our days, which was originally used to blame homosexuals but was later actively turned by the homosexual-community into a symbol of pride.

Perikles' brave semantic strategy helped the Athenian form of government gain legitimacy – an impressive number of personal names, inscriptions, and sculptures prove the cult of *demokratia* in the age of Demosthenes. But it did not help in the long run, since the philosophers' negative views became the dominant interpretation of Athenian democracy after its final fall in 146 BC. It is not easy to give a satisfactory answer to the question why Perikles and other proponents of Athenian democracy were not referred to by historians and political theorists. Most texts which survived the last two millennia were written by fierce critics of *demokratia*. Had there been important texts defending democracy which got lost or were destroyed? To what extent did democracy's bad image have to do with the philosophical context of the arguments against democracy? It seems to

me that Dunn agrees with the following explanation for democracy's ideological defeat: defenders of democracy were not able to reply adequately to the intellectually demanding quality of the texts by Plato and Aristotle (p. 41). In addition new forms of government arising after the defeat of the *poleis*-order and the social forces and social interests influenced the use of the term *demokratia*. This question remains to be answered in detail and John Dunn is careful enough to avoid a mono-causal explanation.

Taking into account the semantic disaster of *demokratia* until the end of the 18th century, it is surprising that the term did have an opportunity to reappear in a 'Second Coming' at all. In the second chapter, Dunn takes a closer look at the political contexts in which these changes first became apparent. According to him two political crises in Europe and America at the end of the 18th century alike brought democracy back to political life. Dunn vividly describes the discussions during and after the American revolution, the debates among the participants of the Patriot Revolt of the Dutch republic in the 1780s, and the debates in France before and during the revolution. Interestingly enough, Dunn claims to be able to pin down the first setting in which the term democracy reappeared as a point of domestic political affiliation (88pp): the Austrian Netherlands (today Belgium), where the name 'democrats' was used by a revolt movement as a positive label of self-identification.

In the following years democracy became one of the most inspiring terms for revolutionaries all over Europe. According to Maximilien Robespierre's speeches of early 1794, "for the first time in modern history, democracy at last appears not merely as a passing expression of political taste but as an organizing conception of an entire vision of politics" (114). Dunn gives Robespierre credit for having brought back democracy as a focus of political allegiance: "no longer merely an elusive or blatantly implausible form of government, but a glowing and perhaps in the long run all but irresistible pole of attraction and source of power" (118). After the death of Robespierre, the term was taken over by the "Equals" (130) on the radical left. Both Babeuf and later Buonarroti made use of democracy as a party label suggesting a political order which was based on social equality and direct political participation, a tradition which later led to Marxist and social-democratic strands in democratic thought.

In the third chapter Dunn points out how democracy was no longer exclusively associated with the European left and their concept of social equality and direct political participation. In the first half

of the 19th century the term became acceptable in North-America as well (125pp). However, on the other side of the Atlantic the idea of equality was interpreted in fundamentally different terms. According to the position which became dominant in the US, equality was defined by equality of opportunity, individual liberty, egoism and free competition in a market economy. In addition, representation was interpreted by Paine and others as being entirely compatible with democracy.

According to Dunn, the struggle between the two concepts of equality, which were at the heart of democracy's renaissance in the early 19th century, has finally been decided by history. Today, he says, "the partisans of the order of egoism have captured the word of the Equals" (133). According to Dunn, the leaders of capitalism switched to the term democracy because they "have recognized, and done their best to appropriate and tap, a deep reservoir of political power" (134) by claiming political equality. Political leaders today apply the term democracy (with the active consent of most of the citizens) not to a form of government in which the people rule, but to a form of government which selects political leaders through elections and thus enables them to rule. So again, during the period of two centuries between the days of Babeuf and those of Blair, Bush and Berlusconi, the word has changed substantially in meaning.

Following Dunn's argument further, the perspective of democracy being associated with social equality again comes close to zero. For him North Korea, Soviet War Communism, Mao's Cultural Revolution or the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge are not "what Babeuf and Buonarroti wanted, but what in the end they were always going to get" (143). Opposing those regimes, democracy in the 20th century is now a "modern name for eliminating tyranny" (159).

Even though Dunn says in one passage in his book that "no one knows what, if anything, will come after democracy" (138), from his perspective our political future looks bright. The world will probably not become a world-democracy with the entire human population of the globe being one *demos*, but there are good reasons for assuming that liberal democracy will survive and flourish. Liberal democracy has become global in pretension and aspiration. "Democracy's ideological triumph" (162), its "global near-monopoly" (187) has become overwhelming. Even though still contested and rejected in some places of the world, no alternative secular claimant to cosmopolitan legitimacy has appeared until now. Liberal democracy still has enemies (for example in some Islamic countries), but it no longer

faces compelling rivals in terms of how political authority should be structured.

No reader can blame Dunn to be unhappy with this outcome, but there is some ambivalence left at the end of his book. On the one hand Dunn argues that there is no reason to regret that modern liberal democracy is not the rule of the people. Had it really been the rule of the people, "it would assuredly not have triumphed, but dissolved instead, immediately and irreversibly, into chaos" (185). At this point Dunn agrees with the liberal interpretation of democracy, stating that it offers its inhabitants the safest basis on which to live together with their fellow citizens. On the other hand Dunn is right in saying that there is "no evident appropriateness in our selection of the word democracy" (185) as the name for such a government. For that name to be appropriate, it obviously "must mean more than this" (185). But what is this "more", what has to be added exactly? Dunn is not very clear on this issue in the final pages of his book. It seems to me that he puts the problem of "acute inequality" (186) in capitalist societies back to the heart of the issue. As a matter of fact, the protest against these inequalities may indeed serve as a starting point for a more enthusiastic political support of democracy in the future. Does this mean that it is – contra Dunn's sympathy for liberalism – time for a Babeuf or Robespierre to return?

Dunn is not very clear about another element of the democratic promise as well. What is the role of political participation in the demands for democracy? Is it crucial to democracy? Is there a certain limit in the institutional deprivation of the opportunity to participate in political decision-making or in the manipulation by private mass media which would make it more appropriate to call modern western political systems 'post-democracies' at some point? This set of question leads us to the question of the status of participation within the democratic ideology. According to the approach of the Cambridge School and of Dunn's book there cannot be such an 'objective' limit – all political terms are wide open for interpretation. Historical evidence, however, may hint to the paradoxical fact that the (grammatically incorrect) translation of democracy 'rule of the people' may serve as a promise which is given whenever one is using the word and thus equips the term with some essential substance.

However, this is pure speculation which comes to mind while reading Dunn's book. On the whole, John Dunn has written an admirable book, not only because it confronts fundamental terminological confusions in modern political theories with a genealogical point of

view. It is the first book after the collection of articles in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* which has the courage to undertake a combination of the history of democratic theory with the entire set of semantic shifts of the term democracy itself. Dunn's reconstruction of democracy's long and winding genealogical road profits from his broad and deep knowledge of the history of political ideas, his sensibility for semantic details, his interest in social and political changes, and his willingness to take current political debates and developments into account as well. And last but not least: the book is excellently written, entertaining and fun to read – a real *Erlebnis*.

Dunn's genealogy attempts to undertake a more systematic look at democracy's semantic metamorphoses. Keeping one eye on Dunn's narration of the various historical contexts of democracy's rediscoveries and the other eye on the internal logical structure of these processes, we can distinguish four paradigmatic phases in the long history of the term after Athens. Obviously the first step after its long lasting condemnation had to be a kind of '*positivation*'. *Positivation* is the outspoken protest against the negative image of democracy as held by Aristotle, Plato and their followers. In particular Hegel or the young Nietzsche disagreed with the dominating prejudice about democracy and praised democracy as being most suitable for ancient poleis. But for them – as well as for Rousseau – democracy was a concept of the past, having withered for good (or bad, when asking Rousseau) reasons. Today, the positive connotation of democracy is nearly undisputed. We are all democrats, or at least we pay lip-service to this term. The next crucial step after developing a positive connotation had to be a radical break with the underlying temporal structure of thinking about democracy. In the political interventions of Thomas Paine, Robespierre or George Grote one can observe this break as the next semantic change towards a '*futurization*' of the concept. Tocqueville was the most influential amongst a growing number of political theorists and political actors who started to view democracy as a project of the future. The *futurization* of the term inspired critics and supporters of democracy alike. Critics like Benjamin Constant acknowledged democracy not any more as a phantom of the historical opera, but as a real enemy. In democracy the supporters found their promising project for a better political future. Today, the *futurization* of democracy still underpins the whole discourse in democratic theory. Democracy is seen as an ongoing project to which we are all invited to make it even better!

The switch of the discourse towards the future, however, would not have been so successful, if its key term had not served as a concept of admiring adaptability. We can call this step in democracy's semantic genealogy '*integration*'. Despite their deep differences, all democratic theories of the 19th and 20th centuries agree in their general semantic strategy of integrating elements into the concept of democracy, which had nothing to do with it before or which originally had even been in clear cut opposition to it – rule of law, separation of powers, elections, representation, to mention just a few of these elements. The modern integrated concept of democracy assembles elements of all sorts of traditions which – at least from a strictly logical point of view – are in contradiction to each other. Whereas a minority of political thinkers like Carl Schmitt have emphasized the tensions between these components, the modern integrated view takes its pride in being able to blur these contradictions. Disputes between democratic theories today deal mainly with the concrete composition and mixture of these elements. Some theorists include more direct participation, gender issues or social rights in their version of a liberal democracy whereas others have less problems with elitism or economic stratifications. If we follow John Dunn's narrative, no tremendous changes are to be expected in the near future concerning the composition of the democratic cocktail. One of the punch-lines of his book is that democracy will be liberal or it will not be at all.

In contrast to Dunn's narrative – but in line with his general genealogical approach – I have reservations concerning the idea that democracy's conceptual history has come to a liberal end, longing only for full implementation around the world. Perhaps we are already witnessing the beginning of another paradigmatic shift, which I would like to label the '*rationalisation*' of democracy. In this phase, the semantic core of the term is shifting from the organisation of the political process to the rationality of the results of this process – a shift from input-criteria to output-criteria. At least in democratic theories among academic political science, political participation seems to lose its essential status within the conceptualization of democracy and is given less priority than political efficiency and the fulfilment of certain goals. Even though we can find important differences between current theories of deliberative, liberal, feminist, socialist or republican democracy – they all focus upon the refinement of the quality of the political process. Democracy is justified as legitimate because it produces political outcomes which are viewed as '*rational*'

according to different strands in democratic thought (ranging from economic performance to an increase of participation of women on politics). Opinion polls show that broad majorities in most modern democracies have goal-oriented expectations towards democracy. It will be interesting to see what will happen to the intrinsic value of political participation which has been a component of the democratic promise for such along time in the nearer future.