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Political Space and Political Purpose in Contemporary Democratic Theory

Political Theory as Democratic Theory

While the enthusiasm surrounding democratization movements of the late 1980s has given way to more cautious appreciations of the complexities and imperfections of democratic transformations,¹ it is undeniable that these events have reaffirmed confidence in the power and justice of democratic ideas and institutions. As recent events have clearly shown, the apparent triumph of democracy does not mean that political crises and crimes will cease. But it does imply that the most legitimate way to cope with such dilemmas is through the collective actions of democratic societies, often in cooperation with one another.² Within the more confined realm of political theory, the effects of democratization have been even more decisive. It is now virtually axiomatic that constructive theorizations about politics must take their bearings from an acceptance of the priorities and principles of democratic theory.³ Whatever departs from these premises is either relegated to the history of political thought or dismissed as antidemocratic.⁴ Consequently, successful democratization seems to have had opposing effects on political practices and political theories. Together with the global influences of consumer capitalism and communication technologies, democratic institutions seem capable of effecting political changes scarcely imagined twenty years ago. Yet the ways we theorize these possibilities are shrinking as contemporary democratic political theory, for all of its variety, becomes more hegemonic.

What if this relationship is the reverse of what is needed for the success of democratic regimes? The first broad thesis of this book is that

the power and justice of democratic institutions are in need of continued reexamination. This does not mean that democracy, particularly liberal social democracy, must be subjected to searches for oppression and cruelty festering beneath its appearance of welfare and civility. However, powerful and attractive political institutions are always in need of critical revisiting, never more so than when prideful confidence is intensified by experiences of stress. This book's second broad thesis is that one of the most valuable resources for this scrutiny can be found in a body of thought that democratic theorists often regard with suspicion: classical political philosophy, and, more specifically, the works of Thucydides and Plato.

In what follows I will try to make this case by engaging the work of these thinkers with four significant forms of modern democratic theory: the rational choice perspective, deliberative democratic theory, the interpretation of democratic culture, and postmodernism. Though these perspectives differ significantly from one another, their common concern is to identify the proper structuring or functioning of democratic political space. Rational choice theory emphasizes how arrangements for the articulation and negotiation of interest claims allow formulations of and responses to public policy. Theories of deliberative democracy focus on institutions that enable citizens to reach rational understandings to guide collective action. The interpretation of democratic culture stresses the ways that the shared meanings of democracy shape and maintain its political practices. And postmodern democratic theory highlights the need for political energy as social forms are established, challenged, and revised. These perspectives differ on the most important functions, institutions, and practices of democracies. Yet they all in some respect reject political theory's undertaking critical examinations of the controversial questions with which democratic regimes must cope—namely, democratic purposes.

For most of those who write within these perspectives, silence about the character of democratic purposes is a good thing, for it defers substantive political decisions to the collective choices of citizens. Theory does not displace or tyrannize practice (Knight and Johnson 1997, 279; Habermas 1996, 489; Honig 1993, 2; Shapiro 2003, 65–66). Yet this reticence is accompanied by a number of significant costs. In spite of the concern to preserve maximal space for democratic politics, none of these positions is able successfully to remain agnostic about the content of political goals. To the degree that these frameworks implicitly endorse visions of democratic outcomes or purposes, they encounter serious conceptual and practical problems. By taking stands on questions that they say are inappropriate for theorizing, they court uncertainties

about the stability or coherence of their own positions. And by failing to acknowledge their own controversial stands on the ends of politics, they threaten to displace rather than to support the political activities of democratic citizens.

I draw these approaches into conversation with Thucydides and Plato in order to expand the ways in which democratic theory and practice can be understood. Read both historically and theoretically, these authors are often viewed as two of democracy's enemies. When they address the limits of democracy, they are suspected of attacking democracy's shortcomings in the name of more hierarchical or aristocratic forms of governance.⁵ I argue instead that they address the limits of democracy by extending the borders of what can legitimately be talked about within democratic political deliberations. Neither author believes that establishing democratic political institutions is a sufficient guarantee against mistaken or destructive political acts. And both suggest that the language of democratic political culture resists some intellectual sources whose presence is vital for democracy's well-being. However, these criticisms do not mean that democracy can or should be replaced with any alternative form of politics. Instead, I show the ways in which both authors broaden practical discourse, potentially making democratic politics more thoughtful and more just. While I devote significant attention to the interpretations of the texts as written, my principal goal is to offer reconstructed readings⁶ of their works that argue for the value of a style or form of political thinking that is different from and a needed alternative to the major theoretical perspectives that are currently dominant.

In relying on these classical sources as corrections to more familiar positions, I am not urging the creation of a more-encompassing theoretical framework guided by classical concerns. My complaint about current forms of democratic theory is not that they are insufficiently architectonic, but that they provide inadequate resources for what Jill Frank characterizes as the work of democratic citizenship (2005, 15). At the most general level, my readings underscore the need to focus critically on the purposes of politics, and therefore of democracy, as controversial yet unavoidable questions for political theory. The principal outcome of this engagement is not new theory but a mode of political thinking capable of greater sensitivity to the need for self-criticism within democratic theory and practice, a style of political thought that serves as a resource for democratic citizens.

Before I try to develop these claims, I would like to say more about what it means to problematize democratic ideas and institutions, then to sketch why the examination of democratic purposes is difficult for most contemporary forms of democratic theory, and, finally, to indicate

more fully why these two classical authors offer appropriate resources for such a task.

Democracy's Problematics

When I speak of problematization, I mean more than subjecting a familiar institution or practice to sustained theoretical scrutiny. In my terms, a social practice is problematized when it is shown that its advantages can be partially overridden or undermined for reasons that its supporters must take seriously.⁷ Problematizing a practice does not mean rejecting its supporting arguments, such as by showing their origins in suspect political agendas or exposing their strategic functions as weapons in social conflicts. Critics would accept problematized practices as valuable and treat their justifying arguments with intellectual respect. Moreover, problematization looks toward adjustments that are themselves imperfect. No alternative practice in which all problematics would simply disappear is envisaged. This is not a recognition of the inevitable gaps between theory and practice, but an admission that all solutions include their own intrinsic imperfections. At the same time, to problematize is not simply to acknowledge the regrettable prices that are paid where there are no worlds without loss. Problematization envisages constructive changes, but recognizes that any reconstruction will nonetheless be subject to problematizations of its own. This is therefore a kind of immanent critique that is continuous with pragmatic deliberations about social and political arrangements.

If we were to identify the major accomplishments of recent forms of democratization, we would surely focus on the protection of individual freedom and the establishment of individual rights, the creation of institutions allowing appropriate popular involvement in public governance, and the expansion of opportunities for material well-being and economic progress.⁸ As experiences with democratic and democratizing experiences proliferate, scholars, social commentators, and political activists are scrutinizing these guiding templates in ways that contribute to an important series of problematizations in the sense understood above.

Rights

Critical reflections on the phenomenon called globalization have led to the critical scrutiny of rights from at least two directions. First, since the liberal tradition grounds its political and social rights in more fundamental claims about human rights, limiting those rights to citizens of liberal

communities seems indefensible. Uma Narayan's recent examination of the problems associated with modern citizenship further interrogates how criteria for membership in democratic societies should be constructed. Her immediate concern is that liberal states provide all of those who reside within them with access to the basic goods (education, health care, adequate housing, and so on) needed for a minimally decent life respectful of human dignity (1999, 64). Seyla Benhabib goes further in arguing for the extension of basic political rights, such as opportunities for expressing political voice, to those who are not fully citizens (Benhabib 2004, 3–4).

Second, liberalism's commitment to human rights sharpens dilemmas that arise when liberal societies encounter cultures or subcultures with antiliberal traditions. As liberal societies become more multicultural and globally connected, they cannot easily avoid encounters with abusive social conditions that cry out for remedy. These include domestic subcultures that subordinate women or restrict their children's access to education and health care and nonliberal societies whose institutions damage well-being even more outrageously, permanently suppressing the voices of religious or ethnic minorities, often through the use of extreme state or state-sanctioned violence. Proposed responses to such dilemmas range from John Rawls's (1999, 105–20) cautiously stated duty of assistance through Michael Walzer's respect for political self-determination (1977, 88–99) to the activism of Martha Nussbaum (1996, 21:5). All of these proposals raise difficulties. Generalized toleration for the integrity of nation-states and the respect for political self-determination can blind critics to even the most flagrant abuses (cf. Benhabib 2004, 10; Ignatieff 2001, 23–24). Yet a greater degree of activism runs the risk of lapsing into imperialism or hegemony, all the more so because such justifications can too easily be enlisted in the service of interests that are not at all high-minded (cf. Benhabib 2004, 10; Ignatieff 2001 23–24). The growing numbers of proposals for making the international political realm more democratic encounter equal theoretical and pragmatic concerns. It is difficult to see how democratizing international politics could occur without requiring significant shifts in a large number of political cultures' self-understandings.⁹ The project of spreading democracy across the globe can also be used to justify political intrusions that may cause more ills than they cure.

Governance

Questions regarding the public governance of democracies have elicited significant disagreements about what this should mean and about the

conditions needed to foster it. Political theories of democratic elitism that flourished in the early 1960s have given way to proposals that insist on widespread civic involvement if collective choices and actions are to be truly democratic (Barber 2003, 117–18; Habermas 1996, 366–73; and Warren 2001, 60–61). Yet the mechanisms and implications of structuring effective citizen involvement are by no means clear. Analyses that see democratic governance as simply emerging from the interactions of self-interested egoists have encountered significant criticisms from approaches that are more sociological and cultural in focus.¹⁰ For such critics, democratic politics seems to require the deeper support of a democratic civil society (Putnam 1993, 152–62). Absent such traditions, democratic initiatives will be ineffective or dysfunctional. Yet this conclusion has been complicated by empirical and theoretical claims. First, these associative traditions often seem threatened by the very political efficiencies that they foster. Robert Putnam's recent work on American society suggests that many of the social outcomes that mark the presence of effective democracy (especially the delivery of services by responsive administrative agencies leading to more widespread economic progress) may also erode the civic associations that make long-term democratic governance possible (1995, 677–81; 2000, 247–76). Second, strong associations do not invariably contribute to liberal democratic health. Questions about this relationship arise particularly in response to those commentators who argue that strong subpolitical associations are needed to enhance the quality of life in a democratic society. If a decent democratic way of life involves and requires forms of virtue and character that are incompletely captured by the presence of personal freedom, a political sociology adequate to what William Galston calls "liberal purposes" must appreciate, for example, how religious institutions (Galston 1993, 6, 12–16; cf. Bellah et al., 1985, 28–30; S. Carter 1993, 15–17; Elshtain 2001, 45–47) affect what one does with one's freedom. Yet precisely because such associations strive to exert a strong influence on personal choice, enhancing their social roles would seem to violate liberalism's strong commitment to personal autonomy.¹¹

Ways of Life

Classical liberal democracy's pride in enabling widespread economic well-being is complicated by criticisms that are both internal and external to the liberal paradigm. The vast opportunities for economic progress that liberal democratization has stimulated often create heavy social casualties, intensify pressures on the natural environment that is development's uneasy partner, and reinforce global inequalities. Earlier (1970s) claims of

the so-called postmaterialists that such difficulties would be addressed as Western societies became more prosperous and secure are now being read more as scenarios of possibilities and ambiguities than as predictable outcomes.¹² Moreover, even those who concentrate on the government's capacity to assure conditions for the pursuit of economic well-being are encountering difficult questions about what this means. Amartya Sen's approach (Sen and Nussbaum 1993, 30–31; Sen 1999, 18–25; Sen 1999, 90–92) to comparative economic analysis shows the limitations of measuring economic health by levels of income without considering how income impacts the basic capabilities that are essential to a decent life. More generally, by treating development as including a certain kind of substantive freedom, Sen insists on attending to the purposes or goods supported by economic progress, making it clear that being economically secure is only one part of the quality of life.¹³

What is apparent within all of these concerns is a greater need for the critical examination of the purposes or goals of liberal democratic society within at least three broad areas. Extending from ambiguities concerning the proper scope and grounding of democratic rights is a need to focus more seriously on how categories constructed and articulated within democratic culture relate to a humanness that cuts across cultures. Extending from concerns about the fragile status of democratic governance is the broader need to examine not only how democracies can work better but also what the "better" working of democracies might mean. Extending from the problematic relationship between democratic institutions and the amassing of national wealth are more basic questions about the merits of the different forms of well-being that democratic communities foster or discourage.

None of these concerns displace or ignore the fact that democratic political institutions are mechanisms for creating and exercising power. Indeed, it is the ubiquity of power that makes serious examinations of liberal democratic purposes all the more essential. The gap between fellow citizens and outsiders may insulate applications of civic power toward outsiders from critical attention. To the extent that forms of civic association fail to encourage deeper considerations of public purposes or to enhance the strength of public institutions, collective actions may come to originate in suspect power bases or to function through mechanisms less susceptible to public scrutiny.¹⁴ And the failure to examine the forms of well-being for which public power is exercised threatens to turn questions about the uses of power into purely strategic calculations whose purposes neither require nor allow the critical discourse of citizens.

Contemporary statements of the problematics of liberal democracy thus underscore the need for resources that can contribute to the

examination of democratic purposes. However, currently available forms of democratic theory fall seriously short in their abilities to provide what is needed.

Theoretical Insights and Limitations

Current frameworks for theorizing democratic political life have advanced well beyond the liberal—communitarian debates of the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁵ While these perspectives have not been disregarded, they have been revisited, deepened, and nuanced. What has resulted is a series of contemporary positions that enrich and provoke one another in theoretically interesting (and at times underappreciated) ways.

Though rational choice theory claims to be valid transhistorically and cross-culturally, it has particular conceptual affinities with classical liberalism. Its methodological individualism means that it analyzes political and social forms as outcomes of decisions made by interacting individuals concerned to further their self-defined interests (Downs 1957, 17; Chong 2000, 13). Within this psychological perspective, rationality refers to instrumental decisions aimed at outcomes that agents believe to be good; the designations “rational” or “irrational” do not apply to practical ends (Downs 1957, 6; cf. Hardin 1995, 46). Political institutions are therefore treated as mechanisms that organize interactions so that it is in the agents’ interests to be bound by the outcomes (Hardin 1999, 26). While this description of politics is applied to all forms of political associations, including authoritarian regimes that punish defection and theocratic states that promise salvation as a reward for obedience, democratic political arrangements most fully allow individual preferences to be articulated and aggregated in ways that influence public policy (Downs 1957, 18, 23–24). It is in the citizens’ interest to be bound by collective outcomes, because this reinforces processes that best enable future satisfactions (Dahl 1956, 75–76; Dahl 1956, 132–33; Shapiro 2003, 90). Insofar as rational choice theory implies a normative political orientation, it endorses institutions that most effectively enable the cooperation of self-interested individuals (Axelrod 1984, 124–41; Downs 1957, 197; Hardin 1995, 26–27; Putnam 1993, 180–81).

While deliberative democratic theory does not emerge out of disagreements with rational choice,¹⁶ a number of its distinctive features can be highlighted by comparing the two positions. They have some shared commitments. Both assess political and social forms in terms of their contributions to the self-determined well-being of individuals, and both focus primarily on how institutions affect the ways interests are

pursued. Furthermore, both try to explain why individuals will accept the political decisions of their community as binding. However, they have different views on how individuation occurs, particularly with respect to the construction of interests, and they differ over the scope and function of relevant institutions. This leads them to explain the binding character of political decisions in very different ways.

Some of these perspectives' differences are sociological and political, arising from deliberative democratic theory's agreement with portions of communitarianism's focus on the constitutive role of social memberships and the importance of civic agency (cf. Cohen and Arato 1992, 376–77, 396, 400).¹⁷ Others are ethical, rooted in deliberative democracy's adoption of a Kantian, rather than a Lockean, understanding of free rationality. Sociologically, deliberative institutions enable forms of communication extending beyond strategic calculation to include the discovery and creation of purposes through shared discourse. Democracy, therefore, does more than facilitate the expression and aggregation of individual preferences. It also allows citizens to cooperate for more associational purposes. Ethically, the Kantian influence demands that politics respect individual autonomy, principally by providing all affected individuals and groups with meaningful access to collective deliberation (Benhabib 2004, 131–32; Cohen and Arato 1992, 398; Habermas 1993, 50; Kymlicka 1995, 140–42; Young 1997, 402–3). Consequently, what binds individuals to deliberative democratic outcomes is not simply prudential concern to maintain a system offering the best opportunities for preference satisfaction, but also moral appreciation of deliberative democracy's basic fairness (Habermas 1996, 108; Richardson 2002, 84; Warren 2001, 91–93).

The perspective relying on the priorities of democratic culture expands deliberative democracy's attention to institutions beyond those that contribute directly or indirectly to communicative action. Though the idea of culture may seem vague, a useful model is found in the work of interpretive anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz. For Geertz, culture is the web or network of meanings that human beings spin for themselves (1973, 5), the interactions and expressions through which they cooperate to construct and reconstruct their lives. In focusing on democracy as a culture, social theory examines not only the ways in which democratic collective action is enabled, but also the processes through which the identities of democratic citizens and regimes are produced; it must therefore be attuned to the educative or semiotic as well as to the strategic or pragmatic aspects of political structures.

This cultural turn is skeptical about any sort of universalism. One of the most important moments in this turn was the transition from John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* to his later work, *Political Liberalism*. In

the first book, Rawls attempted to develop a theory of justice that was valid *sub specie aeternitatus* (1971, 587), relying on rational choices made by hypothetical individuals under stipulated conditions of uncertainty (1971, 136–42). *Political Liberalism* has the more modest goal of clarifying the principles of justice consistent with the constitutive tenets of a liberal democratic society, the most important of which is a recognition of the impossibility of any agreement about comprehensive human goods (Rawls 2005, 24–25). Any attempt to work from such a vantage point would violate the reasonable pluralism that is central to the liberal democratic way of life (2005, xxxvii, 97–98). While Locke’s rights-bearing individual and Kant’s autonomous agent have played important roles in the development of liberal democracy’s self-understanding, they cannot serve as foundations for a universal argument in favor of democratic institutions. The proper task for theory, then, is to identify the political arrangements consistent with liberal democratic culture’s continuity and flourishing (Rawls 2005, 223).

Like many of the democratic cultural theorists informed by Rawls, postmodern democratic theorists understand the self as a social or cultural construction. However, postmodernism sees the cultural claim going wrong by failing to recognize that all representations of culture are politicized and contestable. Informed by the general framework of Michel Foucault,¹⁸ postmodern democratic theory replaces the focus on culture as the construction of shared meanings with a focus on politics as the assertion and contestation of competing identities and allegiances. Democracy is the form of politics most open to projects of identity formation and least susceptible to the establishment of permanent hegemonies. Figures such as Judith Butler, William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, and Chantal Mouffe thus describe a properly functioning democratic culture as a condition of agonistic pluralism, whose members practice innovative and unsettling experiments in living bound only by the most basic civilizational norms (Butler 1997a, 161–63; Connolly 1995, 180, 194; Honig 1993, 13–15; Honig 2001, 85–86; Mouffe 2000, 98–105).

Because these four perspectives engage the same broad set of political phenomena, they often intersect theoretically. Putnam uses a rational choice framework to explain the persistence of cultural environments that enhance or prevent effective democratic governance (1993, 177–81). Rawls sees liberal democratic culture as contextualizing the respect for autonomous individuals that lies at the core of deliberative democratic theory (2005, 98). While there is no reason to believe that these perspectives exhaust the ways in which contemporary social theory can investigate democratic political life, they do represent a number of the most influential current alternatives. They are persistent sources of mutual

criticism; the clarified articulation of each is due in part to reciprocal provocations. One conclusion arising from these critical interactions is that each perspective focuses on a part of democratic political life and may therefore overtheorize its own particular area of concern. Yet, beyond this, they share a basic resistance to engaging in more substantive examinations of the goals or goods of democratic communities, precisely those sorts of questions raised but not answered by the problematizations considered earlier.

Though each of the perspectives outlined above explicitly confines itself to developing a view of democratic space, they all implicitly rely on unexamined endorsements of particular democratic purposes. One reason for the reluctance to engage deeper questions of purpose is that such a project seems to require judging the value of democratic institutions and culture in light of the general needs and potentials of human beings (cf. Taylor 1967, 54–55), and all of the contemporary perspectives are suspicious about political appeals to anything resembling a conception of human nature (Connolly 1995, 106; Geertz 2000, 51–55; Rawls 2005, 13; Habermas 1979, 201; Habermas 1993, 21; Benhabib 2004, 129–30). Yet since each of these frameworks nonetheless presumes the validity of a certain psychology, each rests on a functional equivalent to just such a view. By failing to acknowledge this dependence, each position limits its ability to argue for the human value of democratic practices in the face of determined opposition or to examine critically the justifications of the political spaces they endorse. Since goods provided by or dangers threatening to democratic societies are identified on the basis of a prior acceptance of democratic principles, each perspective is also limited in its ability to deal fully with the goods that democratic regimes make possible or the dangers that threaten those regimes' integrity. For example, while deliberative democratic theory can explain why trust is good for deliberative democracy, it is less equipped to show why a deliberative democracy that nourishes a healthy sense of trust is good. Because post-modern democratic theory insists that the problem of what has come to be called "the other" must be solved (see chapter 5) as a condition for healthy democratic politics, it ignores both threatening and salutary others whose presence is continuous with political life.

By confining their attention to characterizations of democratic space, these perspectives also deprive themselves of the resources needed to accomplish even their own purposes effectively. Though each focuses on institutions or processes through which democratic outcomes can be achieved, the refusal to comment independently on the substance of those outcomes constrains assessments and even descriptions of the processes. Some essential insights about the health or pathology of ways of doing

things can only be provided by judgments about the quality of that which is predictably or characteristically done. To the extent that such judgments are excluded, understandings of what it means for democratic processes to function well are constrained, and the ability to determine the full range of institutional or cultural resources that would enable them to do so is diminished. If one reason why we should value deliberative democratic institutions is that they characteristically generate outcomes that are more egalitarian, more open to the potentially marginalized, or more respectful of the natural environment (cf. Habermas 1996, 355–56), we must also more fully identify the institutional and cultural forms that would make those substantive outcomes attractive to democratic citizens. If the contests within agonistic pluralism are to remain gentle (cf. Connolly 1993, 155–57), a sociology of postmodern democratic society must identify the social and cultural forms that civilize.

Finally, in limiting abilities to consider democratic purposes or projects in light of broader reflections on the characteristics of human beings, contemporary democratic theories disconnect themselves from the substantive concerns of democratic citizens. Our political deliberations, broadly construed, do not exclude critical reflection on democratic purposes and the ways in which these purposes intersect or clash with a range of other human goods. While many of these reflections may seem naive or culture-bound, they are valuable precisely because they refuse to limit themselves according to the more sophisticated languages of theory. This feature of American democratic political life was observed by Tocqueville in the nineteenth century (Tocqueville 1988, 441–42). The spirit of practical openness has been, if anything, intensified by a pluralization of democratic communities that may exert an influence opposite to what Rawls (2005, 38) expects, by broadening rather than narrowing forms of democratic political conversation (Sanjek 1998, 367–93). Democratic citizens do not regard one another simply as bargaining agents whose interests are formed prior to their interactions. Deliberative democratic procedures are considered in light of expected outcomes. The cultural bases of democracy are celebrated and challenged as well as interpreted. And attempts to construct individual and collective identities are regarded as proposed ways of life requiring critical examination, not simply as experiments in living demanding space.

From one vantage point, disconnection between the limited forms of contemporary democratic theory and the more expansive requirements of democratic practice is appropriately respectful of democracy, for any attempt to correct or constrain democratic processes and conversations in light of more rigorous and exact theoretical conclusions would rightly be seen as antidemocratic and even antipolitical (cf. Honig 1993, 2). Yet

this theoretical silence also deprives democratic citizens of valuable resources that could assist them in grappling with substantive political dilemmas. It is not appropriate to try to meet this need by constructing a more elaborate conceptual resource that could more fully theorize democracy while remaining deferential to its political space. More valuable are resources that would pragmatically respect the goods of democracy while continuing to problematize them intellectually. We can find important resources of this kind in classical political theory, particularly in Thucydides and Plato.

The Persistence of Classical Political Theory

But why these two authors? Questions arise from several sources. The first is a more general suspicion about the value of classical political philosophy for democratic societies. This rests on at least three general grounds. First, there is the seemingly unbridgeable gap that separates the premodern society surrounding the classical writers from our own modern social forms (cf. Habermas 1996, 25–26; Warren 2001, 40; Benhabib 2004, 15–17). Second, classical political theory seems to lack the analytic tools supplied by modern social theory. Without access to these more sophisticated conceptual categories, classical political theory is unable to differentiate and interconnect the various social realms (Habermas 1996, 106–7). Finally, virtually every influential voice among the classical Greek political philosophers seems hostile to democratic politics and culture. This is partially a historical assessment, based on the political-cultural allegiances of most Greek writers on politics during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE (cf. Ober 1998, 5). Beyond historical judgments, this criticism is also generated by what is seen as a principled clash between the emphasis that many of the classical authors place on the development of the virtues and the democratic priorities of freedom and equality. Opposition to references to human virtue thus stems in part from a presumption that they presume essentialist assertions about a permanent human identity existing apart from empirical practices and historical change. (Cf. Habermas 1996, xli; Geertz 2000, 52–55). The language of virtue is also assailed because it seems to privilege hierarchies or elites. This is one basis for Rawls's rejecting what he calls "perfectionism" as a standard for social justice, a standard "directing society to arrange institutions and to define the duties and obligations of individuals so as to maximize the achievement of human excellence in art, science and culture" (1971, 325).

Beyond these general objections, there are particular concerns focusing on Thucydides and Plato. If the goal is to make a serious

case for the contributions of classical political philosophy to thoughtful assessments of democratic political life, a more appropriate source is surely Aristotle. Despite Aristotle's unusual style of political discourse, he does develop theoretical concepts and employ them in the empirical analysis and pragmatic evaluation of political life.¹⁹ Thus, the form of his analysis seems more compatible with contemporary democratic theory than either the philosophical dramas of Plato or the historical narrative of Thucydides. And while Aristotle is often acutely critical of democracy, he seems on the whole more open to democratic possibilities than either Plato or Thucydides is.²⁰ Plato's explicit presentations of preferred forms of governance, in the dialogues *Republic* and *Laws*, seem to award political control directly or indirectly to philosophers who rule on the basis of superior wisdom. Thucydides apparently compliments the Periclean paradigm under which what was in name a democracy was in fact under the rule of the *protos anēr* (the "foremost man," in Lattimore's translation) who controlled the citizens by means of hegemonic rhetoric (2.65.9–10).

These objections need to be taken seriously and continually borne in mind, but they are not conclusive. With respect to the generic rejection of classical political theory, it should first be observed that both the significance and the degree of distance between classical Greek culture and ours can be exaggerated.²¹ Arguments that classical political thought is irrelevant to contemporary political discourse often seem to rely on the unexamined premise that these forms of thought are so embedded in their political cultural contexts that no attempt to employ them in broader conversations can be successful. Unless one bases this conclusion on a radical historicism asserted before the fact, it can only be supported by arguments that show how particular cultural and historical barriers prevent classical political theory from speaking to our political concerns. Moreover, as Bernard Yack has argued, empirical investigations of developed societies may identify premodern as well as modern aspects, just as historical investigations of ancient societies may discover institutions or practices quite compatible with ours (1997, 7).

Likewise, while there are striking differences between the categories of modern social theory and the political and cultural concepts employed by classical authors, they can be interactive as well as oppositional. Social theories focus by organizing conceptual fields, leading inevitably to both precision and incompleteness.²² From this perspective, all social theories are partial views that draw our attention both toward and away from certain classes of phenomena, enabling certain questions while discouraging others. At one level, classical political theory can be read as providing a particular conceptual framework, focusing on distinctive

aspects or functions of society. What informs the perspectives of Plato and Aristotle is how political and cultural forms contribute to human flourishing. While classical political theory may downplay aspects of society that modern social theory highlights, it also reminds us of the significance of outcomes that modern social theory may obscure.²³

Finally, while classical political theory's treatment of democracy is generally critical, there are important differences and nuances, both historical and theoretical, within this literature. The antidemocratic criticisms leveled by the author known as the "old oligarch" or by Isocrates (cf. Ober 1998, chaps. 1 and 5) are not those of Thucydides, Plato, or Aristotle. Moreover, the critical contributions of these texts are also pragmatic acts within political contexts that are generally democratic. While the speeches or arguments of these authors often point to serious shortcomings in democratic politics and culture, the speech-acts themselves (the articulation of arguments in specific political contexts) can be read as more discursive and conciliatory. Practical criticisms of democratic practice, including those that point to attractive nondemocratic alternatives, may be offered to improve rather than to replace democratic forms of governance, problematizing rather than simply condemning democracy. When Socrates offers his vision of philosophic kingship as the only effective remedy for individual and civic evils in books 5 through 7 of the *Republic*, he does so within a discursive setting that is egalitarian and dialogic and a dramatic context that reminds the readers of the destructiveness of antidemocratic rule.²⁴ Therefore, the same books also include Socrates' attempt to reconcile a skeptical, if not hostile, young aristocrat with democratic practices (cf. *Republic* 499e). Thucydides' endorsement of the regime known as the Five Thousand, a moderate blending of the few and the many, as the best government in his time (8.97.2–3) is not simply antidemocratic, for it implies preservation of significant aspects of the rule of the many.²⁵ Perhaps the most striking implication of this praise is not that Thucydides prefers a mixed regime over radical versions of democracy or oligarchy, but that he prefers this blend to the rule of Pericles, to the arrangement that was "democratic only in name."

These historical complications are reinforced by more nuanced assessments of the classics' attention to virtue. The charge that conceptions of human virtue must depend on intangible and ahistorical essences seems wrong in light of the many forms of practical philosophy that rely on visions of excellent human activities that are identified and defended in more empirical and revisable ways. Indeed, visions of human excellence inform most of democratic political theory's founding texts.²⁶ While philosophical conceptions of human virtue can be used to justify social hierarchies, this move seems unnecessary, perhaps even

indefensible, from the point of view of the classical writers themselves. We can acknowledge that potential candidates for life choices are of unequal merit, while also maintaining that the human beings making those choices possess generally equal capabilities for making them.²⁷ This broad equality of capabilities is more plausible once we recognize that frameworks for evaluating life choices can be general and provisional rather than specified and dogmatic. From this perspective, taking human virtue seriously is compatible with egalitarian and individualized descriptions of human capabilities.²⁸ Finally, even if human beings are in some respects unequal in moral capabilities, there is no reason to think that such inequalities are reflected in conventional social or political hierarchies. Significant portions of both Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics* and Plato's dialogues aggressively challenge this association.²⁹

Theories and Texts

If we acknowledge that classical political philosophy is not so disconnected from contemporary democratic theory as to be useless or pernicious, there are particular advantages to considering the contributions of Thucydides and Plato. While Aristotle theorizes ethics and politics more systematically, texts that are more literary in character have their own advantages. They are better situated as cultural resources for conversations about the things that matter to individuals and communities.³⁰ While both authors write within specific cultural circumstances and address particular historical concerns—such as Pericles' responsibility for the Peloponnesian War or the justice of Athens's execution of Socrates—each also engages questions about human and political purposes that are broader and deeper than those occupying their immediate audiences. The focus of many of these questions concerns the institutions and purposes of democracy.

Yet there is considerable uncertainty about how these texts respond to human and political complexity and, therefore, about the real depth of their literary character. Modern disciplinary classifications of Plato as philosopher and Thucydides as historian imply that their work is only literary on the surface, masking more rigorous or finalizing projects. While Sacvan Bercovitch sees literature resisting what he calls the cognitive imperialism of disciplinary frameworks, he situates Plato among the imperialists. Bercovitch says, "Once we set disciplines loose on culture, they tend *sui generis* toward absolutes, closure and solutions. . . . They are incurable cognitive imperialists. . ." (1998, 75). The proper antidote to these fruitful but dangerous disciplinary abstractions is literature, which insists on giving "those abstractions . . . a specific textual habitation and

a name" (1998, 74). Yet even though Plato's insights are communicated almost exclusively in dramatic form (cf. *Second Letter* 314c; *Seventh Letter* 342e–343a), their substance parallels the systematic philosophic statements of Descartes or Marx. Bercovitch thus sees through the dialogue form to discover a monologic content (1998, 75).

That Thucydides establishes his own form of cognitive imperialism has been argued in the recent work of Gregory Crane. Crane argues that Thucydides' literary style is constructed to convince the reader of the validity of a universalizing theory that sees through the rich world of social practices to reveal the foundational reality of power moves (1996, 72), ending with the acknowledgment of Thucydides' perspective as supplying "the last word" (1996, 50, 56; see also Wohl 2002, 70). While Plato's literary form is absorbed by a systematic and dogmatic philosophical content, Thucydides' is undermined by a reductionist social theory aiming at nearly mathematical precision (Crane 1996, xiii).

We should resist seeing the literary features of the Platonic and Thucydidean texts as cosmetic. Bercovitch's reading of Plato arbitrarily dismisses the dialogue form as attractive but misleading packaging. Yet this claim succeeds only by ignoring the real complications that the dramatic character of these works creates for attempts to interpret them as didactic monologues. The *Gorgias* is emblematic. Socrates' efforts to argue against the political ethos of competitive self-aggrandizement are met continuously with objections and resistances that he is never able to overcome (cf. 513c). The text itself inscribes a monologue represented as a dialogue (505e ff.), revealing in dramatic and comedic fashion the deficiencies of a mode of speaking that is only conversational on the surface. Though the dialogue contains an unusual number of long, uninterrupted, and vehement Socratic speeches, it ends with Socrates' extreme skepticism about what has been said. Referring to his concluding myth of the afterlife, but extending his reservations to the entire conversation, he concludes, "This myth may seem to you to be the saying of old women and [you may therefore] despise it; and there would be no wonder at our contempt if with all our searching we could somewhere find something better and truer than this. . . . But among all of our speeches, though all have been refuted, one speech (*logos*) stands, that doing injustice is to be avoided more than having injustice done to one, that more than anything a man should take care not to seem good but to be so, in private as well as in public" (527a–b). This conclusion is dialogic, resting not on dogmatic affirmation, but on the failure to discover a more suitable alternative in question and answer.

Bercovitch's perspective also reinforces the disciplinary hegemonies he challenges, for he implies that the same work cannot theorize with

explanatory power while also questioning the certainty or closure that theory seems to provide (cf. Bercovitch 1998, 74). In different ways, both Plato and Thucydides bring these disparate intellectual functions together. Perhaps the most striking example of this in the Platonic corpus occurs in book 7 of the *Republic*. Socrates has completed his account of the educational program that will prepare prospective philosopher-kings for the science of dialectic, the intellection that enables its practitioners to give an account of the basic premises of the highest and most comprehensive kind of knowledge. He is then asked by his young interlocutor Glaucon to give a full account “of the character of dialectic’s power . . . and, then, of the forms into which it is divided; and then of its ways. These, as it seems likely, would lead at last toward that place which is for one who comes to it a resting place from the road . . . and an end of his journey.” Socrates’ response to this insistence is telling: “You will no longer be able to follow. . . . [Y]ou would no longer be seeing an image of the things we are saying, but the truth itself, as that appears to me” (533a). Even the foundational grounding of wisdom is expressible only as a point of view. The radical separation of knowledge from opinion that has justified Socrates’ distinction between the real philosophers and those trapped in the cave of illusions is now called seriously into question. Referring to another philosophical framework, Bercovitch observes, “Philosophy says ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Literature says ‘That’s what you think’ ” (Bercovitch 1998, 73). Within dialogues that are not at all monologic, the Platonic Socrates is both conclusive and provisional in a way that insists on their mutuality.

Likewise, while he is right that Thucydides’ form of writing is integrally linked to his intellectual purposes, Crane’s characterizations are too reductive. An alternative way of reading Thucydides’ narrative is as a text that acknowledges the impossibility of “render[ing] *erga* perfectly into language” (Crane 1996, 72) and therefore as one that complicates rather than resolves the most vexing political questions. Thucydides, the universalizing theorist, seems to find his clearest voice in assessing the causes of the hideous civil *stasis* in Corcyra (3.82). Spurred by love of gain and honor, humans are incorrigibly violent and competitive. This position is systematized and extended by de Romilly (1963, 322–39), Crane (1996, 8), and Jonathan Price (2001, 11–19) into a universal Thucydidean explanation of political disorder. Crane finds the same impulse within many of the speeches of Thucydides’ characters (Crane 1996, 8, 74). Yet in a provocative speech given earlier in book 3 we find less authority than ambiguity. Supporting a moderate response toward the rebellious city of Mytilene, the Athenian citizen Diodotus considers the psychological basis of crime—or error. Driven by greed and irrational hopes, humans

continually overreach. Like the most monologic and imperialist theorist, Diodotus offers a series of lawlike statements revealing depressing human necessities that cannot be addressed through education. Yet his own attempt to persuade the Athenian assembly to behave moderately even as the passions of fear and anger urge otherwise presupposes the sort of educability that his explicit claims deny.³¹ Diodotus does not act as if his statements about human motivation were universally and necessarily true. The same sort of undermining of universal pronouncements may be found in the pragmatics of Thucydides' narrative as a whole, which attempts to educate even as it reveals the extent and depth of human passion.

The literary character of their texts does more than complicate familiar classifications of Thucydides as historian³² and Plato as philosopher; it also points to the complex ways in which these authors can intersect with the modern forms of democratic theory outlined earlier. From one perspective, Plato and Thucydides can be read as offering their own theoretical conclusions about political institutions and cultures. At the most general level, Plato argues that political forms should be assessed according to how well they contribute to the citizens' practice of the virtues (cf. *Gorgias* 504d–e, 517b–c). Thucydides' complex treatment of regimes suggests that they arise from coordinated exercises of power, yet conduct themselves in ways that contribute to destabilization and vulnerability. Too simply put, while Plato theorizes politics in a way that points to enhanced political possibilities, Thucydides draws our attention to the disruption that lies at the core of all political identities. However, both authors resist the tendencies toward the cognitive imperialism that characterizes theorization by showing the limitations of their own dominant templates. For Socrates, the teachability of the virtues is fundamentally problematic (*Protagoras* 361a–c). For Thucydides, some forms of culture enable thoughtful challenges to the power that they presuppose and reflect. In suggesting the provisionality of their own frameworks, both writers practice a conversational rather than a deductive form of political thought.³³

Yet even if we read the texts of Thucydides and Plato among those that Bercovitch identifies as literary, why should we read them as resources for democrats? In setting a time horizon that is "forever," Thucydides suggests that his narrative is a cultural resource for those who can resist the urges of advantage or passion and ascend to a height that is more synoptic and penetrating.³⁴ Plato implies that the dialogues should be understood in the same way when he writes in the *Phaedrus* that "a serious (*spoudē*) speech . . . uses the dialectical art to plant and sow in an appropriate soul knowing words, that can help themselves

and the one who planted them, [words] that are not fruitless, but yield seeds from which there spring up other words in other souls" (276e–77a). From this perspective the appropriate audiences for both authors can be seen as indefinite and self-selecting. For some commentators, this self-selection works against contributions that the texts might make to democratic political discourse. Philosophers as different as Hobbes and Nietzsche have noted that Thucydides' narrative needs extraordinarily careful examination and resolutely applied curiosity. Plato acknowledges that his own beliefs are carefully masked within the speeches of a Socrates "made young and fair" (*Second Letter* 314c). These statements have led some to see both authors constructing texts that can be read at two very different levels: the popular or conventional and the sophisticated or philosophic. In commenting on the need to invest "much meditation" in the interpretation of Thucydides, Hobbes recalls that "Marcellinus saith he was obscure on purpose; that the common people might not understand him. And not unlikely: for a wise man should so write, (though in words understood by all men), that wise men only should be able to commend him."³⁵ Leo Strauss connects Socratic irony to a seemingly elitist response to the varying capacities of human beings. "If irony is essentially related to the fact that there is a natural order of rank among men, it follows that irony consists in speaking differently to different kinds of people" (1964, 51).³⁶ To the extent that a recognition of a natural order among human beings informs the writings of Thucydides and Plato, we must question the value of these texts for democratic citizens. Perhaps their democratic sympathies are only detectable by misreadings (cf. Ober 1998, 157); a truly democratic scrutiny of both authors would reinforce the conclusion that they are among democracy's harshest critics.³⁷

However, such characterizations of both texts and audiences are artificially bipolar. Plato's and Thucydides' works are capable of multiple readings, and while individuals' abilities to read them well surely vary, such variations are continuous as well. From this perspective, good readings of these texts do not require extraordinary gifts as much as a reasonable sensitivity to "the characters of men's humors and manners" and a committed diligence to go beyond what is communicated by "the first speaking." Thus understood, these textual subtleties and audience variations are compatible with a democratic culture that includes a number of sensitive readers.³⁸

The Intersection of Philosophy and History

A second reason to consider the contributions of Thucydides and Plato together as cultural resources is that both recognize that political theory