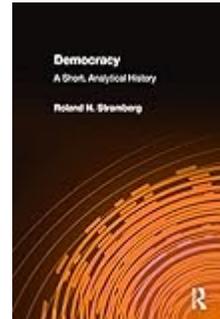




Roland N. Stromberg. *Democracy: A Short, Analytical History.* Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996. 207 pp. \$102.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-56324-761-3.



Reviewed by Peter J. Herz (Southern Illinois University at Carbondale)

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The present study begins with the recognition that finding a definition of democracy is harder than it seems. The word has received radically different meanings from its users, provoking the observation that perhaps it is meaningless cant. Yet for Roland Stromberg, the fact that it has proven a powerful rallying point for over two centuries requires historical dissection of its various layers of meaning. This is done by examining the word and its usage; comparing it to other types of political theory between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries; tracing its nineteenth century advance; analyzing a crisis of democracy lasting from the nineteenth century through the postwar era; and examining its place, expansion, and vicissitudes in the world since the end of the Cold War.

Stromberg roots democracy in skepticism and experience. Formal political theory tends to be non- or anti-democratic. The continuing crisis of democracy catalogued in his book presents the history of modern politics as unrelenting criticism of democracy from many of the best minds of Western civilization. Belief in absolute truth, whether revealed or scientific, makes submitting important questions to a vote either superfluous, dangerous, or both. Perhaps the strongest argument for democracy appeared in the immediate post-World War II era, after Fascists, Nazis, and Communists demonstrated the horrors of which “rationalized” politics were capable.

Democracy should be distinguished from other phenomena with which it has been equated. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, constitutionalist and liberal thinkers usually saw democracy as something dangerous—the empowerment of an uninformed, passion-ridden, and cruel populace. The French enlightenment (as exemplified by Voltaire and d’Holbach) was profoundly antidemocratic, seeking to replace the traditional clergy, rulers, and nobility with a new oligarchy of the philosophers and their disciples. Nor is social equity necessarily the same thing as democracy. Radically egalitarian revolutionary states have often exhibited dictatorial methods of government, while Serbia prior to World War I was an egalitarian peasant society ruled by a strong monarch. Democracy might further be divided into three types: the organic democracy of small, homogeneous entities such as certain Swiss cantons and New England town meetings (as well as the primitive Athenian democracy criticized by Plato and Aristotle); the plural democracy of large modern states; and a future democracy nourished by globalized, pluralized mass culture which renders all mankind skeptical of authority.

Democracy itself represents an amalgam of factors. While rooted in a skeptical worldview, successful democracy represents an uneasy balance between modernity and traditionalism. It appears to require, if not simply

work best, in urbanized, industrialized societies with a Judaeo-Christian heritage. It seems most like Marx's capitalism, a dynamic, inherently unstable, constantly changing transition between old and new. Hence, while noting that the belief that democracy represents the culmination of political history has some merit, Stromberg is unwilling to commit himself to such a view.

Hence democracy is capable of taking several distinct directions, not necessarily positive. Stromberg notes Raymond Aron's observations that democracies are incapable of waging limited wars, but must involve the whole people in their warmaking and moralize against the enemy. Hitler came to power as the result of the democratic process. While opposed to Western concepts of human rights and liberties, Iran's mullahs govern through a majlis chosen through regular, popular elections which appear neither forced nor coerced. Future crises in economies or the environment may require courses of action for which democratic politics are unprepared.

While basically an informative, thought-provoking book and useful for introducing the study of democracy to students interested in history and/or political science, the rooting of democracy in skeptical modernity flaws the work. Too often, the history of democracy begins with Athens, then leaps two millennia to the enlightenment. Yet if democracy means limiting the power of governments and placing the different classes and conditions of human beings on some sort of equal footing (if only the abstract one of equality before law), surely the influence of Christianity (and the Judaism behind it) needs to be considered.

Stromberg skirts this issue when he notes how Reinhold Niebuhr viewed Judaeo-Christian culture as a prerequisite of democratic politics, and how C.S. Lewis declared himself a democrat because of original sin (i.e., no

one sinner can be trusted with too much power). But neither Lewis nor Niebuhr depended on their times and places for their political theologies. Niebuhr knew his Calvin, and Calvin point-blank declared his approval of an aristocracy compounded with democracy (it's in the last chapter of the Institutes) for reasons similar to those voiced by Lewis. Lewis, as a scholar of English literature, was surely aware of democratizing tendencies in seventeenth century Puritanism. John Neville Figgis traced the Western ideal of limited government, on which democracy depends, to the Conciliarists of the Middle Ages. Figgis also noted that when propounded in the sixteenth century, *jus divino* monarchy was a novel idea. Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy found the basis of Western democracy in the equality of all men in Christian eschatology.

If democracy is transitional and unstable, so are all other political systems. Even the Chinese imperial system met its end in 1911 A.D. Perhaps the nineteenth- and twentieth-century crisis of democracy described in this book arises because the antidemocratic intellectuals of modern times—Voltaire, Marx, Shaw, Spencer, and others—all agreed that “the past” represented little more than a monolithic blur of benightedness.

Stromberg correctly notes that absolute democracy has never existed, nor is it an end in itself. It has been most successful when the traditional and modern, the organic and the plural, are in rough balance. In this lies both the secret of its transitional nature and the secret of its adaptability. While it is not certain that it will dominate the politics of the future, certain of its features are likely to inform the future for a long time to come.

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