Introduction

It has become obligatory when writing about democracy these days to reflect on the paradoxical condition it has found itself in at the turn of this century. Democratization has been heralded as the triumph of the last century internationally. Yet it seems to be in a relatively fragile condition in the United States if one is to judge by the proliferation of editorials, essays, and books analyzing “democracy’s discontents.”

When asked what he thought was the most important thing that happened in the twentieth century, Nobel Prize economist Amartya Sen responded that it was “the emergence of democracy as the preeminently acceptable form of governance.”¹ Francis Fukuyama, to offer another example, confidently asserted in The End of History and the Last Man that the collapse of authoritarianism and socialism during the last half of the twentieth century has left “only one competitor standing in the ring as an ideology of potentially universal validity: liberal democracy, the doctrine of individual freedom and popular sovereignty.”² Certainly the number of democratic countries has increased if we are to judge by the expansion of popular elections. The executive summary of a survey by Freedom House notes that “in 1900, there were no states which could be judged as electoral democracies by the standard of universal suffrage for competitive multiparty elections. The

United States, Britain, and a handful of other countries possessed the most democratic systems. . . . By the close of our century liberal and electoral democracies clearly predominate. . . . Electoral democracies now represent 120 of the 192 existing countries and constitute 62.5 percent of the world’s population.”3

Sen, Fukuyama, and the authors of the Freedom House Survey recognize, of course, that democracy is not yet universally practiced and that it is not without its detractors. And while there are encouraging signs in the Middle East and “orange revolution” in Ukraine, there are also reasons to worry whether democracy is really taking hold in Russia, for example, and China’s economic boom perhaps suggests a viable “third way.” Furthermore, based on the experience of the war in Iraq and subsequent democratization efforts there, some have questioned whether democracy should be exported as foreign policy and whether it is suited to some societies. Nevertheless, the outcome of the twentieth century was that democracy shifted from a governmental form in need of justification in light of competitor forms of government to the default position of political legitimacy.

But democracy is not simply a set of governmental institutions and popular elections. It is also a set of cultural values and a form of citizenship. Voting and the rule of law are necessary conditions for democracy but not sufficient. A robust democracy requires a culture that respects the dignity of individuals and the freedoms we associate with that respect; but it also requires citizens suited for participation in democratic decision making.

What is paradoxical is that with the advance of democratic institutions internationally, many have argued that in the United States our democratic culture is in a fragile, precarious condition. Jean Elshtain, in her book Democracy on Trial, put it bluntly: “American democracy is faltering.” She sees “warning signs of exhaustion, cynicism, opportunism, and despair.”4 Clearly Elshtain is not referring to the condition of our governmental structures. Her concern is with the quality of democratic culture and the outlook of people who compose it.

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It would be an interesting exercise to imagine what Alexis de Tocqueville would think about democracy in America if he should return today. Some of his earlier observations would prove to be prescient: the threat of individualism to a shared sense of the common good, for example, or the threat slavery and the treatment of indigenous populations posed for American democracy. But I suspect he would not introduce the book about his journey through America as confidently as he did in the 1830s. This is what he wrote then:

Among the novel objects that attracted my attention during my stay in the United States nothing struck me more forcibly than the general equality of condition among the people. I readily discovered the prodigious influence that this primary fact exercises on the whole course of society; it gives a peculiar direction to the public opinion and a peculiar tenor to the laws; it imparts new maxims to the governing authorities and peculiar habits to the governed. I soon perceived that the influence of this fact extends far beyond the political character and the laws of the country, and that it has no less effect on civil society than on the government; it creates opinions, gives birth to new sentiments, founds novel customs, and modifies whatever it does not produce. The more I advanced in the study of American society, the more I perceived that this equality of condition is the fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived and the central point at which all my observations constantly terminated.5

Of course, the condition of equality that he was referring to was the absence of a governing aristocracy. And he was aware that equality was not extended to women, blacks, and indigenous peoples. What he would observe today is the extension of equality of condition to women, Native Americans, and African Americans, though these are still works in progress in some aspects of American life. However, he still might find reasons to doubt the general equality of condition in America. He might worry about the inequality of condition evident in the widening gap between the rich or reasonably well off and the poor – a gap that very nearly mirrors the fault line of race. This is certainly one of the most graphic and painful lessons of the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina where the daily television images of poor black residents of that city crying out for help underscored

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the extent of our racial and economic divide. He would find many people who believed that there is unequal access to the legislative processes and to the offices of power. Some would say that America has the best democracy money can buy. He would find poor young black men disproportionately represented on death row and young Native Americans disproportionately represented in suicide statistics and in drug rehabilitation clinics. He would find discrimination against Latinos, Asians, and Arabs. He would find a country polarized about the rights of fetuses and about whether gay and lesbian couples should be afforded equal recognition and protection through marriage. Across all of these lines of class, race, gender, ideology, sexual orientation, and national origin, he would find cynicism about government, disengagement from the political process, feelings of disenfranchisement, and deep doubts about the capacity of democratic institutions to support the aspirations of a pluralistic culture. He would hear a chorus of editorialists and social observers decrying the precarious condition of American democracy.

While we have acted out many of Tocqueville’s deepest worries about democracy in America, it is arguable whether we are any longer Tocqueville’s America in important respects; whether the virtues he observed then are the ones that can sustain us now. The differences between then and now are not merely the result of incremental developments over time. The challenge posed to democracy by the diversity of our country today is not just additively different from the challenge of religious differences or differences in European origin in the early nineteenth century. Some would argue that the sheer scope of diverse origins of citizens as well as the political claims of gender and sexuality seem to raise challenges different in kind, challenges about the political significance of diversity. In the vernacular of recent political theorists, it is the challenge to democracy of difference. The expectations of assimilation, of America as the great melting pot, are no longer a presupposition for democratic culture. But if that is the case, can a democracy accommodate difference without undermining a shared sense of civic identity that seems essential to it? Jean Elshtain claims that America needs “a new social covenant,” one that

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can embrace both our differences and our shared identity. But there is substantial disagreement – both in theory and in politics – about what form that covenant should take. Is it a renewal of commitment to the values of Tocqueville’s America – to shared religious traditions, community, family, and civic associations – or is it these values that stand in the way of a genuinely pluralistic democracy? Is it to be struck in terms of the liberal ideal of freedom from intrusion and coercion, allowing diverse people to choose their own ways of living?, In the way the political lines are drawn today – between social conservatives and liberals – either of these alternatives is the source of the other’s disease. And this also contributes to democracy’s precarious condition. So much of our politics is polarized around competing claims about who are the legitimate bearers of American democratic values. Who are the true patriots and who are the enemies of democracy? We find ourselves in a time when to disagree and to criticize is to hate America from one point of view or another.

Democracy is not newly precarious, however. Democracy’s first flowering in sixth- and fifth-century BCE Athens was a tumultuous and relatively brief affair. In his exceptional study of Pericles, democracy’s first citizen, Donald Kagan described democracy as “one of the rarest, most delicate and fragile flowers in the jungle of human experience.” 7 In the ancient world, democracy existed in a jungle. 8 It was not just that the career of Athenian democracy coincided with the long and brutal Peloponnesian Wars. It was no abstract observation when Plato sarcastically described democracy as “a delightful form of government, anarchic and motley, assigning a kind of equality indiscriminately to equals and unequals alike.” 9 The Athenian Assembly was not the idealized public space of reasoned discourse that some political theorists long for today. The citizens of Athens were swayed by self-interests and interests of tribe. They were persuaded by powerful rhetoric whether or not it was on the side of truth. They were fickle in their loyalties. And they executed Socrates.

8 See Mark Munn, The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
The critics of classical democracy who were contemporary with it have been more influential to political theory than democracy’s friends. Apart from Pericles’ “Funeral Oration” as told by Thucydides, most of what we know of a positive sort about democratic theory in classical Greece we must glean from its critics. Plato was clearly antidemocratic. (Whether Socrates was is a matter I will take up later.) In the Statesman, Plato has the Stranger tell the young Socrates that of all possible constitutions, “democracy is the worst so far as law abiding is concerned and the best for flouting the law.” The general line of this criticism was familiar before Plato, sufficiently familiar that Herodotus gave it prominence in his discussion of the three forms of government in his Histories. He put it in the mouth of an imagined Persian rebel leader:

[1] In a democracy, malpractices are bound to occur; in this case, however, corrupt dealings in government services lead not to private feuds, but to close personal associations, the men responsible for them putting their heads together and mutually supporting one another. And so it goes on, until somebody or other comes forward as the people’s champion and breaks up the cliques which are out for their own interests. This wins him the admiration of the mob, and as a result he soon finds himself entrusted with absolute power – all of which is proof that the best form of government is monarchy.

After Plato, Aristotle was to continue this criticism. Of the four types of democracy that he discussed, he identified extreme democracy, that is, democracy as practiced in Athens, to be the worst because “all offices are open to all, and the will of the people overrides all law.”

After the collapse of democracy in the ancient world, democracy was disparaged or ignored for much of the next two millennia. Even as recently as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – as the philosophical elements that we now take to be integral to modern democracy were being shaped – the term democracy was typically used either

narrowly to designate the political regime of Athens or as a term of abuse, naming a form of government that leads inevitably to lawlessness and anarchy.\textsuperscript{14} And when it was used in a less hostile way, it was not intended to designate a governmental form to which we should or could aspire. Rousseau famously declared that “if there were a people of gods, it would govern itself democratically. Such a perfect government is not suited to men.”\textsuperscript{15} The flip side of this coin was James Madison’s claim, in the \textit{Federalist Papers}, that “had every Athenian citizen been born a Socrates: every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.”\textsuperscript{16}

These views are not so far apart as they might seem. What Rousseau’s observation implied is that the success of a democracy, ideally realized, requires a god-like capacity to transcend the personal and partial perspective in favor of the common good. Madison’s view was based on democracy in practice. He shared the views of Plato and Aristotle that it is the “confusion and intemperance of the multitude”\textsuperscript{17} that is democracy’s major failing.

From our perspective in the heyday of democracy, we forget that the Founding Fathers did not originally understand themselves to be founding a democracy. Joseph Ellis reminds us that Thomas Jefferson, with whom we so often identify the democratic intentions of the American Revolution, rarely used the term \textit{democracy} and when he began to, after his election as President of the United States in 1800, he used it interchangeably with \textit{pure republicanism}. When he was called a \textit{democrat} by the Federalists it was a term of derision.\textsuperscript{18} And when Jefferson came to use democracy with approval, it was because of his dismay over how far government had strayed from the true revolutionary spirit of 1776. For Jefferson, democracy or pure republicanism called for the return to the essence of that revolution – freedom from tyranny, citizens’

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Federalist Papers}, p. 281.
voluntary consent to government, distrust of centralized government that favored more local forms of participation, simplicity, and agrarian ways of life and values and so forth.\textsuperscript{19}

Despite Jefferson’s use of the terms democracy and republicanism interchangeably, they were more commonly seen as competing visions and it was the republican vision that was intended by most of the Founders. Gordon Wood, in his exceptional book, \textit{The Radicalness of the American Revolution}, details how the republican aims of the American Revolution, to the dismay of many of the Founders, gave way to democracy. According to Wood, “the irony of the Revolution was that it sought to create a society and government established on republican principle. . . . They sought to construct a society and government based on virtue and disinterested public leadership and to set in motion a moral movement that would eventually be felt around the globe.”\textsuperscript{20}

What the Revolution created instead was a democratic society of competitive individualists. Wood writes: “Well before 1810 many of the founding fathers and others, including most of the older leaders of the Federalist Party, were wringing their hands over what the Revolution had created and most American citizens were celebrating: American Democracy.”\textsuperscript{21}

The purpose of these historical reminders about democracy is to suggest that democracy is not newly precarious. It always has been. Its precariousness is owed to its historical contest with other candidates for legitimacy. But it is also owed to the tendencies internal to the nature of democratic culture, tendencies that its critics have been concerned about all along, tendencies toward the dissolution of the common good, and toward anarchy and disorder. I will be arguing that precariousness is not a merely contingent, circumstantial feature of democracy’s career. Rather, it is an aspect of the nature of democratic culture and how democracy sits in the field of politics, and of tendencies inherent in democracy that pull against one another in ways that always put it at risk. As such, it places unusual demands on citizenship, demands not captured when we only think of citizenship in terms of rights that


\textsuperscript{21} \textit{The Radicalism of the American Revolution}, p. 230.
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citizens in democratic society have or in terms of citizen participation as voters.

Fundamental disagreement about what democracy amounts to also contributes to its precariousness. To use the phrase William Connolly borrowed from W. B. Gallie, democracy is an essentially contested concept.\textsuperscript{22} The contested nature of the concept is not merely academic nor is it recent. It has been with us from the earliest days of the Republic, with fundamental disagreement about the true meaning of the American Revolution. Many of the diagnoses of the current condition of American democracy trace it back to that debate and to the consequences of the version of democracy that prevailed over the republican vision. Michael Sandel’s Democracy’s Discontent, for example, argues that in the American experiment with democracy, republicanism was the path not taken and that the other path, liberal democracy, is the source of the malaise of public life in America. I will return to his diagnosis frequently in this book. It is philosophically and historically rich and Sandel is an unusually compelling representative of one side of the debate in political theory – and the culture more generally – between liberalism and what has variously been characterized as republicanism or communitarianism. Common to the republicanism perspective and communitarianism is the conviction that what is wrong with American democracy is liberalism.

The coupling of liberalism and democracy, an alliance so natural to us now, was not naturally allied through much of the history of liberal political theory or in the history of democracy either. The origins of the liberal tradition were not consciously within the context of a democratic conception. Liberal theories from John Locke to John Stuart Mill shared the historic worry about disorder and the tyranny of the many that were so often associated with democracy. It is worth remembering that the rise of modern liberalism preceded the reemergence of democracy. John Dryzek reminds us that “it is only in the twentieth century that liberalism and democracy really reached an accommodation, such that ‘liberal democracy’ could fall easily from the lips.”\textsuperscript{23} Even


in the twentieth century, the alliance between liberalism and democracy has been uneasy. “Like many marriage partners, liberalism and democracy are totally incompatible, yet cannot live apart,” is the way Alan Wolfe has put it. Liberalism brought to the marriage the centrality of individual freedom, and democracy brought political equality. The two have struggled with one another ever since, and democrats who are not liberals – communitarians such as Michael Sandel, for example – have struggled to break them up, to save democracy from the mischief of its partner.

The disagreement between liberalism and communitarianism that matters to me is their differing views about the nature of democratic citizenship. For liberalism, the center of gravity of citizenship is rights citizens are assured through the rule of law, and crucially the right to vote. Judith Shaklar, in her book *American Citizenship*, examines what it is that was being demanded by women and descendents of African slaves in their quest for citizenship and uses this analysis to identify what she takes to be central. While she acknowledges other meanings of citizenship, she identifies social standing as the core, the marks of which are inclusion in the polity through voting, and the absence of barriers to work and earn. On her view, citizenship is characterized not by qualities that citizens possess but by the guarantee of their equal opportunities. In contrast, communitarians focus on the civic virtues citizens need to sustain self-governance. Michael Sandel, for example, writes that “[m]ore than a legal condition, citizenship requires certain habits and dispositions, a concern for the whole, an orientation to the common good.” And according to Sandel, these habits and dispositions are cultivated through attachments to community, family, religion, and associational memberships that orient citizens to shared common values and common interests. I think, however, that there is more to democratic citizenship than what either Shaklar or Sandel convey. The reason is that there is more to democracy than what either liberalism or communitarianism implies. Democracy is more than rights.