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Yaron Ezrahi
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Imagined Democracies

Necessary Political Fictions

This book proposes a revisionist approach to democratic politics. Yaron Ezrahi focuses on the creative unconscious collective imagination that generates ever-changing visions of legitimate power and authority, which compete for enactment and institutionalization in the political arena. If, in the past, political authority was grounded in fictions such as the divine right of kings, the laws of nature, historical determinism, and scientism, today the space of democratic politics is filled with multiple alternative social imaginaries of the desirable political order. Exposure to electronic mass media has made contemporary democratic publics more aware that credible popular fictions have greater impact on shaping our political realities than do rational social choices or moral arguments. The pressing political question in contemporary democracy is, therefore, how to select and enact political fictions that promote peace, not violence, and how to found the political order on checks and balances between alternative political imaginaries of freedom and justice.

Yaron Ezrahi studied political science and philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and holds a PhD from Harvard University. He has served as an adviser on science policy to the White House, the U.S. National Academy of Science, the OECD (1969–70), the Israeli Academy of Science and Humanities (1973–83), and the Carnegie Commission on Science (1992). He is the recipient of a National Jewish Book Award and of the Israeli Political Science Association's Lifetime Achievement Award (2009). He has been a member of the Hebrew University faculty since 1972. Other appointments include a fellowship at the Center of Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University and visiting professorships at the University of Pennsylvania, Duke University, Harvard, Princeton, ETH Zurich, Brown University, and The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center. His works include *The Descent of Icarus: Science and the Transformation of Contemporary Democracy*; *Technology, Pessimism, and Postmodernism* (edited with Everett Mendelsohn and Howard Segal); *Rubber Bullets: Power and Conscience in Modern Israel*; and *Israel towards a Constitutional Democracy* (with M. Kremnitzer). He is a cofounder and board member of *The Seventh Eye*, Israel's leading journal of press criticism in Hebrew. His work has also appeared in *Minerva*, *Science Studies*, *Social Research*, *Inquiry*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, and *The New York Times Magazine*.

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YARON EZRAHI
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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For Ruth –
The Music of My Life
And the Muse of This Book

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Preface

Contemporary democracy is not the deliberative self-governing polity of informed free citizens envisioned by modern Enlightenment thinkers. It is a system of government in which public policy consists of an eclectic patchwork of half-baked programs, where politicians tend to posture rather than act, where the public sphere is more a site of shifting amorphous moods than a clash of ideas. The question guiding this book is how we got here: How did the influential ideas of Locke, Rousseau, Condorcet, Paine, Jefferson, Kant, Mill, and Dewey about rational politics informed by public knowledge and participatory citizenship devolve into democracies where expertise is a diminishing source of authority, where politics mediated by mass media is shaped more by the suasive emotional and cognitive powers of pictures and images than by well-constructed arguments, driven by marketing culture rather than civic ethos, determined by individuals behaving like consumers, not like citizens? It is ironic that the vision of western democratic ideologues like Thomas Paine, who criticized the monarchy as but a "puppet show of state and aristocracy" and idealized politics based on plain arguments and simple public facts inspired by science, ultimately generated democratic political forms that exemplify a close deliberate collaboration between statecraft and stagecraft. Why has our age of documentary photography and electronic public sphere failed to curb political theatricality and restrain the power of political gestures to eclipse or substitute for public policy?

The political metaphor for the modern democratic state was the machine with its self-regulation, its checks and balances, while the emerging family of political metaphors for democratic politics after modernity is associated with the theater. The quality of the political performance of leaders as actors on the public stage is more commonly invoked than any measurable contribution to definable public goals in explicating the conduct of political agents in our time.

In this book I explore processes driving the contemporary shift from modern to postmodern democracies, considering ways that the historical shift between

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political universes based on faith in the divine right of kings to political worlds legitimated by imagining the state as the embodiment of popular sovereignty can instruct us. Such cases and, more generally, the historical fluctuations between political worlds (grounded alternately or concomitantly in God, nature, scientific utopias, myths of origins, tribal or family genealogies, monumental battles, historical or social laws, etc.) reveal a pressing human urge for safe-seeming, involuntary, and transpolitical anchorage of power veiled by rich sources of signification. In modern democratic states, government by fear and meaningless naked force has been generally delegitimated, although institutionalizing the vision of popular sovereignty or "government by the consent of the people" has been only partial and deeply flawed in many democracies.

In the following I approach the issue of democracy after modernity by examining the problems facing the contemporary collective political imagination in coping with the necessity of replacing or supplementing the anachronistic myths and narratives that have grounded the political order of modern democracies. What could substitute for "natural law," the "autonomous rational individual," "progress," faith in the possibility of rational consensus based on certainties of "scientific truths," and a self-evident "general good" in concealing the unsettling empty dark space at the foundation of the political order? What could replace those modern myths in covering up the meaninglessness and arbitrariness that always lurk at the base of any power structure and threaten to erupt and destroy the existing political universe? I suggest that political history is largely a record of deliberate and intuited efforts to gloss over the secret of this bottomlessness in order to avoid both anarchy and tyranny. In modern democracy, such efforts were concentrated on relating autonomous agency to transparent realities of political power and authority, while contemporary democracy deeply problematizes both. I therefore try at the end of this book to explore some of the ways current democracies can engage this vacuum at the bottom anew.

My own sense of the precariousness of the political order might have started to develop on May 14, 1948, early during Israel's war of independence. Eight years old, I stood in a corridor of the Tel-Aviv Museum and witnessed the creation of a new state as David Ben Gurion read Israel's declaration of independence. In the decades since that day, my awareness of the dilemma of states' foundations has been accentuated by relentless domestic and external challenges to the legitimacy of my state. In the case of Israel, the continual problem of legitimacy is closely related to its conflict with the Palestinians and the particular dilemma of combining the secular and religious Jewish components of Israeli collective identity. In this book, rather than discussing the special Israeli case, I adopt a wider perspective on democracy after modernity, from which I consider the problems shared by contemporary states like America, England, France, and Israel in imagining and practicing democracy.

There is evidence of a growing apprehension of glaring gaps between the experience of contemporary democracies and the vision of popular sovereignty and self-government. These gaps raise the question of whether we are

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witnessing a crisis of the democratic state or a transition to novel modes of practicing political freedom and equality in our time. In order to understand the nature and dimensions of the shifts in the cultural fabrics and practices of contemporary democracies, I shall pay special attention to the formation of the very modern imaginaries of reality and agency undergoing the most radical changes in our time.

This book's sequence of thirteen chapters grouped in four parts is designed to gradually unfold its theses. My purpose is to show that in the transition from modernity to postmodernity, contemporary democracy must reinvent the cultural and political grounds of governmental power and authority; that the shifting collective political imagination is the principal agent of this process; and that, as in other moments of transition between political worlds, now too the legitimation of the new order requires redrawing the boundaries between facts and fictions, reality and theatricality in politics. Hans Christian Andersen's *The Emperor's New Clothes* has captured the shift of sensibilities that marks such a paradigmatic moment of transition when an innocent eye untutored by celebratory monarchic political aesthetics can resist the spell of majesty and see that the king is just a naked man. At the book's end, I examine the possibility that the future of democracy depends on the ability of contemporary citizens to again shift their gaze and appropriate the new electronic media as a tool for generating novel modes of political participation, seeing, criticizing, and legitimating political power and authority.

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