Introduction

The unorthodox perspectives on democracy sketched in this book are the product of deep dissatisfaction with much of the prevailing literature and commentary on the subject. Using various political trends, conflicts and puzzles as its raw material, the book draws inspiration from the conviction that good political writing both engages its readers with contemporary matters and forces them to rethink their cherished certainties: nudged this way and that, they come to question their convictions and prejudices and, generally, grow more wondrous and daring about the world which shapes who they presently are and how in future they might live their daily lives. The whole approach supposes that the subject of democracy urgently requires bold and creative thinking. It calls on those concerned about the future of democracy to abandon dead concepts and worn-out formulae, to become better attuned to the novelties, opportunities and grave dangers of our times. It argues that the option of clinging to the tried, tested and true is not an option, simply because the contemporary democratic imagination is failing in its efforts to name, explain and engage with many threats and opportunities posed by twenty-first century realities. The book sets out to show readers how and why things are happening that are unexpected, or stranger than was once thought possible, or probable. Its whole point is to demonstrate that many real-world things are happening that are far stranger than we can presently think.

Conceived and written and revised at various points during the past two decades, the book attempts to write democratically about democracy. It comes in the form of a set of integrated essays written in a 'pizzicato' style designed to encourage readers to see that the observations, conjectures and predictions offered in these pages are *interpretations*, not set-in-stone

'Truths'. The book does not suppose arrogantly its immunity from follow-up questioning, empirical investigation, critical amendment or savage rejection. It aims to mimic the complex rhythms of democratic life. Building upon the findings presented in *The Life and Death of Democracy*,[1] it probes a new range of research themes, each of them informed and bound together by the astute observation of the Japanese scholar Masao Maruyama (1914–1996) that democracy is a unique and highly contingent political form whose embrace of the principle of equality of power cannot in practice happen, and cannot survive the ravages of time, unless human actors minimally experience a quantum leap of imagination. Every political form, Maruyama insisted, has a 'fictional' or 'imaginary' quality. Democracy is no exception to this rule. There is nothing 'natural' or inevitable about it. Democracy's refusal to accept that some human beings are fit to rule the rest becomes possible only when there is an imaginary leap, a profound transformation of the linguistically structured mental horizons of people, who as a consequence become capable of rejecting what Maruyama called the 'psychology of the ruled'. When this transformation of their horizons happens, he concluded, they become capable of regarding each other as equals, as confident citizens who can govern themselves without recourse to the bossing and manipulation inevitably associated with other political forms.[2]

Not every reader will agree or be satisfied with the book's call for a radical stretching and refiguring of the imaginary horizons of democracy. Yet there can be no doubt that the whole idea of linguistic horizons that pre-form our thinking – an approach developed elsewhere, for instance in the philosophy of one of my former teachers Hans-Georg Gadamer[3] – is a most useful framing category in the analysis of democracy and its future. Of course, those who deal daily with horizons – airline pilots, astronauts, fishermen, coastguards, surveyors, landscape artists – know from experience just how deceptive and contestable they are. Intellectuals who think of themselves as indebted to the heliocentric revolution first proposed by Copernicus against Ptolemy, or who have pondered the astonishing Earthrise photograph taken during the Apollo 8 mission of 1968, also know that horizons are not fixed points or tangible places; they constantly

[1] John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London and New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).
[2] Masao Maruyama, *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics* (Tokyo: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 251.
[3] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975).

play tricks on our senses, seduce us into believing that distances and destinations are tangible, that they can be defined, plotted and searched for with a fair measure of certainty. The elusiveness of horizons makes them a useful metaphor for what I am aiming to achieve in this book. To speak of refiguring the twenty-first-century horizons of democracy is to confront mainstream political science and its fetish for 'facts' and figures. It puts to the test its conviction that such democratic phenomena as elections, political parties and legislatures are best studied using empirical and statistical methods that put an end to future paradigm revolutions because they yield certain knowledge of our political world, in effect ensuring that in the field of democracy research findings are so 'firmly established' that 'future discoveries must be looked for in the sixth place of decimals'.[4] The approach of this book stands restlessly at right angles to such presumption. It calls for urgently needed 'thinking outside the box', for 'wild thinking' or what philosophers have called abductive reasoning; that is, new approaches that pay attention to the way modifying and stretching our linguistic horizons can help make better sense of our world, transforming our perceptions of democracy, and, in the process, altering research priorities and methods and generally upgrading the capacity of researchers to understand their subject better, as well as to communicate with each other, and with citizens and representatives, about matters that are of pressing importance to the present and future of democracy.

PRECEPTS

The contrarian but constructive perspectives developed below draw on several deep precepts; they are important to spell out because they divulge my biases and provide a 'feel' for the prickly distinctiveness of my analysis of the transformations, trials and tribulations of contemporary democracy. In what follows, the commonplace solipsist view that everyone has their own definition of democracy, and that each individual definition is as valid as any other, is called into question. The Humpty Dumpty Principle, the view that democracy can be made to mean anything powerful people want it to mean, is given an equally hard time. The approach of this book is altogether different. It supposes that publicly meaningful

[4] These are the oft-quoted words of the German–American physicist Albert Abraham Michelson, *Light Waves and Their Uses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903), pp. 23–24.

analyses of democracy must find their bearings in *context-sensitive, evidence-enriched* re-descriptions of the languages, institutions and actors that comprise any given experiment with democracy. Note the word re-description: it serves as a reminder that 'reality' is a word, and that every description of 'reality' (including this one) is unavoidably from a particular point of view.

The book further supposes that democratic realities are always infused with ideals, so that *normative accounts of democracy* are not a theoretical distraction or unnecessary luxury, but a vital component of the study of democracy. This is another way of saying that in matters of research on democracy 'reality' is never straightforwardly 'real'; what counts as 'evidence', 'facts', 'objectivity' and 'reality' always and everywhere comes wrapped in language-structured perceptions of the way things are, and where supposedly they are heading, and ought to be heading. Although written more than a century ago, the remarks of Max Weber are surely still convincing on this point: 'There is no absolutely "objective" scientific analysis of ... "social phenomena" independent of ... "one-sided" viewpoints according to which – expressly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously – they are selected, analysed and organized for expository purposes.'[5] The point was reiterated in Ludwig Wittgenstein's later reflections on the ways in which what counts as certain knowledge of 'empirical facts', and such matters as the difference between 'true' and 'false', are always shaped by more or less taken-for-granted presumptions harboured by the language 'scaffolding' (*Gerüst*) within which we think, interpret, judge and live our everyday lives. His point was that certainty takes refuge in the language games we play; but the presumptions that feed our certainties are themselves contingent; that is, time–space dependent, and therefore never fully insulated from doubt, uncertainty and rejection. 'What people consider reasonable or unreasonable changes', wrote Wittgenstein. 'At certain moments, people find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable.'[6]

Wittgenstein's insight remains important, for it underscores the point that considerations of the past, present and future of democracy are always infused with time–space imaginings. That is why, on every page of this book, emphasis is given to the strategic importance within democratic

[5] Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Free Press, 1949), p. 72.
[6] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Über Gewissheit/On Certainty* (New York, London and Sydney: Arion Press, 1972), aphorism 336 (my translation).

theory of developing a much stronger sense of *historical awareness*, not just because nothing is ever forever, or because contemporary democratic theory is largely in the hands of amnesiacs whose neglect or ignorance of the past inevitably spawns misunderstandings of the present, but also (and much less obviously) because democracy is a *uniquely time-sensitive political form* that tends to cultivate a shared public sense of the contingency of power relations within human affairs.[7] The analysis in the pages below of the ways children are coming to be seen as potential citizens is just one instance of democracy in action. For when people's lives are infused with the spirit of democracy, their 'sense of possibility' (Robert Musil) grows strong. Their contrasting 'sense of reality' includes the realisation that things that are might well be otherwise. They push themselves to the known limits of human achievement. They do not privilege what is past or present over what is not yet. They know that reality is malleable; they are believers in metamorphosis. Their sense of possibility thus sharpens their conviction that power relations are never simply given, or forever.

Throughout this book, power relations are understood not just as synonymous with state or governing institutions but as a universal feature of all human life lived within non-human contexts. Of course, power is not a 'thing'. It is not a substance to be held or grabbed, but a relationship of enablement and disablement of people born into environments not of their own choosing, or their subsequent making. Power is the institutionally constrained capacity of people to act upon the world, to realise their chosen capacities, their strivings to live well with others, in multiple domains. Power is here, there and everywhere: from the bedroom and the homeless shelter to the boardroom and the backroom to the battlefield and beyond, to the biomes in which we dwell. So are the flipside dialectics: cunning, cheating, clever and brutish power moves, defensive and aggressive exercises of *arbitrary power* are equally universal features of human life lived within non-human contexts. This ubiquity of power principle leads this book to draw upon another precept, one emphasised by C.B. Macpherson (my doctoral supervisor), for whom democracy was much more than just a mode of electioneering or government. According to Macpherson, democracy must instead be understood expansively, as *a whole way of life*, as a vision of citizens equally entitled (his favourite words) to the 'use and enjoyment' of their capacities.[8] It follows from this

[7] This is among the key points made at length in Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*.
[8] C.B. Macpherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

ubiquity of power principle that reflection on the subject of the past, present and future of democracy must spread its wings. It needs to engage themes as diverse as the colonisation of indigenous peoples, the labelling and treatment of children, the fate of our planetary biosphere, the failures and follies of capitalist markets, the political risks posed by megaprojects and the poisonous effects of fear, violence and bigotry in everyday life settings.

Finally, this book is motivated by dissatisfaction with the *unthinking habit of applying Western yardsticks* when studying democracy. For more than seven decades, the languages and institutions of democracy in representative form have been disseminated to all four corners of our Earth, on a scale never before witnessed. The whole world is making its mark on democracy, and this growing worldliness of democracy contrasts sharply with the unfortunate fact that the centre of gravity of research on democracy continues to be universities, think tanks and other institutions situated in the rather confined Atlantic region of our large planet. Research on democracy remains mostly an affair of the WEIRD world: societies that are by global standards Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and nominally Democratic.[9] Pushing beyond the first-go effort of *The Life and Death of Democracy* to try its hand at writing a global history of democracy, this book supposes that the hegemony of the WEIRD world has outlived its usefulness. Its grip has become untenable and now must be broken. What is urgently needed are more worldly wise approaches, bold and feisty research initiatives that acknowledge that the world is less and less America or Europe; that the imaginary homelands of democracy are changing; and that the analysis of democracy must open its horizons to a wide variety of global settings, global issues and global dynamics previously ignored by mainstream scholars of the Atlantic region.

INDIGENISATION

The sense of worldly adventure sewn into the pages of this book begins by noting that in 1945, following several decades that saw most experiments in democratisation fail, only a dozen parliamentary democracies were left on the face of our Earth. Since then, despite many ups and downs, the political form and way of life called democracy has bounced back from near oblivion to become a planetary phenomenon, for the

[9] Jared Diamond, *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

first time in its history.[10] Fresh research perspectives on this epochal change are urgently required. For the point has been reached where the spirit, language and institutions of democracy have taken root in so many different geographic contexts that several reigning presumptions of democratic theory have been invalidated. As democracy has spread through the world, the world has made its mark on democracy, even though the metamorphosis has remained largely unregistered in the literature on democracy. Two Anglo-centric examples of this lack immediately spring to mind: the effort of the English scholar John Dunn to write a history of the word democracy while ignoring its pre-Greek origins, its survival in the early Muslim world, its earliest modern redefinition in the Low Countries, its penetration of the countries of Spanish America during the nineteenth century, and its more recent metamorphosis in contexts as different as southern Africa, Taiwan, Indonesia and India;[11] and the influential textbook treatment by David Held of various 'models' of democracy, a fairly conventional narrative whose core normative 'principle of autonomy' has a nineteenth-century liberal individualist bias, and whose whole distinctively Anglo-centric approach precludes references to many anomalous cases and worrying trends, both past and present.[12]

The insularity lurking within these accounts has much deeper foundations. Well into the twentieth century, Atlantic-region analysts of democracy supposed that the functional prerequisites of democracy included (a) a 'sovereign' territorial state that guaranteed the physical security of a resident population of citizens living within a rule of law system; (b) a political culture favouring mechanisms that were widely supposed to be synonymous with democracy – parliamentary government based on competition among political parties and periodic 'free and fair' elections; (c) a more or less homogeneous social infrastructure or 'national identity' bound together by a common language, common customs and a common sense of shared history; and (d) a market economy capable of generating investment and wealth that lifted citizens out of poverty and guaranteed them a basic standard of living sufficient to enable them to take an interest in public affairs.

[10] Larry Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World* (New York: H. Holt, 2008); Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, especially the final part.
[11] John Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005).
[12] David Held, *Models of Democracy*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

The grip of each of these supposed prerequisites has been broken during the past generation. The thought-provoking case of Taiwan is discussed in the opening section of this book; elsewhere, I have analysed in some depth the novelty and global significance of India's experiment with 'banyan democracy'.[13] Together with South Africa, Botswana, Colombia, Nepal and the Tibetan Government in Exile, these two cases are just some of the anomalous cases that throw into disarray many presumptions about 'liberal democracy' in such disciplinary fields as political science, sociology, economics and international relations. In each case, the meaning of democracy and the ways in which it took root in local soils prompt new questions regarding what future research might call the *indigenisation of democracy*. In this book, drawing on the Asia Pacific examples of Taiwan and Australia, this phrase refers to the manifold complex ways in which the language and institutions and normative ideals of democracy undergo mutations when they are carried more or less successfully into unfamiliar environments, where previously they either did not exist or exercised little or no influence. Indigenisation is what happens when locals take the language, norms and institutions of democracy from the outside and make them their own. Democracy undergoes domestication; the domestic experiences democratisation.

Indigenisation is always a highly complex and contested set of processes.[14] So what is arguably needed is a new twenty-first century *political anthropology of democracy*: new approaches sustained by fresh perspectives, metaphors, theories and methods for making sense of the way in which democracy undergoes alterations when it takes root in strange new soils. For this purpose, translation and other literary similes drawn from linguistic philosophy have sometimes been utilised, most notably in Frederic Schaffer's remarkable study of the ways in which Wolof and French speakers in Senegal, the country with the oldest tradition of multi-party government in Africa, adopted and transformed ('vernacularised') the European donor language of *démocratie* to make new sense of the importance of electoral practices within a culturally divergent society that calls itself a *demokaraasi*.[15] Other scholars have adapted a different

[13] Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, pp. 585–647.

[14] Marshall Sahlins, 'What is Anthropological Enlightenment? Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 28 (1999), i–xxiii.

[15] Frederic C. Schaffer, *Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998). Subsequent accounts of the 'vernacularisation' of democracy, focused on India, include Akio Tanabe, 'Toward Vernacular Democracy: Moral Society and Post-Postcolonial Transformation in Rural Orissa, India',

approach, originally outlined by Michel de Certeau, to examine the ways in which the tactical adoption of a procedure, like the secret ballot, is always a creative 'theatrical' performance that results, unpredictably, in long-lasting changes in its functioning.[16]

Still other literature (*The Life and Death of Democracy* strives to be an example[17]) has borrowed the language of mutations, mutagens and other terms from evolutionary biology within the field of the bio-sciences. In contrast to political science approaches that emphasise aggregate trends guided either by teleology ('liberal democracy' as the 'end of history'[18]) or by maritime metaphors (most influential has been the 'third wave' approach[19]), this third alternative examines changes in the language, institutions and norms of democracy by drawing loose analogies with those sudden or more protracted mutations in the inherited characteristics of the cells of organisms deep down within the earth's biosphere. The reasoning of this approach is a direct challenge to mainstream searches for a general theory of democratisation with homogeneous qualities. It rather highlights the ways in which particular mutations may transcend unfitness and consequent death. Mutations can be beneficial. Sometimes they produce organisms much better adapted to their environment, in which case the process of competitive selection enables the altered gene to be passed on successfully to subsequent generations. These beneficial mutations turn out to be the raw material of evolution and adaptation to changing environments, as in the illuminating case, examined below, of Taiwan's adventure with a form of democracy that cannot be called 'liberal democracy' in any meaningful sense. Taiwan is not America. Taiwan is not the United Kingdom, or Germany. It is different: in the East Asia region, outside the secure framework of 'sovereign territoriality', its citizens and their representatives have managed to craft a new mutant form of 'dragon fruit' democracy guided by a mixed parliamentary/presidential form of government embedded in a media-saturated and

American Ethnologist, 34, 3 (2007), 558–574; and Lucia Michelutti, *The Vernacularisation of Democracy: Politics, Caste and Religion in Contemporary India* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

[16] Romain Bertrand, Jean-Louis Briquet and Peter Pels (eds.), *Cultures of Voting: The Hidden History of the Secret Ballot* (London: C. Hurst, 2007).

[17] Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, pp. 673–686.

[18] Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

[19] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

multi-cultural civil society. Taiwan is a distinctively non-liberal democracy, a mutant polity whose citizens are strongly aware of their own indigenous roots and strongly attached to the belief in multiple deities, the virtues of strong households and deep political suspicion of concentrated power in arbitrary form.

It should be obvious that analogies drawn from linguistics, theatre and evolutionary biology must be handled with great care, and with keen awareness of their limitations. But in pursuit of new ways of analysing and evaluating the global processes by which democratic languages and institutions become 'embedded'[20] and reinterpreted in particular contexts, one thing seems abundantly clear: the field of research centred on the global spread of democracy is wide open for creating novel metaphors, fresh interpretations and original case studies that add significance to the thesis of indigenisation and, in turn, force the redefinition and refinement of our understanding of democracy, past and present. Much arguably can be learned from the reinterpretation of efforts to nurture democracy on 'foreign soils', including Athenian efforts at what has come to be called 'democracy promotion' and the invention of the norms and institutions of representative democracy in France and their diffusion to the British colonies and Spanish America.[21] Of equal interest are the colonial sources of democratisation in China and Japan during the last great growth spurt of globalisation that lasted roughly from 1870 to 1930.[22] There is much scope as well for scholarly reinterpretation of the spread of new forms of democracy in the current round of globalisation,

[20] Wolfgang Merkel, 'Embedded and Defective Democracies', *Democratization*, 11 (2004), 33–58.

[21] John B. Hirst, *Australia's Democracy: A Short History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002); Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen: Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le peuple introuvable: Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); Pierre Rosanvallon, *La démocratie inachevée: Histoire de la souveraineté du peuple en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le modèle politique français: La société civile contre le jacobinisme de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).

[22] Rwei-Ren Wu, *The Formosan Ideology: Oriental Colonialism and the Rise of Taiwanese Nationalism, 1895–1945* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Hao Chang, *Liang Ch'i-chao and Intellectual Transition in China 1890–1907* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Nobutaka Ike, *The Beginnings of Political Democracy in Japan* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1950); John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Aftermath of World War II* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000).