1 A long, dark shadow over democratic politics

Democracy and the intellectuals

Democracy is on the march in the world today. By democracy I mean something like free and equal people associating and communicating in public spheres, informed by liberal presuppositions, and governed politically by representative institutions based on wide suffrage and contested elections. I do not say that democracy is victorious in the world today, because its reign is fragile in the developing world, is flawed in the developed world (especially in the United States), and is barely emergent on the international scene. Evaluation should be a comparative enterprise, however, and most people aware of the alternatives believe that they are better off under democracy, and democracy is more widely spread now than it has ever been before.

There were a handful of developing democracies a hundred years ago (Dahl 1989, 240). Democratic aspirations flared in continental Europe and areas under its influence as World War I came to an end, but Communism and then Fascism smothered the democratic flame. Fascism was discredited as World War II came to an end, and also political imperialism went into decline, only to be replaced by the *realpolitik* of the Cold War. The Communists were glad to extend their tyranny to broad new territories, and the democracies found it expedient to justify tyrannies among their subordinate allies. Meanwhile, Fascism was dismantled in Mediterranean Europe in the late 1970s, and the democratization of Spain and Portugal strengthened democratic forces in Latin America in the 1980s. The fall of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in 1989, and then in the Soviet Union, confirmed a trend to democratization on a global scale. Most civil wars in Latin America came to an end. Apartheid was dismantled in South Africa. Authoritarian Marcos fell in the Philippines, Suharto in Indonesia. The theocracy in Iran came under democratic pressure. There are no dramatic democratic breakthroughs in the Arab world, however, or with respect to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In middle Africa one-party and military regimes are less common,

but corruption, poverty, massacre, and war are as grievous as ever. The democratic student movement in China was crushed by the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.

I do not know why, but from the beginning academics have tended to be more disdainful of democracy than are, say, the *demos* (the people). Plato's hatred for democracy is no secret. In our times, "Almost as soon as representative democracy on a large scale appeared in Europe . . . there were misgivings about it, especially among intellectuals on both the Left and the Right" (Plamenatz 1973, ix). Victorian England pioneered mass democracy in Europe, and pioneered in its denunciation: where Plato opposed democracy on the ground that it produced spiritual anarchy in individuals, Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Stephen, Maine, and Lecky opposed democracy on the ground that it led to social anarchy, according to Lippincott (1938, 5). The followers of Marx and Lenin damned democracy as a bourgeois sham, and predicted scientific administration and the withering away of politics in the communist future (see Schwartz 1995). Plamenatz refers to the "academic attack on democracy" by liberals Mosca, Michels, and Pareto, whose debunking of democracy provided intellectual suckling to fascism. The US had more of a democratic tradition, personified by Dewey. Dewey's most influential rival was Lippmann, who argued that the citizenry is ignorant and that experts must rule in spite of the "democratic fallacy" (Wiebe 1995). In Europe during the interwar period Lindsay (1935) and Barker (1951) were virtually alone as academic defenders of democracy. In the period after World War II, an exhausted conformism in American culture was accompanied by an empirical democratic theory that apotheosized the "beneficial apathy" of the citizenry, and by positivistic animosity to normative theory; Dahl (e.g., 1956) was nevertheless a milestone in democratic theory. In this period, although little good was said about democracy, not much bad was said about it either. The revival of liberal political theory following Rawls (1971) was kinder to democracy, but was much more liberal than democratic: for Rawls (1993, 231–240), the Supreme Court is the exemplar of public reason, not the parliament, not the people. After Habermas (1984; 1987), an emphasis on the transformation rather than the mere aggregation of preferences stimulated wider academic interest in democracy (Elster 1986b; 1998). A robust normative democratic theory, primarily but not exclusively on the theme of deliberation, is beginning to appear.

Although democratization is the main trend in the world today, the main intellectual trend in American political science is the view that democracy is chaotic, arbitrary, meaningless, and impossible. This trend

originated with economist Kenneth Arrow's impossibility theorem, which was applied to politics by the late William Riker, political scientist at the University of Rochester. The earlier academic attack on democracy by Mosca, Michels, and Pareto was revived with fashionable new methods. Riker had great organizational resources, and used them to promulgate a particular interpretation of Arrow's theorem, to further elaborate a doctrine he called "positive political theory" ("scientific," rather than "ethical"), and to recruit and place his students far and wide.

Riker calls *populist* any democratic theory which depends on a systematic connection between the opinion or will of the citizens and public policy, and *liberalist* any democratic theory which requires only that voting result in the random removal of elected officials. Riker rejects populist democracy as infeasible, and offers his liberalist democracy in its place. What almost everyone means by democracy is what Riker calls populist democracy; and, I shall argue, Riker's liberalist alternative fails, descriptively and normatively. Thus, I am tempted to label his doctrine *antidemocratic*. I believe that it is antidemocratic in consequence, whether or not it is antidemocratic in spirit. But to use such a label throughout this volume would be tendentious. To call his doctrine *antipopulist*, though, is to beg the question in his favor: the word *populism* has many negative connotations, and I do not mean to defend such things as Peronism, short-sighted policy, or mob rule. Since Riker's claim is that in the political sphere the rational individual opinions or desires of citizens cannot be amalgamated accurately and fairly, it is apt to describe his doctrine as one of democratic irrationalism. Riker's irrationalist doctrine emphasizes principled failings of democracy and recommends a constitutionalist libertarianism and the substitution of economic markets for much of political democracy (Riker and Weingast 1988).

Displaced by the forces of economic globalization, I came to graduate school in midlife from a background as a founder and an elected leader of a large forestry workers' cooperative movement, as a lobbyist for forestry workers with state and federal administrative and legislative agencies, as a litigant for forestry workers, as an organizer of issue and candidate electoral campaigns, as policy aide to an elected official at the apex of a large county government, and as a political journalist. I was quite flabbergasted by the irrationalist dogma I encountered in the political science literature. The elegant models of impossibility and disequilibrium I was taught bore no relation to my democratic experiences. I am not one of those who holds that every human life is best fulfilled in politics, but I know that my life was best fulfilled in that activity. Although in democratic politics I had seen plenty of crazy things, some inexplicable, and had been

a hard operator, I had seen nothing that supported the irrationalist models and interpretations of Riker and his followers; and I had seen more crazy things happen in the economy than in politics. At that point I did not know why the models were mistaken, but I did know that if the models do not fit the facts, then it is the models that must go; my political experiences had made me suspicious of those who belittle empiricism. I had already struggled against antidemocratic leftist doctrines in my own mind and in my political environment, and rightist doctrines of the same consequence aroused my suspicions. I am afraid that younger students, without the experience and confidence that I had, tend to accept the irrationalist models, which are transmitted with professorial authority and sometimes by means of hasty and mystifying formalisms.

One day in graduate school I was talking with someone who knew a great deal about China. I asked him what he thought about the student movement for democracy there. He replied that Arrow and Riker had shown that democracy is arbitrary and meaningless, and that what China needed was paternalistic dictatorship by the Communist Party. I was dumbfounded. "The models are wrong!" I said. "How are they wrong?" he asked. I could not answer him then, but I had learned something important: not only is positive political theory empirically erroneous, it can have dangerous consequences. The proposition that democratic voting is arbitrary and meaningless can be used not only to justify a constitutional libertarianism such as Riker's, it can also be used to justify a dictatorship that appeals to the values of stability and order. The irrationalist doctrine is taught in America's leading political science departments, law schools, and economics departments. Students absorb these teachings, and then move on to join the political and economic elites of the world. I shudder to think of the policies demanded in the international consultancies and financial agencies and the national treasury departments of the world by people who were taught the findings of Arrow as interpreted and expanded by Riker's school of thought. I worry that authoritarian movements might find comfort in Riker's (1982) irrationalist credo, *Liberalism against Populism*. One purpose of my work here is to show that Riker's irrationalist doctrine is mistaken, and thereby to restore democracy as an intellectually respectable method of human organization.

I have sketched the progress of democracy in the world, an ongoing academic disdain for democracy, and my motivations for countering the current version of the academic attack on democracy. Next, I introduce the problems of voting that inform the irrationalist view. After that, I provide a sample of quotations from the literature in order to establish that there is a trend to democratic irrationalism in academic opinion.

Problems of voting: the basics

This section is an introduction to the problems of voting. We start with majority rule. Majority rule doesn't always report a winner with more than two alternatives, so we might turn to plurality rule. Plurality rule might pick a winner that a majority of the voters is against, so we look for other methods. The Borda method counts the number of times an alternative beats all other alternatives, but it violates a condition called the independence of irrelevant alternatives. The Condorcet method says to pick the alternative that beats all others in pairwise comparison. The Condorcet method might lead to the paradox of voting, however: no alternative wins, called cycling. The Arrow theorem is a generalization of the paradox of voting. If there is cycling, unfair manipulation of the outcome by agenda control and by strategic voting is also possible. Different methods of voting can yield different social outcomes from the same individual preferences.

Ordinary majority rule seems to be the most natural, or commonsensical, way of voting. A majority is made up of more than half the voters. Often a majority-rule vote is taken over two alternatives; for example, in a committee a proposal is made to alter the status quo, or often there are only two candidates in an election. When there are two alternatives, majority rule will deliver a winner, except when there is a tie. A tie can be decided by some convention, such as a bias to the status quo, recounting of the votes, or flipping a coin. Everyone is familiar with ordinary majority rule.

When there are three or more alternatives there can be problems with majority rule. If there are three candidates, and none receives a majority, then there is no winner, and the method is incomplete. Perhaps without too much thought we might turn to plurality rule as a simple extension of majority rule: whoever gets the most votes, even if short of a majority, is the winner. We might not notice the defects of plurality rule because, as it happens, plurality rule tends to strategically deter more than two serious candidates from the field. If there are five candidates, two of those will be seen as most likely to win the election, and many voters will cast their votes so as to decide between the top two rather than waste their vote on expressing a preference for one of the likely losers. Candidates interested in winning the election, knowing this tendency among voters, tend not to enter the race unless they are likely to be contenders. These are tendencies, not certainties, and I only mention them to explain why we don't see too many plurality elections with more than a few serious candidates, and that this may blur the distinction between majority rule and plurality rule in our minds.

Table 1.1. *Preference profile of three factions over three alternatives*

	1–40	*2–35*	*3–25*
1st	A	C	B
2nd	B	B	C
3rd	C	A	A

There can be a problem with simple plurality rule, however. Suppose that there are three candidates A, B, and C in an election, and 100 voters. For simplicity, everyone has strong preferences (denoted by $>$, meaning that voters are not indifferent over any alternatives). Faction *1* is made up of 40 people, and ranks the candidates $A > B > C$. Faction *2* is made up of 35 people and ranks the candidates $C > B > A$. Faction *3* makes up 25 people and ranks the candidates $B > C > A$. It will help to display the preference rankings. With plurality rule, everyone casts a vote for their first-ranked alternative. With the profile of voters' preferences in Table 1.1, A would win by plurality rule, even though 60 percent of the voters are against A. If election were by plurality rule, Factions *2* and *3* might anticipate this outcome and unite their forces on candidate C, who then would win, showing again the tendency to two candidates under plurality rule. The tendency is imperfect, or the election might be among alternatives that don't respond strategically, and in such circumstances it seems undesirable that A would win the election, as Margaret Thatcher did in these circumstances.

Borda wrote on the theory of elections in 1784 (see Black 1958; McLean and Urken 1995). Borda noticed this defect with plurality rule, and proposed his method of marks, which we shall call the Borda count, to remedy the defect. Borda thought we should count whether alternatives are ranked first, second, third, and so forth. He proposed that if there were, say, three alternatives, then we would assign two points to each voter's first-ranked preference, one point to her second-ranked preference, and zero points to her third-ranked preference. For the profile in Table 1.1, Alternative A gets $2 \times 40 + 0 \times 35 + 0 \times 25 = 80$ points. Alternative B gets $1 \times 40 + 1 \times 35 + 2 \times 25 = 125$ points, and is the Borda winner. Alternative C gets $0 \times 40 + 2 \times 35 + 1 \times 25 = 95$ points. The full Borda ranking is $B > C > A$ (125 for B > 95 for C > 80 for A). In a *pairwise-comparison matrix*, as in Table 1.2, we display the alternatives by row and by column, and the cell entry is the number of votes the row entry gets against the column entry. Alternatives don't get votes against themselves, so those cells are empty. Borda's method counts the number

Table 1.2. *Pairwise-comparison matrix for profile in Table 1.1*

	A	*B*	*C*		*Borda*
A		40	40	=	80
B	*60*		*65*	=	125
C	*60*	35		=	95

Table 1.3. *Another voter profile*

	1–51	*2–35*	*3–14*
1st	A	C	B
2nd	B	B	C
3rd	C	A	A

of times that an alternative beats all other alternatives, and the Borda score is also the row sum of the entries in the matrix.

Condorcet, another French thinker, wrote on the theory of elections in 1785 (see also McLean and Hewitt 1994; McLean 1995). Condorcet proposed as a criterion that the alternative that beats all other alternatives in pairwise comparison should be the winner. In our example, examining the italicized cells in the matrix, $B > A$, $B > C$, and $C > A$, or $B > C > A$. In this example (and in most practical circumstances) the Condorcet winner and the Borda winner coincide. They need not, however. Condorcet objected to the Borda method on the ground that it is possible for it to violate a condition that later came to be called the independence of irrelevant alternatives. Assume the profile in Table 1.3. By the Condorcet method, the social ranking is $A > B > C$, the same as the ranking of the faction with the slender majority of 51. Observe, however, that A is the last choice of 49 voters. The Borda method takes that into account and reports a social ranking of $B > A > C$. The dispute is this: Condorcet insists that in pairwise comparison A beats every other alternative, Borda insists that B gets more votes over every other alternative than does any other alternative. The Borda method violates the independence condition because in deciding the social ranking between two alternatives X and Y it takes into account individual rankings of alternatives other than X and Y, such as between X and Z and between Y and Z. To comply with the independence condition, for example for faction *2*, we can count that an individual ranks $C > B$, that she ranks $B > A$, that she ranks $C > A$, but not that she ranks $C > B > A$.

Table 1.4. *Strong preference rankings over three alternatives*

1. A > B > C	4. C > B > A
2. A > C > B	5. B > C > A
3. C > A > B	6. B > A > C

Table 1.5. *Condorcet paradox of voting*

	Huebert	***Deuteronomy***	***Louis***
1st	A	B	C
2nd	B	C	A
3rd	C	A	B

There is also a problem with the Condorcet method, however, known as Condorcet's paradox of voting. Suppose there are three (or more) alternatives and two (or more) voters. Given three alternatives, there are six possible strong preference rankings, shown in Table 1.4. Given three voters, one each with cyclical rankings 1, 3, and 5 (or with 2, 4, and 6), the result of voting by the Condorcet method over three alternatives is inconsistent, that is, A beats B, B beats C, and C beats A. Suppose that the Duckburg Troop of the Junior Woodchucks have misplaced their Guidebook (which has a section on democratic decision making), and are deciding on how to spend their treasury over three alternatives, as in Table 1.5. Huebert and Louis favor A over B, Huebert and Deuteronomy favor B over C, and Deuteronomy and Louis favor C over A. The collective choice cycles over $A > B > C > A$. Arrow's possibility theorem can be understood as a generalization of Condorcet's paradox, applying not just to simple voting but to any social welfare function that aggregates individual orderings over alternative social states. The Arrow theorem requires that the social ranking be transitive, not intransitive as is the cycle. The Borda method would count the cyclical profile in this paradox example as a tie, $A \sim B \sim C$ ($\sim$ denotes indifference), and thus would not report an intransitive social ranking, but the Arrow theorem also requires that a voting rule not violate the independence of irrelevant alternatives condition, thus disqualifying rules such as the Borda count. Historically, Arrow's theorem is the consequence of noncomparabilist dogma in the discipline of economics, that it is meaningless to compare one person's welfare to another's, that interpersonal utility comparisons are impossible.

Cycling is one problem with Condorcet voting. A second, and related problem, could be labeled *path dependence*. What if there were first a vote between *A* and *B*, which *A* wins, and second a vote between *A* and *C*, which *C* wins? It seems that we have voted over all three alternatives and that we have a winner, *C*. We neglected, however, to vote between *C* and *B*, which *B* would win, and which would have disclosed the cycle to us. Unless we take pairwise votes over all alternatives we might not notice the cycle, and normally we don't take all pairwise votes. To make things worse, what if Louis controlled the agenda, and arranged for that order of voting, *A* against *B*, and then the winner against *C*? Then Louis would have manipulatively brought it about that his first-ranked alternative, *C*, won, *arbitrarily*, and voters Huebert and Deuteronomy might even not have noticed.

A third problem is *strategic voting*. Suppose again that we have a cycle as above, and an agenda as above, *A* against *B* and then the winner against *C*. Then Huebert would have an incentive to vote strategically in the first round: rather than sincerely voting for *A* over *B*, Huebert strategically votes for *B* over *A*. *B* wins the contest in the first round, and beats *C* in the second round. By voting strategically, Huebert has avoided the victory of his third-ranked alternative *C* and brought about the victory of his second-ranked alternative *B*. *Inaccuracy* is a fourth problem. I showed already that the Borda and Condorcet procedures can select different social outcomes from the same profile of individuals' preferences. If apparently fair voting rules each select a different public good from the same voter profile, then arguably the public good is arbitrary. Inaccuracy, agenda control, and strategic voting also raise the possibility that a social outcome might tell us nothing about the sincere individual preferences underlying the outcome. Based on these and further considerations, Riker's hypothesis is that democratic politics is in pervasive political disequilibrium.

These are the basics. For those new to these topics, be assured that they will be presented more slowly and in greater detail as we proceed.

A sampling of the literature

Those unfamiliar with the particular intellectual subcultures may doubt my claim that there is a trend to democratic irrationalism in academic opinion. To establish my claim, I offer what I shall refer to in the remainder of the volume as a hall of quotations, an unconventional but I hope useful method of exposition. The people we shall hear from are in economics, sociology, history, legal theory, political science, and philosophy; they are anarchists, socialists, liberals, or libertarians; some are my teachers,

colleagues, or friends. We begin with an essay introducing a recent survey of the state of the political science discipline:

- The fall of the Weimar Republic and, more broadly, the collapse of many other constitutional democracies with the rise of fascism and bolshevism in the interwar period alerted the [political science] discipline to the terrible consequences of unstable democracies. Later, Arrow's impossibility theorem, a key instance of incisive analytical work on the core problems of liberal regimes, set forth the theoretical challenge in stark terms. Instability is an immanent feature of liberal democracy. Under broad conditions, majority rule leads to the cycling of coalitions and policy; only nondemocratic practices can alleviate this deep tendency, convoking a tradeoff between stability and democracy. (Katznelson and Milner 2002, 17–18)
- At its most extreme, Arrovian public choice predicts that literally anything can happen when votes are taken. At its most cynical, it reveals that, through agenda manipulation and strategic voting, majoritarian processes can be transformed into the equivalent of a dictatorship. In a more agnostic mode, it merely suggests that the outcomes of collective decisions are probably meaningless because it is impossible to be certain that they are not simply an artifact of the decision process that has been used. (Mashaw 1989, 126–127)
- interpersonal comparison of utility has no meaning . . . If we exclude the possibility of interpersonal comparisons of utility, then the only methods of passing from individual tastes to social preferences which will be satisfactory and which will be defined for a wide range of sets of individual orderings are either imposed or dictatorial. (Arrow 1963/1951, 8, 59)
- This clearly negative result casts doubt on all assertions that there is a "general will," a "social contract," a "social good," a "will of the people," a "people's government," a "people's voice," a "social benefit," and so on and so forth. (Feldman 1980, 191)
- Aristotle must be turning over in his grave. The theory of democracy can never be the same . . . what Kenneth Arrow proved once and for all is that there cannot possibly be found . . . an ideal voting scheme. The search of the great minds of recorded history for the perfect democracy, it turns out, is the search for a chimera, for a logical self-contradiction. (Samuelson 1977, 935, 938)