Disenfranchising Democracy

The first wave of democratization in the United States – the removal of property and taxpaying qualifications for the right to vote – was accompanied by the disenfranchisement of African American men, with the political actors most supportive of the former also the most insistent upon the latter. The United States is not unique in this respect: other canonical cases of democratization also saw simultaneous expansions and restrictions of political rights, yet this pattern has never been fully detailed or explained. Through case studies of the USA, the UK, and France, *Disenfranchising Democracy* offers the first cross-national account of the relationship between democratization and exclusion. It develops a political institutional perspective to explain their co-occurrence, focusing on the politics of coalition building and the visions that political community coalitions advance in support of their goals. Bateman sheds new light on democratization, connecting it to the construction of citizenship and cultural identities.

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Disenfranchising Democracy

Constructing the Electorate in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France

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To Mary, Robert, Kate, Chris, Justin,
Mary-Alma, and Martina

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Preface

This is a book about democratization, the transformation of institutions to make them more responsive to a larger share of persons subject to their authority or determining influence. More narrowly, it is about distinct moments in the construction of a mass electorate in three countries, a historical process through which the right to register a binding choice over the leadership of a state was expanded beyond small cliques and narrow social classes to include a much larger body identified with "the people." And because "the people" never has a predetermined identity, it is ultimately a book about the ways in which particular political communities were delineated and given form, about how democratization reshaped the social foundations of the state.

Given these subjects, however, the book starts in an unusual place and with an unusual question: asking why democratization in the early nineteenth-century United States was accompanied by the *disenfranchisement* of black Americans.

Nationalist conceits to the contrary, it is not obvious that the United States has much to teach the world about democracy. In fact, the very conditions that seemed to facilitate its early but stunted emergence in America would eventually make the country a poor guide for developments elsewhere. The democratic transformations in Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, seemed to require a focus on conflict between economically defined classes – the peasantry, proletariat, bourgeoisie, and landed aristocracy that still populate our stories about this period. The initial wave of democratization in America, by contrast, was more often explained in terms of a supposed muting of class conflict and especially by the absence of

feudalism and its profoundly antagonistic class relations. The United States even seemed to lack a precise moment of transition, a definite date at which it could be said that it had ceased to be an autocratic regime and become a democratic one. As Alexis de Tocqueville remarked, "The great advantage of the Americans is to have come to democracy without having to endure democratic revolution and to have been born equal rather than become so."[1]

The seeming exception to America's ostensibly exceptional history was the enfranchisement of African American men after the Civil War, which in many ways fit the comparative patterns that would emerge in the rest of the world. Paradoxically, however, this case seemed to only further mark America as an outlier. Unlike in Europe, the fight over African American voting rights was organized along not only a vertical axis of class conflict but also a horizontal one of racial differentiation. It was not simply the "masses against the classes," but black Americans arrayed against whites across social classes. And it was ultimately defeated, a clear case of democratic reversal but one often neglected in the comparative literature on democratization. For decades afterward, conflict over black political and civil rights would often be interpreted not through the lens of democratization but through that of "race relations," a formulation that framed conflict over political rights in terms of managing frictions inherent to a diverse society, and in which the aspirations of black Americans to equal citizenship was a problem to be regulated, generally unconnected to America's regime type. And so the case of democratization in America that aligned most closely with the comparative pattern has itself often been seen as a different matter altogether.[2]

If the book's starting place in America is unconventional, so too is its focus on disenfranchisement, the act of stripping a social group of political rights and, more broadly, the state of being denied political and civic standing. If mass enfranchisement is a defining feature of democratization, then disenfranchisement would seem to be its negation, the active undoing of its achievements or a frontier beyond which it has not yet occurred.

[1] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2004), 588–89.

[2] Some of the most important exceptions are Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966); W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998 [1935]); and most recently, Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South, 1944–1972* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

If you want to understand a phenomenon, starting from its negation in a seemingly deviant case is not usually the best strategy. And yet my guiding premise has been that democracy and democratization might be productively studied by examining their exclusions, and that this might provide new insights into their occurrence.[3] This requires us to cast a new look on familiar cases, reexamining the primary record and historical sources from a new perspective, telling these stories in different ways, and asking whether our existing theories are compatible with the new stylized histories we produce. The objective in doing so, however, was not so much to invalidate or contradict earlier accounts, but to see what sorts of stories we tell in light of different questions. The downside is that by changing the focus of the analysis and dealing with specific cases rather than aggregate patterns, we are not directly testing alternative theories of democratization. The upside is that by attending to the *possibility* that democratization might have been accompanied by disenfranchisement – whether this actually occurred in any given case – we might gain new insights that would have been overlooked if not studied with this in mind.

One such insight is that democratization is not only a process by which political rights are extended but also a deliberate effort to change the composition and character of a particular community, reallocating influence, the benefits and costs of public policy, and social and civic prestige across different groups. Democracy, in this light, is never simply a neutral set of procedures for deciding upon political leadership: it is also a form of government that rests its legitimacy on a claim to constitute and represent a particular "people." And so democratization is, perhaps inevitably, a conflict over *people making*, occurring not only in institutional and material realms but on the level of discourse and imagination.

If understanding the connection of democratization to disenfranchisement requires us to attend to discursive and institutional processes of people making, then it also suggests that the historical study of democratization needs to expand the cast of actors beyond the narrowly defined economic classes to which we usually assign the leading roles. We must grapple with the variegated ways in which class and other forms of social differentiation and group identity were given form and meaning through locally specific institutions that assigned worth, rights, and standing. In examining the historical record, students of democratization are

[3] This had many sources, but among the most important was Teri L. Caraway, "Inclusion and Democratization: Class, Gender, Race, and the Extension of Suffrage," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 4 (2004): 443–60.

confronted by this fact all the time. The work we produce carries the traces of this encounter, often resulting in an acknowledgment that interests and identities are socially constructed and so will result in nationally specific differences; but if our goal remains nonetheless limited to identifying a "locus classicus" of historical democratizations in the enfranchisement of an urban, male (white) proletariat, we will likely miss much of the story.[4] Our stories of democratizations can instead be enriched by considering a wider variety of intersecting classes, social groups, and not-straightforwardly-economic hierarchical relations, paying attention to the political processes by which these groups – and the actors who claimed to represent them – defined their separate and collective interests, negotiated with others around these interests, and ultimately created new understandings of common purpose and collective identity.[5]

Reading democratization through the lens of disenfranchisement might also help make our stories about its historical occurrence more relevant to contemporary readers. Democracies around the world are being buffeted by the rise of a form of politics that simultaneously appeals to portions of the electorate in democratic terms, as representing the will of a coherent "people," even as it threatens civic and political disenfranchisement for some. This development is often connected to what a number of scholars have identified as "*the* defining political question of our times," namely the seemingly "growing proliferation of antagonism around cultural difference."[6] Relative to these trends, the historical study of democratization can often seem far removed, concerning ostensibly less diverse societies and focusing on conflicts organized around definite material interests rather than seemingly more subjective understandings of identity, status, or culture.

When viewed through the perspective of disenfranchisement, however, the nineteenth century looks a lot more diverse, with myriad identities and a proliferation of ideologies and ideas about interests that are not straightforward implications of the structural position of a given class. Much like contemporary conflicts, struggles over historical democratizations weave together questions of status, culture, identity, power, and material and

[4] Ruth Berins Collier, *Paths Toward Democracy: The Working Class and Elites in Western Europe and South America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 27.

[5] For a project that embodies these imperatives and that has helped me appreciate their importance, see Dawn Langan Teele, *The Political Origins of the Female Franchise* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

[6] Kobena Mercer, ed., "Introduction," in Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 11.

economic position in ways that can never be wholly disentangled. The past is a foreign country, and the nineteenth century was different, very different, from today. But perhaps in some ways it was less different than is generally appreciated.

If such a perspective helps make historical democratizations more legible to us today, it might also shed light on contemporary democratic struggles. Many instances of democratic backsliding in recent years have combined the undermining of democratic institutions with the affirmation of democratic identities. In some cases, these have been political projects aiming not only at reconfiguring state or economic institutions, but also at constructing a broadly shared sense of peoplehood that will help sustain it at a popular level. The "peoples" they construct will be varyingly exclusive in their symbols, institutions, and assignation of civic worth, but for many they will provide a reason to believe that one is part of something valuable, even if its value is defined in part by what is denied to others. This might help explain why democratic backsliding can be experienced not as a fall into authoritarianism but as a democratization, as the reconfiguration of the state to better represent, even if only in public discourse, a particular definition of "the people."

We should not concede the words *democratization* or *democracy* to such projects. But we should take seriously the possibility that their contested popularity rests on their creation of an image of community and a hierarchy of worth that provides potential constituents with a sense that they are valued and that their state *represents* them in some meaningful sense (even if its officers are fleecing them in a more material sense).

Those of us who believe that a further and genuine democratization of social, economic, and political life is urgently needed, and that democratizing projects to level inequalities and expand liberties can be pursued without resting these on disenfranchisements, should take note of what these faux democratizers have understood. Democratization has always required its advocates to work out new senses of collective belonging, new peoples that can meaningfully connect a multiplicity of identities into a shared emancipatory and democratic purpose. Its occurrence and consolidation in turn rest in part on connecting individuals and communities with a commitment to a broader political project, one that is both imagined – in the sense that all such communities require us to imagine who "we" are – and yet anchored in either the antagonisms and differentiations of social life or in real improvements and opportunities clearly connected to the democratizing project itself. Imagining and constructing

such egalitarian and emancipatory visions of popular community must count among the vital tasks of a democratizing movement today.

America has only briefly lived under a democracy, and its geographic and social scope has only gradually (and somewhat feebly) been expanded. There is no particular reason to think it should endure. But I do not expect American democracy will be killed by a public opinion that turns against the *idea* of democracy or its presumptive values in the abstract, or that rediscovers animosities of race, origin, gender, language, or religion. Authoritarian values have always been with us. White racism, sexism, and other chauvinisms never went away: they are embedded in and daily reconstituted by our form of economic organization, our governing institutions, our social relations, and our senses of self, and they have buttressed forms of undemocratic rule that were successfully defended by large segments of America's political elites, with the backing of broad publics, until quite recently. The current danger, as is generally the case, is to be found in certain political elites who see in the degradation of democratic institutions – through voter suppression, the harassment and physical terrorizing of activists, the deportation of community leaders, continued attacks on the collective organizations of working people, especially those of importance to people of color, and the legal dismantling of the institutional gains of previous democratic revolutions – an opportunity to hold on to or expand their own power through denying the status and membership of certain classes of Americans. To cite just one example, the last several decades have seen many of America's elites, of both political parties, delight in the destruction of a limited form of democratic organization in the workplace, one of the few organizations that seek to provide the majority of America's inhabitants with a concrete ability to shape the conditions under which they live. And this is done in the name of unleashing capital and entrepreneurship, shifting the balance of America's public priorities from one vision of the people to another.

If America continues to undermine and roll back its democratic institutions, the danger is not likely to come from "below," in the form of illiberalism among a mass and variegated public. We should instead expect the denigration and corruption of democratic institutions to be undertaken by political elites pursuing their own interests, whether for love of self, power, or a form of principle. But history suggests that in doing so, they will seek to rest their project on a popular warrant, harnessing widely held identities and America's quasi-official civic statuses for their own ends, offering a seemingly democratic identity that

affirms care and worth for some, telling them that their lives matter, even if no one else's does.

In this case, I expect that a good many Americans will not only not notice democracy's passing – after all, many did not notice its centuries-long denial – but will experience it instead as a moment when a particular vision of the "people" was again represented in the symbols and discourse of the government. It will be a democratization for some, resting on the substantive disenfranchisement of others.

* * *

There would be no book in front of you had it not been for the collective and individual efforts of scores of people, whose assistance and guidance can never be repaid. I arrived at the University of Pennsylvania knowing only a little about political science, less about politics, and next to nothing about anything else. What little I did know I owe to Axel Huelsemeyer and Leander Schneider, who had encouraged me to apply to graduate school. And I was lucky to arrive with a wonderful cohort whose friendship enriched my life and profoundly shaped my scholarship. Graduate workers are the bones and sinew of intellectual inquiry, and their friendships and solidarities define the discipline: it is well past time for your labor to be recognized as such and for your inalienable right to organize collectively to be affirmed.

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the historical study of institutions, democratization, ideologies of race and class, and political representation. This book bears the imprint of their insights and courses.

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