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Introduction

Doubters and Demagogues

On the night that Barack Obama beat John McCain, a kind of manic optimism swept through many parts of the American public. Several blocks from my Brooklyn apartment, a raucous dance party erupted in the streets, and car horns blared as if we'd just won the Super Bowl. People were drunk on the possibility of a better future and, in spite of its many obvious shortcomings, democracy seemed like the vehicle carrying us toward that future.

Needless to say, the atmosphere here in the United States, and elsewhere, feels very different as I write this in 2023. It is a weird time to be writing a book about social progress in democracies for at least a couple of reasons. First: the notion of “progress” seems, well, so very pre-post-modern¹—the idea of civilization marching forward and all that. Can we still take that seriously after the horrors of the past few hundred years? This worry is not exactly new, but it is particularly salient at a time when so many traditional historical narratives are being questioned. Second: many democracies are presently experiencing a wave of populist retreat on human rights, pluralism, and democratic institutions themselves. And their ability to handle the great challenges of our time—climate, the COVID pandemic, searing social divisions—seems more questionable than it has been in a long time.

Here in the U.S., which has long imagined itself as democracy's sacred temple, the tenure of Obama's successor began with the

¹ I picked up this turn of phrase from Philip Kitcher (in conversation).

demonization of racial minorities and concluded with a violent mob stalking around the U.S. Capitol Building. Current (late 2023) polling gives better than 50% odds that the American public will re-install a president next year who is openly hostile to basic democratic norms.² That may indeed have become reality by the time this book is printed. Elsewhere, Brazil's (recent but no longer) President, Jair Bolsonaro, loudly celebrated the country's previous military dictatorship, gutted its environmental protections, publicly endorsed torture, and attacked the press.³ In India, the ruling Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has chipped away at the rights of Muslims, clamped down on dissidents, and enabled or ignored ethnic violence.⁴ And it would not be difficult to document further examples of democracy's current fragility.

In spite of all that, the strength of current skepticism about democracy is surprising considering democracy's ascendance and ideological sway in the recent past. A majority of the world's population now lives in a democracy, and the great bulk of those democracies came into being in the past 100 years.⁵ Remarkably, however, one-third of Americans apparently believe it would be "good" or "very good" to have a "strong leader" who doesn't have to "bother with parliament and elections."⁶ In Europe, anti-democratic sentiment is somewhat weaker overall, but still on the rise, and is notably stronger among the young.⁷ In the scholarly world, meanwhile, there has been a fresh wave of cynicism about democracy, with several prominent books painting a damning portrait of voters, and some casting a sympathetic gaze toward technocracy.⁸ The general spirit of these books is nicely captured by

² *FiveThirtyEight* 2023.

³ Human Rights Watch 2020b.

⁴ Human Rights Watch 2020c.

⁵ Roser 2013.

⁶ Foa and Mounk 2016, 14.

⁷ Foa and Mounk 2016.

⁸ Achen and Bartels 2016; Bell 2015; Brennan 2016; Caplan 2007; Jones 2021; Somin 2016.

the cover of Bryan Caplan's *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, which features an army of sheep staring vacantly, ominously ahead.

Even as such criticism persists, it is difficult to find serious competitors to democracy on the world's menu of political regimes and, at least among scholars who currently live in democracies, it is difficult (though not impossible) to find a full-blown defense of an alternative.⁹ When the public elects a bigot or climate-denier, frustration with majority or plurality rule is inevitable. Nonetheless, democracy enjoys a very strong default status for good reason, which is that, on the issues that really matter, it has almost certainly performed better than any of its rivals in modern history.

Democracies, and especially mature democracies, have been the driver of every categorical expansion of moral status in recent memory, including the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement, the gay rights movement, and the animal rights movement. In general, democracy substantially improves human rights protections¹⁰ and reduces ethnic favoritism¹¹ relative to more authoritarian alternatives. Democracies go to war less often,¹² enjoy better health outcomes,¹³ and have lower infant mortality rates.¹⁴ A number of studies also indicate that democracy improves individual happiness and life satisfaction.¹⁵ The remarkable economic growth of China in recent years is often taken to be evidence of an authoritarian advantage. Yet, controlling for other factors, Daron Acemoglu and his co-authors argue that conversion from a non-democratic to a democratic regime causes a roughly 20% gain in GDP.¹⁶ All of these data points are of course subject to some degree of reasonable contestation. At this preliminary stage the point

⁹ The main exceptions to this are Bell (2015); Brennan (2016).

¹⁰ Christiano 2011.

¹¹ Burgess et al. 2015.

¹² Pinker 2012, 278–84.

¹³ Besley and Kudamatsu 2006.

¹⁴ Gerrig, Thacker, and Alfaro 2012; Navia and Zweifel 2003.

¹⁵ Dorn et al. 2007; Orviska, Caplanova, and Hudson 2014; Owen, Videras, and Willemsen 2008.

¹⁶ Acemoglu et al. 2019.

is simply that, taking the body of evidence as a whole, democracies do comparatively well on basic moral and practical measures of performance. Whatever the serious shortcomings of democracy may be, there are good reasons for the very strong presumption in its favor.

In short we have reached a moment at which, on the one hand, democracy's considerable advantages are difficult to deny and yet, on the other, its real and perceived failings have made it vulnerable to a new wave of doubters and demagogues. Democracy seems to play a powerful role in improving lives and societies, and yet democratic publics are also too often ignorant, impulsive, selfish, spiteful. How are we to reconcile these two things? It's not enough simply to point out the flaws of authoritarian alternatives. We need a clear and robust account of democracy's distinctive value and, therefore, of the proper shape that our democratic ambitions should take in the face of serious social problems. My suggestion is that an important part of that account has gone missing, and that it concerns the special role of democracy in driving social progress. This book is about how democracy does this, what it means, and why it matters.

1.1. Democracy as a Driver of Social Progress

Put in one word, the most fundamental objection to democracy is "incompetence." Contemporary critics of democracy tend to focus on technical policy knowledge. But when Plato analogized democracy to a ship of drunken fools, he was worried principally about virtue.¹⁷ Being a good ruler requires extraordinary excellence of character, he thought. Handing over power to the masses was a recipe for tyranny. In the 21st century, Plato's trust in the virtue of

¹⁷ Plato 2000.

elites comes across as naïve. Nonetheless, a robust justification of democracy needs to account for its capacity to sustain a morally good society. Democracy may be justified on other grounds as well, of course. Maybe democracy is a uniquely fair decision procedure, or a peaceful way of resolving disagreements. But a fair procedure that produces a benighted social order is on shaky ground. A stable but unjust peace is not enough.

In this book I propose an “experimentalist” model of how democracy generates social progress over time. The model’s centerpiece is the idea of “experiments in living,” a phrase adapted from John Stuart Mill which has also been picked up by a variety of contemporary thinkers.¹⁸ Writing in the 19th century, Mill thought that social progress depended on the freedom of citizens to experiment with different practices and lifestyles, and that this kind of experimentation would lead to innovations that improved on the human condition. I’m particularly interested in innovations that concern the *social order*, that is, the rights and privileges people should have in social life, the norms governing how they treat each other in public settings, how resources should be distributed, and the forms of well-being that public institutions should promote. That is why I have used the phrase “experiments in living together” in the title (though I will generally stick with the shorter, more conventional version of the phrase). Thus, in my usage, an *experiment in living* is an alteration of practice that tests the moral values and principles which constitute the social order. Such alterations lead to progress by enabling societies to learn from experience. One of the central goals of the book is therefore to argue for the essential role of experience in moral learning and therefore in creating social progress.

The significance of experience for both ethics and democratic politics was a particularly important theme in the work

¹⁸ The original source is Mill (1998b). Contemporary takes on the subject include Anderson (1991); Gaus (2016); Kitcher (2011); Manor (2021); Muldoon (2021).

of John Dewey, and his philosophical influence is vital in the arguments to come. Although this book is not principally an attempt at interpreting Dewey, I will at some points in the narrative engage directly with his body of work. For Mill, the critical role of experiments in living in social progress was one of several justifications for liberalism's robust protection of individuals from social and political interference. My own focus is on the virtues of democracy rather than liberalism, though there are obviously close connections between these two ideals. In particular, I argue that democracy provides a uniquely powerful framework for experiments in living, and therefore for reliable improvements in our moral beliefs and practices.

To put all of this in more concrete terms, it is worth bringing into view the three historical examples that are touchstones in what follows: the extension of marital rights to same-sex couples, the racial desegregation of schools, and the dramatic expansion and qualitative improvement of women's workforce participation. It is cases like these that I have in mind when I refer to "social progress," and it is also cases such as these which illuminate democracy's distinctive role in generating progress. In each instance, some significant part of society had a morally valid grievance, mobilized that grievance through democratic institutions and powers, and, over time, achieved remarkable (though highly imperfect and incomplete) improvements in the social practices on which the initial grievances were centered.

Notably, in these cases, the outcome of this process of mobilization was not limited to coercive policy implementation. As we shall see, it also involved very substantial long-term shifts in public opinion and societal convention. So changes in practice led over time to a systemic transformation of beliefs and sympathies. It is in this last respect that these are examples of epistemological interest. That is, they are cases in which the public appears to have learned something about the good and the right through the experience of acting on innovations of moral principle.

There is at present no comprehensive model that explains the role of democracy in supporting these kinds of transformations. And the contemporary menu of democratic theories is not well equipped to offer such an explanation. For a long time, much of the political science scholarship on democracy has been dominated by a model borrowed from economics. On that model, citizens have “preferences” and cast their votes so as to maximize satisfaction of those preferences. This model has its place in understanding important aspects of electoral politics. But it is not terribly illuminating from the standpoint of progress. That is because, much as consumers may satisfy their preferences through cruel, selfish, or shortsighted market behavior, so too may voters satisfy preferences by voting in racists and policy charlatans. The question at hand is not how or whether democracy tends to satisfy our preferences. It is how democracy transforms our preferences to something kinder, more humane, and more sensitive to good evidence.

Among democratic theorists, the dominant idea right now is “deliberative democracy,” which models democracy as a process of inclusive, rational deliberation.¹⁹ As I discuss at length in Chapter 2, the problem with deliberative democracy is that, because it focuses so thoroughly on deliberation, it omits the important epistemological role of human experience outside the deliberative context. The idea here is that so much of our moral learning happens, not through the communication of reasons, but instead by seeing what it is like to live in a particular social order, often over a very long period of time. The most glaring consideration in this respect is that, in all three of the historical examples above, transformations of public opinion lagged far behind the public expression of arguments. Instead, I shall argue, these cases all depended on experiments in living: directed interventions in social practice which supported changes in morally significant experience. Deliberation turns out to be one important part of this picture, but must be situated in the

¹⁹ For canonical essays, see Bohman and Rehg (1997).

context of other crucial factors. That's a quick preview, anyway, of where the argument will take us.

1.2. Skepticism about Progress

Generically speaking, *moral progress* is improvement in conformity to a valid moral standard. And *social progress* is moral progress in the context of institutions, practices, and norms which have large-scale social dimensions.²⁰ For the purposes of this book, the two terms are interchangeable.

There are a number of recent books that defend a general theory of moral progress.²¹ My interest, by contrast, is in something a bit more specific, namely the distinctive contribution that democracy makes to moral progress. But that project, obviously, presupposes the idea that moral progress is a credible notion in the first place. On this point, I defer to the work that others have already done. Here, I take for granted that moral progress is a real historical phenomenon and a coherent intellectual idea. I will not try to persuade hardcore skeptics to take it seriously. Still, for those who might be sympathetic but nonetheless a bit wary, it is worth quickly rehearsing some of the most immediate concerns about the idea and identifying where they go wrong.

The most prominent worries about moral progress look to its role in some of the darkest chapters of human history. Much of European history, in particular, has been defined by the imperative to violently subdue “savage” or otherwise “uncivilized” peoples in the name of progress, and the mass atrocities of the 20th century were, to a large degree, propelled by perverse visions of moral and social destiny. In more recent years, the efforts of wealthy European

²⁰ Does all moral progress fit this definition of “social progress”? Yes, arguably, though I find myself a bit uncertain of what to think on this question. In any case, the answer does not matter for the purposes of my argument.

²¹ Appiah 2010; Buchanan and Powell 2018; Kitcher 2011, 2021.

and North American countries to promote economic and political development in poorer countries has, to some at least, come across as a thinly veiled form of colonialism (“if you want this loan, you’d better do what we ask . . .”). Whether or not such criticisms are fair, the general point stands that, historically, “progress” has often served as a pretense for violence and cultural hegemony.

To address skepticism about the general idea of progress, we must first distinguish the history of the discourse of “progress” from the history, and idea, of progress itself. Exhibit A is the case of slavery. To a significant degree, slavery was propagated under the banner of progress: the domination of enslaved groups was rationalized by attributing inferior moral qualities to them, and cooptation of their labor was seen as an instrument of greater prosperity. But while slavery may have been “progress” (let me just emphasize the scare quotes here!), the abandonment of slavery was, in fact, progress. Steven Pinker notes that between the 16th and 19th centuries, something between 17 million and 65 million people died in the African slave trade.²² That number of course leaves out the multitudes who lived but suffered grievously. This is a staggering quantification of human misery. Whatever human rights abuses persist today (including some forms of slavery), and however bad contemporary forms of racism and colonialism may be, the abandonment of chattel slavery was, any way you want to look at it, a real, important, and durable moral improvement. We need something in our conceptual repertoire that refers to improvements of this kind, and the obvious choice is “social progress.” If you think that a world without slavery is morally better than a world with slavery, then you accept the reality of social progress.

Here is a list of other cases in which the judgment of social progress looks compelling: the expansion of civil rights to African-Americans in the 1960s USA; the worldwide expansion of women’s and girls’ rights, including rights to education, property, political

²² Pinker 2012, 154.

participation, and freedom from violence and harassment; the widespread expansion of attitudes and practices of religious tolerance; the expansion of protections of animal rights in food production and medical testing; the expansion of gay rights in many countries; and the expansion of protections and norms against cruelty to children.

Can we really, straightfacedly, abandon the idea of progress in such cases? No, we cannot. If less child cruelty is not a moral improvement over more child cruelty, then the idea that cruelty itself is bad, or worth avoiding, or worth arguing against, or worth getting upset about, starts to go seriously out of focus. But because the fabric of our individual lives and social practices is woven around such ideas, the basic pillars of human existence—judging and valuing things as good, desirable, worth pursuing over others, worth defending and arguing about—start to crumble. If we abandon the idea of progress altogether, we are left with a completely destabilizing moral skepticism. That's an unacceptable price to pay.

In the cases above, judgments of moral improvement are closely tethered to judgments of moral right and wrong, that is, that freedom is morally good, cruelty and suffering bad, that there are moral rights to education and economic self-determination, etc. In order for these kinds of views to support judgments of moral progress, their validity must hold across the time periods being compared, and their validity must hold independently of the prevailing beliefs in each time period about moral progress. Otherwise, they would simply amount to cross-temporal comparisons of moral attitudes rather than statements that, in some sense, our predecessors got certain things wrong which we are now getting (more) right. So the idea of progress is tied to the idea that moral standards are at least in some minimal way objective, holding independently of the moral attitudes that particular people, at particular points in time, happen to hold. The notion of moral progress is not compatible with hardcore versions of moral relativism, according

to which no cross-cultural moral judgments are valid and each society has “its own truth.” Examples like slavery and child cruelty show that we are, unavoidably, stuck with some notion of progress. And if we are unavoidably stuck with a notion of progress, then the strongest forms of moral relativism and skepticism are not viable.

So this book starts from the presumption that judgments of progress are unavoidable and that they implicitly appeal to at least some basic notion of moral objectivity. I will eventually address the complications raised by the idea of objectivity, but not until Chapter 7. Before moving on, I’ll just add one further qualification. First, the most plausible kinds of progress judgments apply to moral communities in temporal, geographic, and cultural proximity. And they tend to focus on particular dimensions of improvement rather than applying an all-encompassing moral standard (“society X is more morally advanced than society Y”).²³ Thus, the primary examples of progress in this book involve changes in American society which have occurred principally in the past 70 years or so. I do not compare different countries or cultures, I stick to a relatively small time frame in recent history, and I focus on particular dimensions of progress rather than trying to issue any totalizing moral comparison. This approach should limit my exposure to many of the prevailing worries about progress talk.

1.3. What I Assume

A meaningful account of social progress must presuppose some exemplars of the subject it proposes to illuminate. Unless we stick to a very narrow range of cases—such as the reduction of slavery or child cruelty—this requires adopting contested moral views. Not everyone is going to agree that this book’s core examples are genuine instances of progress, and not everyone is going to agree

²³ Kitcher 2015, 2021.

with my judgments about how they amount to progress. Many conservatives, in particular, are likely to reject the presumption that same-sex marital rights count as moral progress. They are also likely to see questions surrounding racial diversity in schools and women's participation at work somewhat differently.

Thus I need to concede, from the start, that someone who comprehensively rejects my first-order moral judgments of these cases is unlikely to find this book persuasive. It seems to me that this is an unavoidable but also unsurprising constraint on any substantive account of progress. It is unsurprising because our beliefs about what causes any particular phenomenon will always depend on what we take the phenomenon to be. Put less abstractly, if social progress is principally about bringing greater glory to Dear Leader or consolidating the power of some particular ethnic group (for example), then the view that democracy catalyzes social progress is a non-starter. At the same time, if my interpretation of particular cases rides on some highly contentious ideological perspective, then its potential impact will be badly limited. I have worked hard to bring out the nuances and considerable moral complexity of each example. I also address the question of what happens when, inevitably, there is disagreement about what counts as progress. I hope that readers who are skeptical of the progressive or leftist consensus on these issues will be willing to press forward to consider the details of my analysis.

Though I presuppose that my paradigm cases are instances of social progress, my choices here are not simply a matter of brute intuition. They reflect a collection of fundamental moral views that we might call *generic liberalism*. Thus, I assume in what follows that people are moral equals, that individual freedom is an important good, that people's subjective experience of their own lives is an important aspect of their well-being, and that individuals are not to be treated exclusively or primarily as instruments of collective objectives. I mention these assumptions because they bear on the aims of the book and the set of debates in which it is positioned. My

approach is this: if you accept generic liberalism, and if you accept the very broad view of progress that this entails, then I am going to defend a particular view about how, specifically, we should think about social progress, how, specifically, democracy drives that kind of progress, and how therefore we should understand the democratic ideal.

This means that my view enters into a debate with two primary camps. First, I am entering into an argument with other (generically liberal) democratic thinkers about how and why democracy helps produce a morally desirable society, and how this contributes to the value of democratic institutions. Second, I am entering into an argument with “epistocratic” (technocratic) skeptics of democracy who are tempted by more elitist models of government. This group accepts generic liberalism but thinks that making our institutions less democratic in certain ways is a superior route to progress. Epistocracy/technocracy is the only institutional alternative to democracy that I consider closely, because it links power to merit, and that makes it the nearest competitor to democracy, at least for those who accept generic liberalism. Epistocracy/technocracy has also received significant attention lately among democratic theorists, and that makes it the right target from a scholarly point of view.

By contrast, autocratic and oligarchic regimes maintain power primarily through crony patronage, the threat of violence, and control of public speech and information. This makes them implausible candidates for the reliable protection and promotion of diverse interests. This is not to rule out the possibility of enlightened totalitarianism in any particular case. But, considered as systems of government, they are implausible rivals to democracy (again, assuming we take for granted generic liberalism). In other words, if democracy beats epistocracy from the standpoint of social progress, it probably beats every other regime. In any case, I do not try to convince those genuinely tempted by autocracy that their preferred system is a bad idea. I leave that project to others.

1.4. What I Do and Don't Try to Argue

To avoid confusion it is worth clarifying some limitations in the scope of this book. Here are several theses that I do not try to defend:

- (i) [I do not try to defend the view that] democracy always leads to social progress.

On the contrary, democracies often elect demagogues who implement policies of cruelty, bigotry, exclusion, and demonization. The inevitable example is Hitler. But there are plenty of others. Among contemporary democracies, the United States, India, Brazil, and Hungary have all recently undergone a substantial regression on civil and human rights among vulnerable groups. In countries with weaker democratic cultures and institutions, it is common to see strong patterns of ethnic favoritism and corrupt in-group patronage. Whether things would be better under a more authoritarian regime is a separate matter. But the point is that democracy's basic architecture—the universal egalitarian distribution of fundamental political powers—is not intrinsically oriented toward good or bad purposes. It depends on what specific form the architecture takes and how it is used.

- (ii) [I do not try to defend the view that] social progress only happens in democracies.

This is also obviously false. The Magna Carta was signed by the 13th-century British Monarchy. The Chinese Empire abandoned the practice of foot-binding in the early 20th century. The modern monarchy of Bhutan made significant strides toward gender equity even before recent democratic reforms were put into place. The British Empire banned the slave trade in the early 19th century, well before voting rights had been widely distributed. And even

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, whose record on human rights has been mixed at best, has recently taken meaningful steps toward improving the status of women in Saudi Arabia. And so on.

- (iii) [I do not try to defend the view that] when social progress happens in democracies, it only happens via experiments in living.

Given the plurality of forms that social progress takes, it would be surprising if any particular model could capture it in every particular instance. In their recent account of moral progress, Allen Buchanan and Russell Powell identify nine distinct forms it may take.²⁴ There is also remarkable variety in the domains and human circumstances under which progress occurs. No substantive model is going to be adequate to every possible case. Likewise, there are likely to be disparate factors which work together to instigate progress. The importance that I attribute to experiments in living need not be incompatible with views that focus on other factors, such as Anthony Appiah's work on honor or Steven Pinker's account of violence-reduction.²⁵

In light of the above, let me offer a circumspect version of the central claims that I do defend:

- (a) Experiments in living are a particularly powerful mechanism for social progress;
- (b) Democracy offers a particularly powerful framework for cultivating those experiments at scale;
- (c) Democracy's capacity to drive social progress is crucial to explaining the value of democratic rule and understanding its normative principles.

²⁴ Buchanan and Powell 2018.

²⁵ Appiah 2010; Pinker 2012.

Here I'm giving you neither necessary nor sufficient conditions. Saying that something is "particularly powerful" conveys a strong positive tendency under normal conditions, but is not the same as saying that something is "utterly unique," "strictly essential," or "universally successful." I haven't used that kind of language because, as I suggested above, the topic in question is too complicated and contingent to allow for that kind of strong generalization. Thesis (c) uses the word "crucial," which comes close to "necessary." Yet, even here, I believe the subject matter resists strict exceptionlessness. The utility of my analysis does not depend on whether it is indispensable to every plausible justification of democracy that can be given.

It may seem that, as I have formulated my thesis, there is just too much wiggle room in the argument. Have I set things up so that I can weasel out of any objection by appealing to built-in caveats? Is the argument still substantive when formulated in this way?

I believe the answer to this last question is "yes." To see why, indulge me briefly in a sports analogy drawn from my youth. Suppose you were trying to give a model of the Chicago Bulls' greatness during the 1990s, when they won six NBA championships. Your model would surely point to Michael Jordan's remarkable skill with the basketball as at least one definitive consideration. Still, the Bulls lost plenty of games during the Jordan era and, even when they did win, it was not always because of Jordan's basketball skills. Sometimes his psychological leadership was crucial and, in others, his teammates played the dominant role on the court. So Jordan's basketball skill was neither necessary nor sufficient for any given Bulls victory and yet it was a "particularly powerful" factor in their tendency to win games. Establishing the central role of Jordan's basketball skill is "crucial" to an understanding of the Bulls' greatness.

Like Jordanism, the account of social progress in this book should be judged on how well it captures the virtues of democracy across a range of important cases. It should be judged on whether it establishes something distinctly important and valuable about

democracy, considered over all, and not on whether it can be adapted to circumscribe every potential example. There is, however, one very important difference with Jordanism. Jordanism explains the Bulls' success by appealing to descriptive regularities in history—"here is what Jordan did, here is how often he did it, and here is the causal significance of what he did in generating victories." My account of social progress, by contrast, is normative, meaning that it extrapolates from paradigm cases to articulate how social change works when democracy functions well. This means that an examination of empirical or historical regularities can only get us so far, since they may or may not conform to the crucial conditions and practices identified in my account. Jair Bolsonaro's public avowal of torture and homophobia does not falsify the view that democracy is an engine of social progress. Instead it invites us to consider whether my model of progress accounts for why things went wrong, and whether it provides a normatively compelling account of an alternative way forward. Likewise, a simple catalog of democracy's statistical tendency to protect human rights does not on its own vindicate my or any other normative account of democracy. The question at hand is how exactly democracy supports reliable transitions in that direction and how that connects to core democratic values and principles.

1.5. This Book's Methodology

This is a work of empirically and historically informed philosophy. Although my own scholarly training is in philosophy, and my core arguments have a recognizably philosophical character, the book is full of citations to psychology and political science that play an important role in the argument. In Chapters 4 and 5, I pursue a detailed investigation of several important episodes in American social history and therefore include many citations to historians as well.

While this interdisciplinary approach is perhaps not so unusual in contemporary philosophy, it is worth making clear my own motivations for working in this way. My primary thesis is normative. It concerns the democratic ideal: what democratic practices, institutions, and norms should be and an account of the reasons why they should be that way. It is possible to make arguments like this working solely from abstract or axiomatic principles about liberty, equality, fairness, and such. In this variety of “pure” ideal theorizing, empirical and historical facts about how real democracies behave may be entirely irrelevant. The primary goal is to articulate a moral standard which is attractive given a set of idealized assumptions, irrespective of whether there is some realistic pathway of progress toward that standard. As G. A. Cohen, one of the premier defenders of pure ideal theory, puts it: “The question for political philosophy is not what we should do but what we should think, even when what we should think makes no practical difference.”²⁶ Pure ideal theory does not aspire in any direct way to be action-guiding.

That is not my approach here. This is a work in non-ideal theory, the function of which is nicely described by Ingrid Robeyns:

In cases in which we are not in a fully just society, we need theory to guide us for two important tasks: first, to be able to make comparisons between different social states and evaluate which one is more just than the other; and, second, to guide our actions in order to move closer towards the ideals of society.²⁷

Here Robeyns refers to principles of justice, but her points can be applied to any set of normative standards. As Robeyns describes it, the distinguishing feature of non-ideal theory is not that it describes conditions that are fully achievable. Instead, it provides a standard

²⁶ Cohen (2003, 243), quoted in Robeyns (2008, 343).

²⁷ Robeyns 2008, 346.

of evaluation that guides us toward incremental improvements given the messy, imperfect circumstances in which we find ourselves. Let's call standards of this kind *regulative ideals*:

Valid *regulative ideals* (a) prescribe incremental steps which (b) are practically feasible and which (c) effectively promote the values or goods captured in the ideal, (d) relative to a particular social context.

My goal is to defend a particular regulative ideal of democracy by appealing to its virtues in enabling social progress. And that explains the role of empirical and historical facts in my argument. A regulative ideal of democracy needs to grapple with the actual challenges that (present) democracies face, and the actual set of institutional and psychological conditions that constrain our ability to meet those challenges. It therefore must be responsive to a whole set of facts about human motivations, feelings, thoughts, and institutions. Hence the prominent role of social science and history in my argument. Social science and (recent) historical examples help us to understand the factors that govern the achievement of moral progress, and to identify the aspects of democracy which most contribute to that achievement. At the same time, the notions of "democracy" and "social progress" cannot simply be extrapolated from data or historical cases. These are essentially contested²⁸ concepts that must be theorized and motivated in a wider context of normative ideas: truth, objectivity, legitimacy, fairness, well-being, knowledge, human flourishing, and others. And that is why this book is, first and foremost, a work in political philosophy. In short, I recruit the descriptive story provided by social science and history in support of a philosophical account of democratic social progress.

²⁸ Gallie 1955.

One important caveat about my use of historical examples: I have chosen to drill down deep on three landmark cases rather than survey many instances of democratic social progress. The reason for this relates to my observations about the importance of empirical and historical facts for non-ideal theory. If we really want to understand how moral progress works, the factual nuances matter. The advantage of my approach is that it enables us to take a really careful, analytical look at the institutional, cultural, and psychological dimensions of social change. The disadvantage is that it leans heavily on the presumption that we can extrapolate from a small handful of examples to a wide range of other cases. I believe that presumption is valid in this instance, but readers will have to judge for themselves.

The most conspicuous limitation of my three primary examples is that they are all drawn from American social history. Let me assure the reader that this is not because I think America is the best or archetypal model of democracy. Instead, I have focused on the U.S. because I have been immersed for my entire life in its political culture and social particularities. I therefore feel much better positioned to issue a credible commentary on how things work there than I do in other national contexts. No doubt we have much to learn by looking at other countries as well, but that will have to wait for another occasion and, I hope, further scholarship.

1.6. This Book's Intended Audience and Style

This work is interdisciplinary in its methodology and aims for accessibility in its style. Although I expect political philosophers and theorists will feel most at home in the discussion which follows, I have tried to write a book that will be readable and engaging for those outside this group, including scholars outside of philosophy and political theory, as well as readers who are not academics.

I want to underscore this, because it entailed making some choices that will not please everyone. Although I do discuss “the literature” at many points, I sometimes move past debates and technical issues that will interest political philosophers, but which are likely to be arcane for others. Relatedly, where I investigate John Dewey’s ideas in Chapter 3, I completely avoid debates in the secondary literature. At times I slow down to explain terminology or distinctions that will be well known to political philosophers but which, again, may be obscure to others. I have tried to excise obscure jargon entirely, and have deliberately avoided the sorts of technical coinages, numbered arguments, and formalized theoretical models which are common in professional philosophy journals. Nonetheless, the book centers on recognizably academic ideas and discussions. The principal goal in what follows is to do something new in political philosophy, not to explain work that’s already been done or to deliver a simplified version of ideas for public consumption. There are inherent tensions in trying to achieve all of that at the same time, but I think the subject matter warrants this approach.

1.7. An Overview

Chapter 2 (“Barriers to Change”) considers and rejects the most promising alternative accounts of progress in democracy, devoting particular attention to “power-sharing” models of democracy and deliberative democracy. Together, these accounts capture something important about democracy’s capacity to promote moral improvement. But, on their own, the egalitarian distribution of basic political powers and a culture of deliberation cannot explain social progress because—I argue—political power and deliberation are themselves vulnerable to the consequences of structural oppression. We need to introduce a further factor which explains how moral minds are changed over time.

Chapter 3 (“Joint Flourishing”), along with Chapter 4, offers the heart of my own view. Here I work by directly developing John Dewey’s democratic thought and so, unlike the rest of the book, this particular chapter engages with some of his major texts and ideas. I propose that, from a Deweyan standpoint, the regulative ideal of democracy can be understood in terms of “joint flourishing”: all flourish as a consequence of an intentional, ongoing, reciprocal adjustment of objectives. Accordingly, democratic social progress involves improvements in joint flourishing. Two features of the Deweyan approach stand out. First, progress is socially contingent, varying with the distinctive desires and historical circumstances of different moral communities. Second, progress depends on transformations of social emotion, identity, and habit.

Chapter 4 (“Experiments in Living Together”) presents my model of how improvements in joint flourishing come about, which turns on the book’s central idea: “experiments in living.” Experimental interventions in practice alter patterns of social interaction, and that enables “transformative experiences”²⁹ that change the values which make us who we are. Those changes, in turn, reshape the background linkages of emotion and identity which enable us to represent the concerns of others through deliberation. Deliberation then enables further expansion of experimental interventions, and the cycle repeats until moral innovations stabilize in social thought and practice. I illustrate and defend this account by looking closely at the history of same-sex marriage in the U.S.

Chapter 5 (“Falling Short”) looks at two further historical examples: school desegregation and the integration of women into the workplace. These are both instances where the verdict on “progress” is more mixed than in the same-sex marriage case. I argue that the outcome in these examples is explained by the relative difficulty of intervening to change patterns of social interaction, and also by

²⁹ Paul 2014.

important tensions among the values animating these movements. Finding a path to progress will require negotiating valid desires that may not be entirely compatible. This kind of value pluralism explains why moral consensus is not always a companion of progress or its proper measure. Sometimes weaker forms of mutual accommodation are the best we can do.

Chapter 6 (“Democratic Rationality Is Social”) argues that experiments in living are rational processes. In that respect, they are a reliable pathway to progress and not merely arbitrary swings of power or mob psychology. The key point here is to see moral rationality in social rather than individual terms. From a social standpoint, the reliability of moral inquiry depends on aggregate group tendencies distributed over an extended time frame. And—consistent with voter data—that is compatible with relatively low levels of average individual rationality. I argue that democracy supports social rationality through its distinctive norms: maximizing opportunities for contestation across diverse groups, empowering those with the deepest knowledge of injustice to initiate incremental changes, and enabling robust deliberation.

In Chapter 7 (“Truth, Progress, and the Will of the People”) I reconcile the role of democracy in social progress with the traditional democratic notion of popular autonomy. It has often been thought that democracies determine their own moral requirements through the “will of the people,” expressed through the democratic process. But if the expressed popular will is always right, it’s hard to make sense of progress through “moral inquiry,” which seems to presuppose a standard of moral truth that stands outside of the democratic process. We can reconcile these two ideas, I suggest, by abandoning the idea that the moral truth is a fixed standard that we “track” in favor of the idea that we construct or achieve it through the reflective modification of our desires. This approach, in turn, helps us to understand how moral progress is compatible with the rampant moral disagreement we observe in democratic societies.

Chapter 8 (“What Is the Lesson of Donald Trump for Democracy?”) addresses the implications of contemporary populism for the prospects of democratic social progress. Are Trump, Orban, Bolsonaro, etc. evidence in favor of strong forms of technocratic or “epistocratic” reform? I argue that the answer is “no.” Epistocracy fails to accommodate the radically egalitarian nature of moral insight as detailed in Chapter 6. In focusing narrowly on the question of voter “competence,” it also mistakes to some degree the symptom of a problem for its cause. Thus, I survey a wide range of social science suggesting that voter incompetence is driven by partisan tribal motivations and that those motivations, in turn, are linked to increasing social segregation and status inequality. That point links with the book’s broader claim: progress involves improvements in our communal relationships and not just greater “competence.” At the end of the chapter, I survey three potential experiments in living which might lead to progress of that kind.