The Rise of Democracy

Hobson, Christopher

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INTRODUCTION

We obstinately hold to the language of democratic and liberal principles in order to preserve these principles – I believe that we are sincere – but it seems to me also that we speak this language in order to preserve the ideological shadow of our fraying dominance.

Pierre Manent (2014: 140–1)

The start – and end – for this study is the somewhat contradictory position democracy finds itself in early in the twenty-first century. A quarter-century after the collapse of communism, which signalled the end of the ‘long war’, democracy still remains without peer. Yet the rise of China, combined with Russia’s bullish behaviour and the problems of established democracies following the 2008 financial crisis, all point towards the weakening of the West’s ideational hegemony. If indeed the post-Cold War era is coming to an end, as some have suggested (Haas 2014), one sign of this might be democracy increasingly playing a less central role as a marker of state legitimacy. The latest Freedom House report ominously warns that ‘acceptance of democracy as the world’s dominant form of government – and of an international system built on democratic ideals – is under greater threat than at any point in the last 25 years’ (Freedom House 2015: 1). The liberal interregnum following the end of the Cold War may have come to an end, and the geopolitical environment has certainly become less hospitable for democracy, but this in itself does not portend crisis. On this point, Philippe Schmitter cautions against inflated claims about democracy’s decline, suggesting that ‘there is simply no plausible alternative in
sight, save for a few models (for example, Chinese meritocracy, Russian neo-Czarism, Arab monarchy, or Islamic theocracy) that are unlikely to appeal far beyond their borders’ (Schmitter 2015: 32). Democracy’s standing in the international order has undoubtedly weakened, but it still remains without a clear rival or alternative.

The greater danger to democracy might instead be one of default dominance slowly leading to death by a thousand cuts. One does not need to look very hard to identify serious political, economic and social problems that democracies, new and old, are struggling with. Reflecting on these trends, *The Economist* recently published an essay entitled ‘What’s gone wrong with democracy’ (note the lack of question mark) (Economist 2014b). Another clear example of this change of mood is the shift in Francis Fukuyama’s thinking: instead of celebrating the ‘end of history’, his latest work is focusing on political decay with a keen eye on the increasingly dysfunctional democracy of the United States (Fukuyama 2014b). From this perspective, democracy is less likely to suffer from a sudden implosion, but remains at risk of being steadily eroded and hollowed out, until one day what is left bears little resemblance to what we once understood ‘democracy’ to mean. In this regard, Thomas Meaney and Yascha Mounk warn that ‘the death of “democracy” will not be announced’, as politicians ‘will invoke the aura of democracy long after whatever substance it once contained has been lost’ (Meaney and Mounk 2014).

In this somewhat uncertain context, one of the assumptions underlying this book has been that gaining a more nuanced understanding of democracy’s historical development is necessary to better comprehend its current standing and future trajectory. Rather than summarise the preceding study, this final chapter will instead build on it to offer a normative defence of democracy. Before doing so, it is valuable to highlight four important conclusions that have emerged, which all indicate notable limitations or qualifications to democracy’s current ascendance. First, much of the conceptual and institutional architecture of contemporary democracy developed primarily in reaction to the *ancien régime*. Modern democracy was forged in response to a different set of political and social dilemmas to the ones we face today (Ankersmit 2002; Manin 1996; Urbinati 2006). As such, it is hardly surprising that a regime constructed from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century is now struggling to deal with the complex realities of globalisation.

Second, democracy is a much more recent and contingent
achievement than we might care to remember. The outcomes of both world wars were far from preordained, and with less fortune, the twentieth century could have been one that reaffirmed the longstanding criticisms of democracy as a dangerous, unstable and weak form of rule (Gat 2009: 7). It was only after the Second World War that stable democracies were finally established across continental Europe, and it was not until the 1960s that full civil rights were granted to all citizens in the United States and Australia. As Jeffrey Isaac reminds us,

it is a sobering thought that mature, functioning Western liberal democracy is of fairly recent vintage…. It is not so long ago that Europe lay in shambles, and the world was reeling from the experience of world war, Holocaust and totalitarian ascendancy. (Isaac 1998: 22–3)

Third, popular sovereignty and democracy developed in tandem with, and reinforced, the anarchical nature of international politics. Some of the revolutionaries who advocated popular doctrines sought to transcend a world of separate sovereign states, but ultimately the opposite happened, as the corollary of democratic self-determination has been state sovereignty and non-intervention. This was observed by Hans Morgenthau, who described it as a ‘tragic contradiction of Shakespearean dimensions’, in so far as the triumph of democracy ‘strengthened immensely the sovereignty of the state and with it the anarchical tendencies in international society’ (Morgenthau 1947: 63). This suggests that contemporary democracy is much more closely intertwined with the international realm than is sometimes appreciated.

Fourth, there has been a longstanding tension between, on the one hand, principles of sovereign equality grounded in self-determination, and on the other, standards of international legitimacy that tend to exert a homogenising influence. As Martin Wight remarks, there is a ‘dislike for the variety and complexity of international society’ (Wight 1972: 27), which means legitimacy principles gravitate toward certain forms of state. This has been reflected in the post-Cold War international order being one uniquely predisposed towards fostering democracy.

Collectively what these findings suggest is that democracy’s fortunes are closely tied to its past, and that the international sphere has played a central role in shaping its development. In this sense, adopting a
historically sensitive position encourages a more pluralist appreciation of contemporary democracy and its possibilities. This entails recognising both its empirical and its normative strengths, especially the manner in which it has offered a comparatively convincing answer to how different peoples should rule themselves in a world divided into separate states. While it may be fracturing and blurring, an anarchical society of states will most likely continue to survive for quite some time, in which case democracy – with all its flaws and limitations – remains very relevant. And by recognising that the agreement on democracy as something possible and desirable has been relatively brief historically, both humility and caution are promoted, in contrast to the overly optimistic and confident attitude that prevailed after 1989.

The account of democracy outlined here aims to chart a middle way between two unproductive extremes. On the one hand, excessive faith or overconfidence in democracy is unwarranted and potentially counterproductive. On the other hand, danger also lies in the increasing pessimism about democracy, as it risks misunderstanding the value and resilience of this form of rule. The approach taken here builds on Pierre Rosanvallon’s observation that it ‘is not simply a matter of saying democracy has a history. More radically, one must see that democracy is a history. It has been a work irreducibly involving exploration and experimentation, in its attempt to understand and elaborate itself’ (Rosanvallon 2006: 38; original emphasis). Recognising this can, in turn, facilitate agency by helping to make actors more cognisant that the current order, and democracy’s present place within it, is neither natural nor inevitable, but one that has been constructed over time. And as Friedrich Kratochwil explains, ‘precisely because we know that things could have been different, the more we deepen our understanding of the past, we begin to sense the opportunities forgone and thereby become aware of our own potential as agents’ (Kratochwil 2006: 8). This encourages an awareness of the possibility for challenging and changing existing power relationships and societal structures, which can have significant democratic consequences (Keane 2009: 875–80). In this regard, returning to democracy’s past is a way of demystifying it, a way of avoiding simplistic platitudes about its virtues or shallow scepticism bred by its shortcomings. This process generates a sense of humility founded in the incomplete and fragile nature of these achievements, and a recognition of democracy’s simple merits that make it worth fighting for and defending.
The historical and contemporary achievements of democracy certainly reflect the strength and value of this form of rule, but there has also been a huge amount of luck and fortune involved. The failure of its great historical rivals – fascism and communism – should not be equated with democracy’s triumph. The end of the Cold War was closer to a technical knockout than a clear-cut victory, as communism ultimately collapsed under the weight of its internal contradictions. While the communist alternative lasted much longer, it has been suggested that fascism posed a greater challenge, in so far as it was able to develop a much more efficient and effective political-economic system (Gat 2009: 2–8; Mazower 1998: xiii). As Michael Mann observes, ‘the simple explanation of fascism’s demise is that Hitler killed it…. Without Hitler’s Germany, fascism would have lasted much longer, and so would other European and Asian rightist despots’ (Mann 2012a: 344–5). This is not to deny the considerable strengths of democracy, but simply to make the necessary point that there has been nothing inevitable or natural about its recent ascendance.

While recognising the failings of democracy’s major ideological rivals and the historical contingency of its current positioning, it is important not to downplay the significant achievements of modern democracy. To date, democracy has offered the best answer to the question of how people should rule themselves. Combining pragmatic and principled reasons, Robert Dahl, one of the most influential democratic theorists of the twentieth century, summarises ten major desirable consequences of this form of rule: ‘(1) avoiding tyranny; (2) essential rights; (3) general freedom; (4) self-determination; (5) moral autonomy; (6) human development; (7) protecting essential personal interests; (8) political equality; (9) peace-seeking; (10) prosperity’ (Dahl 1998: 45). Certainly the extent to which really existing democracies provide these values differs drastically (Fukuyama 2014b; Fukuyama 2015). Nonetheless, on the whole, democracy has provided a greater
degree of freedom, equality, accountability and prosperity than its historical alternatives. In this regard, Mann completes his four-volume *magnum opus* by observing that ultimately democracy is ‘validated by its intrinsic political merits, for it creates more freedom, considerably more than state socialism or fascism’, which ‘were born in wars and … always bore the marks of violence’ (Mann 2012b: 418). A further feature that has distinguished democracy from its historical rivals has been its remarkable flexibility and ability for self-correction. This leads David Runciman to suggest that one of democracy’s great virtues has been its ability to muddle its way through, slowly but surely finding solutions to the different crises it has faced (Runciman 2013; Fukuyama 2014b). Democracies may regularly fail to live up the lofty ideals they are meant to embody, but on the whole, this regime type has proven capable of providing key political goods that people value.

These empirical and normative strengths lead Larry Diamond to caution against concluding ‘that the historical moment for democracy has passed’ (Diamond 2014: 11). It is remarkable that he must even assert this: in a relatively short space of time unbounding optimism has been replaced by an increasingly widespread pessimism. Certainly this is partly a corrective to the exuberance of the late 1980s and early 1990s. As Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way rightly note, ‘the global regime landscape looks darkened today because observers viewed the events of the initial post-Cold War period through rose-tinted glasses’ (Levitsky and Way 2015: 48). Yet it also connects to the way democracy has been understood and studied. In this regard, Jeffrey Isaac identifies a further reason for this growing disillusionment:

Much of the political science literature on democracy remains trapped in a discourse that is broadly positivistic and functionalist … Ironically, however, in its instrumentalism and its faith in the possibility of deploying political science to stabilize the instability of our political world by ‘engineering’ official responses to it, this literature tends to be rather overoptimistic, even naïve, about the possibility of … creating an orderly world of orderly liberal democratic states. (Isaac 1998: 5)

Excessive confidence can, in turn, create the conditions for disappointment and pessimism. This is arguably what can be witnessed now. Certainly democracy has important features in theory, and often
in practice, that give it value as a form of rule, and may recommend it over many other regime types. Yet these normative and empirical strengths can only partly account for democracy’s rise and widespread acceptance. Its current position is as much – if not more – thanks to fortuna than any unique virtues it possesses. To take one important example: in making the First World War for democracy, President Wilson put all his chips in and luckily the gamble paid off. Had the United States and the Entente Powers lost the war – which remained a realistic possibility at the start of 1918 – democracy’s role in the twentieth century would have likely looked drastically different. Likewise, by 1941 there were only a handful of democracies left in the world, as authoritarianism and totalitarianism appeared to represent the future. That democracy survived was due in large part to the remarkable resilience of the Soviets, which combined with the overwhelming material resources of the United States and the self-destructiveness of the Nazis to ensure the outcome of the Second World War. This leads Azar Gat to observe that

a more context-sensitive understanding of the past ought to inspire … a sense of awe, not only at the underlying trends of the historical drama, but also at its frailty and unfulfilled potentials, at the tremendous arbitrary forces and elements of chance that affect it. (Gat 2009: 181)

In this sense, returning to democracy’s past allows an appreciation of the fragility and the unlikely nature of its rise. And being more attuned to this uneven, contested and fraught history can cultivate a sense of humility about democracy’s current positioning and value.

Advocating humility is certainly meant as a corrective to the misplaced confidence, sometimes hubris, which has often prevailed when considering democracy in the post-Cold War world. It is more than this, however. It is a way of appreciating the resilience and value of democracy, while acknowledging how its fortunes have been shaped by the vicissitudes of history. Indeed, John Keane goes further in advocating the centrality of humility to democratic rule:

Humility is the cardinal democratic virtue … In a world of arrogance tinged with violence, humility emboldens. Unyielding, it gives individuals inner strength to act upon the world. It dislikes
hubris. It anticipates a more equal and tolerant – and less violent –
world. (Keane 2009: 856)

What Keane is suggesting is that humility is a source not of weakness,
but of strength. It represents a grounded awareness of the very real and
significant achievements of democracy, while also acknowledging its
failings and weaknesses. It is in this sense that Patrick Deneen reflects:
‘Democracy is not an undertaking for the faint of heart: it calls for lim-
itless reservoirs of hope against the retreat into easy optimism or the
temptation to a kind of democratic cynicism or despair’ (Deneen 2009:
12). This leads him to call for a form of ‘democratic realism’, which
defends ‘democracy not in the name of human potential for “perfect-
ibility” but rather on opposite grounds, namely, based on fundamen-
tal and inescapable human imperfection, insufficiency, and frailty’
(Deneen 2009: 191).

The most robust statement of the centrality of humility to democracy
comes from the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in The Children of
Light and the Children of Darkness, tellingly subtitled ‘a vindication of
democracy and a critique of its traditional defense’. Writing during the
Second World War, the lowest ebb in democracy’s modern history,
Niebuhr offered a particularly compelling account of democracy. In the
preface, he outlined a basic but powerful rationale for this form of rule:
‘man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s incli-
nation to injustice makes democracy necessary’ (Niebuhr 2011: xxxii).
In contrast to the rigidity of totalitarian doctrines, democracy must ulti-
mately be supported by a spirit of toleration and openness. Niebuhr’s
understanding of this was grounded in his faith, and is worth quoting
at length:

Democracy therefore requires something more than a religious
devotion to moral ideals. It requires religious humility. Every
absolute devotion to relative political ends (and all political ends
are relative) is a threat to communal peace…. Democratic life
requires a spirit of tolerant cooperation between individuals and
groups which can be achieved neither by moral cynics, who know
no law beyond their own interest, nor by moral idealists, who
acknowledge such a law but are unconscious of the corruption
which insinuates itself into the statement of it by even the most
disinterested idealists. (Niebuhr 2011: 151–2)
While humility is a virtue that has strong connections to Christian thought, I would differ with Niebuhr’s belief that it must be grounded in religious faith. It is possible to extract his more general observation about the role humility plays in charting a path between the Scylla of excessive optimism and the Charybdis of corrosive pessimism.

It might seem inappropriate to be calling for humility at a time when democracy is facing a growing array of serious challenges, and doubts about it are voiced with increasing regularity and tenacity. Some might suggest that instead its virtues should be loudly extolled. While the achievements of democracy are significant and should not be easily discounted, the strength of democracy ultimately – albeit perhaps paradoxically – comes from what it lacks: its inevitable imperfectibility, its constant incompleteness. This reflects democracy’s dual existence as a set of governing institutions and as an ideal, a vision of a society in which freedom and equality coexist. Put differently, democracy is both a means and an end, but it is an end that is never fully reached. In this regard, the leading democratisation scholar Guillermo O’Donnell reflects that ‘what is best and most distinctive about democracy’ is its ‘intrinsic mix of hope and dissatisfaction, its highlighting of a lack that will never be filled’ (O’Donnell 2007: 10–11). The gaps that define democracy – between the ideal and reality, the people and their representatives, power and accountability – will never be closed, but democracy is precisely about the ongoing attempts to reconcile these tensions and minimise such shortcomings.

In Jacques Derrida’s words, democracy is ‘always to come’, it ‘must have the structure of a promise’ (Derrida 2005: 85–6). This thought can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who observed: ‘If we take the term in the strict sense, there never has been a real democracy, and there never will be’ (Rousseau 1923: ch. 6). Yet democracy is not for the gods, rather it is a thoroughly human method of rule. Appreciating the humanity of democracy – with all its inadequacies and contradictions – is necessary to better understand its strengths and weaknesses. The flaws and limitations of democracy accurately reflect the flaws and limitations of people, but they also reveal their vision and belief, both as individuals and as members of a collective. The lure of fascism and communism may have partly been in their promises of overcoming the frustrations and failings of democracy, but such plans for perfection cannot be squared with the flawed reality of humans. This is what democracy, in all its ugly beauty, represents and conveys.
Adam Michnik, the former Polish dissident, explains that democracy ‘is a world of clashing viewpoints, fragmentary and conflicting interests where the overriding colour is grey. It’s an endless search for compromise, eternal imperfection … Democracy does not claim infallibility’ (quoted in Demenet 2001: 48). Since re-emerging in the eighteenth century democracy has been founded on an idea that has been revolutionary but also reflects a simple truth of human existence: it is a form of rule that is created by people and for people. God, providence, monarchs or history do not give this community its ultimate meaning or justification; the people do that themselves.

A DIFFERENT FORM OF DEMOCRACY SUPPORT

So what would adopting a humble approach to democracy actually entail, especially when understood in the context of international relations? For starters, it means actively engaging with its normative dimensions. On one level, this might seem like a rather obvious, even unnecessary, injunction. Yet the ideational dominance of democracy in the post-Cold War world has, in a strange way, actually resulted in a weakening of its normative defences. As Patrick Deneen avers, underpinning much contemporary work on democracy is an unacknowledged, transcendental belief in its value and virtue. He suggests that ‘accompanying the ascendancy of democracy in the present age is an increasing inability to recognize, much less examine, presuppositions that undergird democratic faith precisely because it is rarely recognized as a form of faith’ (Deneen 2009: 5–6; original emphasis). Given that democracy’s hegemony is becoming more brittle, it is necessary to explicitly reconsider its value and restate why it should be defended. For, as Jeffrey Isaac notes, ‘however much it remains an aspiration not yet achieved in many parts of the world, it also increasingly rings hollow as a repository of utopian impulses or as a meaningful vehicle of self-government’ (Isaac 1998: 11). With that in mind, this section briefly sketches out a different form of democracy support.

Humility is necessary when viewing attempts at democratisation, appreciating what an incredibly difficult and fraught process political change unavoidably is. The frustration and impatience with the uneven and incomplete nature of the third wave of democratisation, as well as disappointment with the inconclusive direction of the Arab Spring, is based on a superficial reading of how democracy successfully
developed elsewhere. As Samuel Huntington observes, each wave of democratisation has been followed by a reverse wave in which some countries revert to non-democratic rule (Huntington 1993: 13–26). Failed attempts at democratisation and the return of authoritarian regimes are hardly new phenomena, and should not be unexpected. Adopting a longer-term perspective, one more attuned to the vicissitudes of political change, is especially important for considering the Arab Spring. What is remarkable is that despite that movement being named in reference to Europe’s ‘springtime of the peoples’, many seem to forget that the immediate consequences of the 1848 revolutions were thoroughly disappointing from the perspective of democracy. The revolutions, as we saw in Chapter 5, failed in the short term, but in the longer term they were a crucial step towards popular rule. For many of the countries involved, however, it was not until a century later – following two great wars – that stable democracies were finally established. In the case of Germany, it went through the failure of Weimar democracy and the horrible experiment with fascism before stable democratic government finally emerged.

Thus, when considering the uneven manner in which the Arab Spring has unfolded, it is important to recognise that these political transitions will almost certainly be slow, uncertain and not unidirectional. As Sheri Berman notes, those criticising the course of events in the region ‘set absurdly high benchmarks for success, ones that lack any historical perspective’, failing to appreciate that ‘stable liberal democracy usually emerges only at the end of long, often violent struggles, with many twists, turns, false starts, and detours’ (Berman 2013: 66). As noted, a distinguishing feature of the history of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the gradual, incomplete and frequently violent transitions towards popular rule. Given that it took the West hundreds of years – and considerable bloodletting – to successfully establish stable liberal democracies, it is unrealistic to expect these same processes to happen in a smooth and speedy manner elsewhere.

Appreciating the difficult, uneven nature of democratisation and the challenges involved with maintaining democracy is very relevant when thinking about democracy promotion. This was observed by Václav Havel, who noted ‘the limited ability of today’s democratic world to step beyond its own shadow’. In this regard, a defining feature of democracy promotion practice has been the unquestioned
assumption that liberal democracy should be the end point of political change (C. Hobson and Kurki 2011). Havel further explained that

as a consequence, democracy is seen less and less as an open system that is best able to respond to people’s basic needs – that is, as a set of possibilities that continually must be sought, redefined, and brought into being. Instead, democracy is seen as something given, finished, and complete as is, something that can be exported like cars or television sets, something that the more enlightened purchase and the less enlightened do not. (Havel 1995: 7)

The fallacy of regarding democracy as simply a set of institutions that can be transferred and installed was especially evident in the failed attempts to bring it to Afghanistan and Iraq.

Reflecting the ideational strength of democracy since the end of the Cold War, democracy promotion has been premised on a belief in the superiority of liberal democracy, and that target states desire this form of government. In this regard, there is a danger of generalising from the ‘velvet revolutions’, which were defined by their ‘anti-utopian, or at the very least non-utopian’ nature (Garton Ash 2009). After half a century of collective experimentation with real-world communism, there was little appetite for further social engineering. There was widespread consensus over the desirability of the liberal democratic model of the West, which was associated with individual freedom and prosperity. As Ivan Krastev observes, following the Cold War ‘the politics of “normalization” replaced deliberation with imitation’ (Krastev 2010: 117). Yet the experience of the velvet revolutions is closer to the exception than the rule. One cannot assume that political change will naturally be directed towards liberal democracy. As Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way note, ‘although the collapse of a dictatorship creates opportunities for democratization, there are no theoretical or empirical bases for assuming such an outcome. Yet that is exactly what many observers did in the 1990s’ (Levitsky and Way 2015: 48–9). Furthermore, the strong performance of China, combined with the troubles the United States and Europe have been experiencing, means the ideological climate today is much less favourable to democracy compared with the early 1990s. On this point, Thomas Carothers recently stated:
Some Western aid practitioners … seem startlingly unaware of just how damaged Western models have become in the eyes of others and how much democracy aid needs to be built on far more modest assumptions about the relative appeal of Western democracy. (Carothers 2015: 72)

In this sense, a more humble approach would be one that starts from the assumption that political change does not necessarily mean democratisation, but when it does occur, a desire for democracy does not necessarily mean a preference for the specific liberal democratic model found in the West.

Another notable feature of democracy promotion practice has been its remarkably undemocratic flavour: it has tended to proceed in a hierarchical, unidirectional manner. Adopting a more humble approach, one that views democracy as an ongoing process, suggests a more dialogic, two-way approach to democracy promotion, centred on mutual learning and exploration between the actors involved, as opposed to a hierarchical relationship between donor and recipient (C. Hobson and Kurki 2011). In this regard, there have been notable innovations that have emerged from democratising countries which established democracies could learn from. Madeline Albright famously described democracy promotion as not only ‘the right thing to do. It is also the smart thing’ (Albright 1998). This is representative of the typical liberal argument that promoting democracy is in the interests of the United States because it will lead to greater interstate peace, cooperation, protection of individual rights and so on. Yet these arguments – mistakenly grounded in an excessive confidence in American democracy – miss a much more fundamental way in which democracy promotion can serve US interests. A more open, dialogic approach would not only help the cause of democracy abroad, it could also help strengthen it at home. This could be especially relevant if US democracy is indeed in ‘crisis’ or ‘decaying’, as prominent commentators such as Fareed Zakaria and Francis Fukuyama have recently suggested (Fukuyama 2014b; Zakaria 2013). From this perspective, reshaping democracy promotion practices goes hand in hand with strengthening democracy at home.

Humility is also needed in the way we study democracy. This suggests a drastically different ethos from the one that has underpinned much liberal scholarship in the post-Cold War period. Flush with confidence in their finding that the ‘absence of war between democracies
[is] as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations’ (Levy 1988: 662), democratic peace proponents spent much of the 1990s pronouncing the relevance and importance of their conclusions for foreign policy. Yet as Anna Geis and Harald Müller point out, ‘studies on the separate democratic peace abound and have been celebrated as a rare example of a progressive research programme in International Relations, whereas complementary research on the external use of force by democracies has remained comparatively scarce’ (Geis and Müller 2013: 5–6). Not only was much less time spent on the darker side of democratic peace, little effort was expended on seriously considering what would happen to their ideas if taken up by political actors. And so when the Bush administration and the neo-conservatives adopted and politicised the core findings of democratic peace research, its proponents lacked the political and normative resources to challenge this politicisation (C. Hobson 2011; Ish-Shalom 2013). Certainly these scholars are not completely responsible for the way their probabilistic and cautious claims were transmogrified into a motivation and justification for US adventurism in the Middle East (C. Hobson et al. 2011). Nonetheless, given that these findings were reached by political scientists, they should have been much more cognisant of how their scholarship might be appropriated for other ends.

Treating the significance of democratic peace research findings with caution is warranted given that it represents a limited, incomplete and only partly explainable phenomenon. While appreciating the strong correlation that has existed between stable, liberal democracies and interstate peace since the Second World War, proponents have still failed to convincingly demonstrate that it is democracy which causes this outcome (Levy 2011; Rosato 2003). In pointing to a wide range of additional factors that have contributed to the increasing pacification of democracies, Azar Gat suggests that ‘a far more complex causal process has been at work than a simple relationship between an independent variable, liberal democracy, and a dependent one, democratic peace’ (Gat 2009: 111). Even if it is possible through using rigorous social scientific methods to separate these different factors and isolate democracy as the sole cause, it does not promise that the situation will continue in the future. In this regard, the methods adopted actually restrict exploring how democracy may undergo more complex changes than simply becoming more or less democratic according to the Polity scale.
These methodological choices mean that mainstream democratic peace scholarship may show a detailed awareness of how democracy’s institutions operate, while lacking a deeper awareness of what gives democracy meaning and vitality in the first place. The resulting outcome is rather odd: this considerable body of work related to democracy actually has very little to say about its substance or ethical value. As Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen notes, ‘though democratic peace theorists discuss endlessly the democratic nature of different societies (for example Wilhelmine Germany), they rarely discuss how democracy itself could be better and how making democracy better could make the world more cosmopolitan and more peaceful’ (Rasmussen 2003: 185–6). Related to this point, while this scholarship is aware of threats to the zone of peace from outsiders, there is little consideration of internal threats that also exist.

An unsaid assumption underlying most scholarship is that while there might be some backsliding at the edges, the key states that constitute the democratic zone of peace will remain at peace and remain democratic. Not only does such a linear conception of history clash with democracy’s much more uneven past, it fails to account for the possibility that democracy may disappear, be undermined or undergo great change. By avoiding normative and historical reflection, mainstream democratic peace scholarship lacks the resources to be able to properly assess such issues. This should both encourage a broadening of the research agenda and counsel caution in the claims being made: a humble appreciation not only of democracy, but also of our ability to understand it.

CONCLUSION

The future of democracy and its flourishing will depend decisively on our capacity to imagine a more capacious rather than constricted view of its possibilities and also of its fragilities.

Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (2007: 2)

Shortly after the First World War, another moment when democracy was in the ascent, James Bryce reflected on whether democracy represents the ‘final form’ of human government, concluding that, ‘whatever else history teaches, it gives no ground for expecting finality in any human institutions’ (Bryce 1921b: 656). These words hold true:
democracy is an incomplete and imperfect system that humans have devised for ruling themselves. History suggests there is little inevitable about the present importance attached to democracy or the manner in which it is practised. Nonetheless, while democratic government might regularly fail to live up to the high ideals associated with it, on the whole it has proven capable of providing a greater degree of freedom, safety and prosperity to people than its historical alternatives. In this regard, John Dunn observes in depreciating fashion that ‘no one could readily mistake it [democracy] for a solution to the Riddle of History. But, in its simple unpretentious way, it has by now established a clear claim to meet a global need better than any of its competitors’ (Dunn 2005: 183). That democracy now finds itself without peer competitors owes much to the internal contradictions and failings of its great rivals – communism and fascism – but separate from this, it is important to appreciate that democracy has positively demonstrated its value through providing important political, economic and social goods.

As this study has shown, the fate of democracy has been closely intertwined with the development of the modern states system. Revolution and war have been vital in determining democracy’s fortunes. By focusing almost exclusively on the relationship between democracy and peace, liberal scholarship overlooks the extent to which war has shaped the rise of modern democracy, creating the conditions that have made a democratic peace possible. Furthermore, the limited concern with understanding the way democracy and war interrelate has left most democratic peace scholarship with little to say about the consequences of the belligerence of the United States and its democratic allies in recent years. In tackling this issue democratic peace scholars would be well advised to return to the concerns of America’s founding fathers that ‘no nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare’ (Madison 1795). In this regard, the understanding of democracy presented in this book might jar with much contemporary IR scholarship; this is quite intentional. The topic of democracy has effectively been monopolised by liberal scholars to the detriment of our understanding. On this point, this book has been inspired by Reinhold Niebuhr’s observation that ‘the consistent optimism of our liberal culture has prevented modern democratic societies both from gauging the perils of freedom accurately and from appreciating democracy fully as the only alternative to injustice and oppression’ (Niebuhr 2011: xxxiii). This study has consciously sought to develop an alternative way
of understanding democracy and international relations, and in doing so, offer a substantive contribution to the emerging body of critical democratic peace scholarship.

Democracy’s current meaning and shape bear the scars of a long, varied and tumultuous history. Its ascent from obscurity and ignominy to becoming a key marker of international legitimacy is both remarkable and humbling. The present form and future possibilities of democracy are partly structured, but not determined, by this past. And by being more attuned to democracy’s uneven, contested and fraught trajectory, one can cultivate a sense of humility and cautious appreciation of its strengths. As Frank Ankersmit notes, history suggests that ‘democracy is a far more subtle, sophisticated, and therefore also a far more vulnerable political system than we tend to believe’ (Ankersmit 2002: 230–1). While past and present successes may provide a degree of hope, the antinomies, limits and complexities that mark democracy suggest humility, counselling an awareness of the contingency and potential impermanence of its present normative and political ascendancy. By foregrounding the fact that democracy’s meaning and the value now attached to it are neither determined nor fixed, an alternative vision is forged, one explicitly more open and political. It reminds us that democracy is inevitably incomplete: the tensions, contradictions and inadequacies can sometimes be resolved, narrowed or managed, but they can never be fully overcome. Indeed, if democracy is always still ‘to come’, if it exists in an inevitably incomplete form, strictly speaking it is more appropriate to talk of democratisation than democracy. This is what leads Adam Michnik to recall the Greek myth of Sisyphus when explaining democracy: an endless struggle towards an unreachable end (Demenet 2001). There will always be a gap between democracy as an ideal and democracy as a reality. In turn, this should create motivation for further developing and expanding democracy, while also generating a profound sense of humility in pursuing this challenging task. Ultimately if we value democracy, and there are important reasons for doing so, we should not take it as fixed or a given but constantly seek to explore, confront and renovate what it means.