

The Tampere Lecture 2008



## Democracy: A Nightmare or a Noble Dream?

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'For our government is not copied from those of our neighbours: we are an example to them rather than they to us. Our constitution is named a democracy, because it is in the hands not of the few but of the many ... we differ from other states in regarding the man who holds himself aloof from public life not as "quiet" but as useless; we decide or debate carefully and in person, all matters of policy, holding, not that words and deeds go ill together, but that acts are foredoomed to failure when undertaken undiscussed'. (Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War* Book II, 37, 40).

These words, written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and taken from Book II of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, constitute one of the earliest, most eloquent, and most famous defences of democracy – the defence offered by the great political leader, Pericles, in his funeral oration delivered at the end of the first year of the war against Sparta. Pericles spoke in honour of those soldiers who had died defending Athens and her values, and he was addressing those soldiers who would themselves soon be called upon to risk their lives for their city and for its democracy – for government by the many and not the few.

The scene shifts from ancient Athens to 19<sup>th</sup> century America and to Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address – a speech which has been compared with Pericles' funeral oration in both tone and content. Speaking, as Pericles did, in honour of the fallen, Lincoln concluded:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us...that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

For both Pericles and Lincoln the appeal to democracy has not only a factual but also an evaluative dimension: as a matter of fact, democracy is that form of government by and through which the people (the many) rule, and as a matter of evaluation, it is something to be proud of and indeed something worth dying for. Democracy is not simply the name

of a particular kind of government, it is, for both Pericles and Lincoln, the name of the best kind of government.

Nor are Pericles and Lincoln alone. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of communism in central and eastern Europe were celebrated as triumphs of and for democracy; the invasion of Iraq and the bombing of Baghdad were justified in the name of democracy; while condemnation of the recent Zimbabwe elections rests heavily on their anti-democratic character. Indeed, accusations of acting undemocratically are amongst the most damning in the modern world and people will go to considerable lengths to deny that they are guilty of behaving undemocratically. So, Robert Mugabe does not defend his actions by contesting the legitimacy of democratic government; on the contrary, he insists that his government is the democratically elected one. We may not believe him, but that simply reinforces the point that for us, now, democracy is not just the name for a particular kind of government (government by the people); it is, or is spoken of, as the only legitimate and morally defensible kind of government. It is, in short, a noble dream.

But it was not ever thus. Although Pericles heaped praise upon Athenian democracy, Plato famously (or notoriously) had no time for it at all, and in an early dialogue - *Protagoras* - he has Socrates reflect on the fact that, in democracies, the work of governing is done by amateurs. Socrates says: 'if the State is faced with some building project, I observe that the architects are sent for and consulted about the proposed structures, and when it is a matter of shipbuilding the naval designers, and so on with everything the Assembly regards as a subject for learning and teaching ... But when it is something to do with the government of the country that is to be debated, the man who gets up to advise them may be a builder or equally well a blacksmith or a shoemaker, merchant or ship-owner, rich or poor, of good family or none. No-one brings it up against any of these .... that here is a man who, without any technical qualifications ... is yet trying to give advice.'

Plato's reservations about democracy - in particular his concern that rule by the people means rule by the uninformed - survived the centuries and surfaced again in de Tocqueville's 1836 work, *Democracy in America*, and yet again in John Stuart Mill's 1859 essay, *On Liberty*. Despite being a political radical and a vigorous proponent of female suffrage, Mill was in no doubt that democracy harboured dangers, and that chief amongst them was the danger of mediocrity. He wrote: 'No government by democracy or a numerous aristocracy, either in its political acts or in the opinions, qualities, and tone of mind which it fosters,

ever did nor could rise above mediocrity except in so far as the sovereign many have let themselves be guided by the counsels and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed One or Few'. And he went on to make specific recommendations to the effect that the highly educated should have more than one vote, while the illiterate and those who paid no taxes should have no vote at all. A world in which political power lies with the people – the uneducated, illiterate, poor – is, for Mill, more a nightmare than a noble dream. And it is a nightmare because, under democracy so construed there is a danger that mediocrity will triumph and will make progress and improvement exceedingly difficult if not impossible.

Here, then, are two faces of democracy: although nowadays enthusiasm for democracy is almost universal and almost unbounded, and although there are few now who are prepared to declare publicly their rejection of it, historically democracy has had a much more mixed reputation: it has been perceived both as a nightmare and as a noble dream.

In this lecture, my aim is to say something about why and how democracy has had such a very mixed reputation. The reasons for this are of course, many and various, and it would be quite impossible to cover all the ground in a single lecture – or even in a single lifetime. I will therefore focus on one reason or set of reasons for this varied reputation – reasons which are connected to our wider theme over the next few days – the theme of democracy and social progress. What I want to suggest is, first, that democracy's reputation as a nightmare can be traced, in part, to its connection with social progress and, second, that democracy's reputation as a noble dream can also be traced, in part, to its connection with social progress. So, somewhat oddly, perhaps, if we want to know (as I do) why democracy has been thought of as both a nightmare and a noble dream, we must look in the same direction – we must look to the ways in which democracy and progress have been associated with one another both historically and conceptually.

First, then, a bit more about the two key terms – 'democracy' and 'progress'.

## **I. Democracy**

So far, I have simply noted that democracy has a 'patchy' reputation and that it has been praised and despised in fairly equal measure. I have also noted (through the opening quotations from Thucydides' Pericles and from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address) the general understanding of

democracy as government by the people themselves. Of course, in ancient Athens, government by the people themselves was attained in a fairly full and direct way: as Pericles tells us, in Athens the citizens gathered together to debate and decide on the important issues of the day<sup>1</sup>. They met frequently, took their turn in holding public office, contributed to political debate, and made significant political decisions. In short, the citizens really did govern themselves, and they did so to a degree which is quite astonishing from our standpoint in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For us, democracy is (and probably must be) realized in a much more indirect way: we do not, on the whole, meet to debate and decide; we do not take politically significant decisions on the basis of nation-wide discussion, nor do we, as ordinary citizens, hold public office. Democracy for us is much more 'indirect' and citizenship is much more 'passive'. To put the point provocatively, unlike the ancient Athenians, we do not rule ourselves, we simply (and at best) choose the people who rule us.

This difference between democracy then and democracy now is, of course, hugely significant and it raises questions about whether modern democracies are genuinely democracies at all. Thus, in his book, *Setting the People Free*, the political philosopher John Dunn notes that: 'what is special about democracy's agenda is its assertion that in the end it must be the people that decides what is to be done ... the central challenge [for democracies now] is to show the ruled that the authority which confronts them simply is their own; that it is their will that stands behind it, and their interests which it is compelled in the end to serve' (pp.135, 142). And the clear implication of Dunn's comment is that, while the challenge could be met in ancient Athens, it cannot be met now.

Democracy, anyway, is essentially a matter of rule by the people. Whether it is a good thing or a bad thing (a nightmare or a noble dream) is a moot point, and whether it is even possible in large modern societies such as Britain or the United States is also moot. Some have suggested that the rapid growth of new technology (of television voting, for instance) might facilitate a greater democratization of society, but this claim has been doubted and, even if it were possible, it is certainly not the way things work at the moment. Similarly, proponents of deliberative democracy place great store by the possibility of reviving public discussion and active citizenship but, again, even if this were both possible and desirable, it is not the normal way of proceeding in modern,

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<sup>1</sup> It must, of course, be noted that not all adult members of the society were citizens. So even though Athens was indeed a democracy, the status of citizen was not accorded to all.

democratic societies.

Crucially then, democracy is that form of government by and through which the people rule themselves. And a democratic society is one in which ‘the authority which confronts [the people] simply is their own’. This is the specification of both the nightmare and the noble dream. Democracy is rule by the rabble – and that is the nightmare; it is also a way in which we can govern ourselves, and that is the noble dream. So much for ‘democracy’, what now of our second key term, ‘progress’?

## II. Progress

It might be thought that, even if democracy is a complex and difficult idea<sup>2</sup>, progress is altogether simpler. It is, the dictionary tells us, a matter of advancement, improvement, or development. And, so described, we are all familiar with the idea of progress in science, in medicine and in mathematics. We no longer rely on candles for illumination, nor on tonic water to ward off malaria, nor on horse-drawn carriages for transportation. In all these areas there has, fairly uncontroversially, been progress. But if progress is a comparatively straightforward concept in science, medicine, and mathematics, it is much more problematic when applied to fields such as art, literature, and music. We may, of course, think that some novels are better than others (*Pride and Prejudice* is a better novel than *Bridget Jones’s Diary*), or that one piece of music is superior to another (Bach’s *Double Violin Concerto* is superior to Cole Porter’s *Anything Goes*), but in these areas of human activity the idea of progress does not have application in quite the same straightforward way as it seems to in science. It would, for instance, be odd - and very contentious - to describe the development of tragic drama from Shakespeare to Arthur Miller as a matter of progress, or to think of Dostoyevsky as a primitive novelist by comparison with (say) Philip Roth or John Updike. To make the point yet more starkly, it would be, and was, highly inflammatory to say - as Saul Bellow is reputed to have done – ‘when the Zulus produce a Tolstoy, we will read him’ (I will return to this example later in the lecture).

And in the area of the ethical, too, the concept of progress has doubtful and contested application. Thus, the late Bernard Williams notes the temptation to suppose that in morality there are only three possibilities – either other societies are better than us, or they are worse than us, or they are about the same as us. Against this, he suggests that it may be more appropriate to compare our ethical world with, for example, the

<sup>2</sup> What W B Gallie referred to as an ‘essentially contested concept’.

ethical world of ancient Greece, without making progressivist claims at all. As he puts it: ‘it is one question whether we are to understand the history of ethical conceptions from the ancient world to modernity as a story of development, evolution and so forth, the outcome of which is that our conceptions are more sophisticated and complex replacements for those of the Greeks. It is another matter to distribute admiration between them’ (*Shame and Necessity*, p. 8).

In short, progress is a concept whose application is neither simple nor universally agreed upon. Intuitively, it finds its most natural home in science, mathematics, and medicine; seems much less apposite in the areas of drama, literature, and music; and has a very vexed and disputed application to ethical questions. But if literary, artistic and ethical progress are vexed, what about social progress? How are we to understand this concept and (to recall my central theme) how, if at all, can appeal to social progress help to explain the reputation of democracy as both a nightmare and a noble dream?

In an article entitled ‘Needs and Wants: What is Social Progress and How is it to be Measured?’ Lars Osberg notes that ‘it is a natural condition of a free democratic culture that a plurality of conceptions of the good is pursued by its citizens’ and he goes on to suggest that in this sort of society (our sort of society) ‘social progress must be measured in the “enabling” sense that a society progresses when it enables more of its citizens to choose the kind of life they personally have reason to value’ (p. 25). And of course it is one of the background assumptions that, in societies such as ours, different people will predictably and properly find different kinds of lives valuable. So, on this understanding, social progress is not, so to speak, unitary. It is not a matter of getting the uniquely correct answer to a long-standing problem, as it might be in mathematics or in science. Rather, it is matter of creating the social circumstances in which different people can lead different kinds of lives.

Now at one level, this understanding of social progress is unobjectionable: if we think of societies in which most people live below the poverty line, have low life expectation, and are doomed to spend much of their daily lives scratching a living for themselves and their families, then it is (I take it) fairly clear that (almost) anything which, in Osberg’s words, enables them to ‘choose the kind of life they personally have reason to value’ could, fairly uncontroversially, constitute social progress<sup>3</sup>. Simi-

<sup>3</sup> A great deal of the literature on capabilities pursues this line of thinking. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, and Amartya Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities*.

larly, though rather less dramatically, societies which reject religious intolerance (for example) and guarantee freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and freedom of association may be said to have made progress in precisely the way referred to by Osberg: they enable citizens to live the kind of life they personally have reason to value.

However, an understanding of social progress as enabling in this way is not without its difficulties and these difficulties come to the fore when we reflect on Osberg's initial statement 'it is a natural condition of a free democratic culture that a plurality of conceptions of the good is pursued by its citizens'. Whereas progress in science is normally associated with convergence, social progress as Osberg describes it is premised on the persistence of divergence or on what John Rawls calls 'the permanence of pluralism'. It is a matter of enabling people to lead the kinds of lives they personally find valuable, and to do so in the sure and certain knowledge that different people will find very different kinds of lives valuable. Social progress secures divergence, not convergence. It recognizes and responds to the fact that people are different and that they will find satisfaction in different kinds of lives. The predictability and importance of variety was, of course, very eloquently expressed by John Stuart Mill when wrote:

There is no reason that all human existence should be constructed on some one or some small number of patterns. If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode. Human beings are not like sheep; and even sheep are not undistinguishably alike. A man cannot get a coat or a pair of boots to fit him unless they are either made to his measure or he has a whole warehouseful to choose from; and is it easier to fit him with a life than with a coat, or are human beings more like one another in their whole physical and spiritual conformation than in the shape of their feet? (*On Liberty*, pp.132-3)

Here we find the classic defence of what Mill calls individuality – of the importance of allowing each person to choose the mode of life which suits him (or her) best. Much has of course been written about the problems that arise in societies where people make different and conflicting choices, and indeed John Rawls goes so far as to say that this problem – the problem of how we can live together given that we have very different ideas about the best way to live – is the single most

important problem for modern western liberal societies<sup>4</sup>.

However, my interest is a rather different one. My title is 'Democracy: A Nightmare or a Noble Dream?', and I began by noting that, although we now take democracy to be an almost unalloyed good, and although people will now go to great lengths to avoid allegations of acting undemocratically, it was not always this way. For extended periods, up to and including the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, democracy was treated with great suspicion and was thought to be a foolish way to govern – it was a nightmare and not a noble dream. Against this background, my central question is 'why has democracy been thought of as both a nightmare and a noble dream?' and I have indicated that my answer involves reference to progress. It is democracy's association with social progress that accounts, in some part, for its varied reputation. Or so I claim. So, I now need to say something about how and why appeal to social progress might make democracy a nightmare, and then I need to say something about how and why appeal to social progress might make democracy a noble dream. In both cases, I am taking democracy to be a matter of rule by the people themselves, and in both cases I am taking social progress to be a matter of enabling people to lead the kinds of lives that they personally find valuable. First, the nightmare; then, the noble dream.

### III. The Nightmare

I have already given some reasons for thinking of democracy as a nightmare: Plato had grave doubts about it because it elevated the ignorant amateur to a position of authority, and Mill was similarly concerned about the extent to which democratic arrangements would stifle individuality and lead to mediocrity. More specifically, Mill's fear was that democracy would inhibit progress, and indeed he went so far as to urge that democracy would only be an appropriate form of government in societies which had already reached a sufficient level of 'maturity'. Thus, (rather shockingly, perhaps) he wrote: 'despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement and the means justified by actually effecting that end'.

In short, then, and for Mill, democracy is, if not quite a nightmare, at least a very dangerous form of political organization, and it is so for two

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<sup>4</sup> See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. xviii where he identifies the question for political liberalism as 'how is it possible that there may exist over time a stable and just society of free and equal citizens profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical and moral doctrines?'

distinct reasons, both of which are connected to the possibility of social progress. In the first place, it is dangerous because it threatens to give too much power to the ignorant and unimaginative, who will stifle the creativity of those 'eccentric' individuals in whose hands alone progress is possible. Second, and for the very same reason, it is not an appropriate form of government in 'immature', backward or uncivilized societies. Along with many other Victorian thinkers, Mill believed progress to be hugely important, and he feared that, unless handled with great caution, democracy would jeopardize progress. On his account, then, the relationship between democracy and social progress is quite the reverse of what we might initially imagine or hope for. It is not the case that democracy will foster social progress; on the contrary, it will jeopardize social progress and, for that reason, social progress must be secured before the world will be, as it were, safe for democracy.

#### **IV. The Noble Dream**

How, then, is the reputation of democracy as noble dream associated with progress? The answer (my answer, anyway) takes us back to the definitions of the two key terms: democracy and progress. In discussing progress I noted that it is often thought of as having application primarily in science, and I also mentioned the apparent oddity of taking a 'progressivist' view of ethics or of literature, for example. We live now in multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-faith societies – societies which are characterized by great diversity of opinion and lifestyle, and where it often seems at best insensitive and at worst positively racist to refer to one's own way of life as an advance on those of other groups. Hence, I take it, the outrage that followed Bellow's alleged pronouncement that 'when the Zulus produce a Tolstoy, we will read him'. Hence, too, the proposal that when we refer to social progress, it should be in an enabling sense – that is to say, we should see social progress as a matter of facilitating diversity not a matter of aspiring to unity. Or should we?

The conviction that social progress is either impossible or is a matter of enabling diversity strikes me as mistaken and, in particular, as neglectful of the real achievements of democratic societies and of the real - and important - values that inform them. To explain this, let me return to someone I have mentioned already – Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was, of course, the Great Emancipator. It was he who issued the Emancipation Proclamation on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1863 in which the slaves of the Confederacy were declared forever free. And it was he who delivered the Gettysburg

Address to a society which had long been committed, through its laws, to the legitimacy of black slavery. When Lincoln called upon the living to continue the work begun by those who had fallen in battle, he was conscious that democracy - government of the people, by the people, and for the people - included, or should include, those who had so recently had the status, not of citizens, but of slaves. 'The people' included, or should include, the black people.

One hundred and thirty years later, in 1993, John Rawls published a book called *Political Liberalism*, and in the opening pages of that book he identified the rejection of slavery as a 'settled conviction'. He wrote 'slavery, which caused our Civil War, is rejected as inherently unjust, and however much the aftermath of slavery may persist in social policies and unavowed attitudes, no-one is willing to defend it' (p.8). In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the belief that 'the people' should include black as well as white people was the occasion of a long, bloody, and acrimonious war. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, this belief had become a 'settled conviction' - something which no-one would openly deny or reject.

Now this, it seems to me, is progress. Moreover, it is democratic progress just in the sense that the values which inform it are democratic values. The transition from a society in which black people were enslaved and women denied the suffrage, to a society in which every voice has a right to be heard, is a democratic transition. Those who are critical of modern democracies tend to focus on the difficulty of ensuring that the people's will is actually reflected in the decisions of government. Hence John Dunn's comment: 'the central challenge (for democracy) is to show the ruled that the authority which confronts them simply is their own; that it is their will that stands behind it and their interests which it is compelled in the end to serve'. It is, I think, true that this is the central challenge for modern democracies, but the fact that it is the central challenge is itself a mark of progress not (as is often claimed) an indication of how far we have fallen from the original, Athenian, ideal.

When Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address many would have denied that it was at all necessary to show black people or women that the authority which confronted them was their own. Many people were completely clear that justification needed to be offered only to white men, and probably only to a sub-set of them. Now, the belief that they (we), too, must be offered justification and explanation is a 'settled conviction'. Something that no-one would openly deny. It is perhaps a tribute to the success of democracy, understood in this way, that we do not often think of it as an achievement, but it is (and was) a very signifi-

cant achievement, as Lincoln knew full well, and as his contemporary, John Stuart Mill, also knew through his involvement with the women's suffrage movement.

## V. Conclusion

My focus in this lecture has been on the varied reputation of democracy and, in particular, on its reputation as nightmare, on the one hand, and noble dream on the other. My suggestion has been that both reputations are, in part, attributable to the perceived relationship between democracy and progress. Those who feared democracy were concerned that, if realized, it would be nothing other than the tyranny of the majority and would lead to mediocrity and the suffocation of progress; while those who admired democracy felt that, insofar as it could facilitate progress, that would not be progress in the 'full blooded' sense of the word, but only a kind of progress that enabled people to lead their diverse and conflicting lives in their own way. Against this, I have suggested that there is a clear connection between democracy and social progress. We, now, live in societies which at least aim to take every one into account and to listen to every voice. Of course we fail in that ambition. But there can be progress even in failure. In his poem *The Hollow Men* T S Eliot wrote:

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion and the act

Falls the shadow

This can of course be read pessimistically – as a statement of how difficult it is to attain what we aspire to. But it can also be read optimistically: even if the noble dream is not attained, it is, nonetheless, noble. And we should take comfort from that fact. Those before us who were the dreamers of democracy would, I think, feel that what we now have constitutes progress and was indeed a cause worth fighting for.

