



THE SPIRIT OF DEMOCRACY

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During a coast-to-coast lecture tour of the United States in the spring months of 1938, the German Nobel laureate writer Thomas Mann told large audiences of several thousand people that in an age dominated by ‘dictatorial fascism’ and ‘totalitarianism’, the survival and flourishing of democracy everywhere depended upon keeping alive in ‘thought and feeling’ its ‘spirit’. In a text published afterwards as *The Coming Victory of Democracy*, with his eyes on both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, he explained that democracy is not reducible to the clichéd principles of ‘majority rule’, or ‘government by the people’, or ‘the right of a free people to determine its own destiny’. Important as these principles are, the vital precondition of a resilient self-governing polity based on periodic free and fair elections “is democracy’s deep and forceful recollection of itself, the renewal of its spiritual and moral self-consciousness.”

Spirit

Note the unusual reference to spirit in this formulation. In English, and in other European languages, the word spirit has strongly Christian origins. Its connotations come bathed in the oft-quoted formula of Saint Paul: “The spirit helps the weaknesses of our prayer... and intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8: 26). There are also more secular versions of the notion of spirit, displayed for instance in the famous garden scene of Goethe’s *Faust*. When asked whether he believes in God, Faust cleverly replies that no words can describe his faith. “Call it then what you will”, he explains. “I have no names for it! Feeling is all; to name is but noise and smoke, beclouding heaven’s glow.” [1]

Thomas Mann was understandably preoccupied with the role of the United States and, thus, not especially concerned with the semantics of the word spirit.[2] Mann may well have been familiar with Hegel’s use of the word (*Geist*) to refer to the set of properties of a consciousness or ‘mind’ commonly shared by all or most people. Most probably, he was unaware that his notion of the spiritual joined hands with the imaginative thinking of the 18th-century thinker Montesquieu, for whom the word spirit (he spoke of *esprit des lois* and *esprit général*) was an indispensable category when analysing the mechanics and durability of any given regime of power. The importance of spirit, a commonly shared belief that a particular form of government is desirable, and that other types of political regime are objectionable, surfaced in Montesquieu’s striking but little-remembered account of the visit by a late 16th-century Venetian jeweller, merchant and author to the ancient Burmese port city of Pegu. When formally introduced to the merchant, the local king immediately asked after the ruler of Venice. Told by the merchant that in the republic of Venice there was no king, the Burmese ruler reportedly began to laugh so loudly that he coughed and choked in astonished disbelief that there could be an orderly government without a monarch.

[1] Elsewhere, in many global contexts, the word spirit is also but for different reasons highly meaningful, and has similar connotations, as in China, where under one-party rule people commonly speak of spirit via a family of words centred on *líng hún*, a word which connotes an embodied frame of mind marked by heaven-inspired but this-worldly yearnings for vigour and vitality, mettle and courage, and the willingness to do bold things. Anthropologists meanwhile tell us (and I have observed first-hand) that the indigenous Pitjantjatjara peoples of the central and western interior of Australia today speak of *kuuti* (vital energy, life force), *kurun-kurun* (the ghostly spirit of the dead) and *mamu* (a harmful spirit monster, generally invisible and more dangerous at night but which can be seen by dogs and driven off by experienced older people).

[2] Although his earlier writings (*Der Tod in Venedig* [1912], for instance) were fascinated with the way our bodily dispositions are structured by commonly acquired longings, passions and enabling and disabling ambivalences and confusions, his American lectures never explained precisely what he meant by the spiritual other than referring implicitly to the collectively shared and deeply embodied ‘too deep for words’ feelings of loyal attachment of a people to the ideals of self-government, equality and human dignity.

According to Montesquieu, the story was a reminder that every durable and legitimate form of government rests upon shared beliefs: sets of notions, mores, customs, passions and beliefs in right and wrong that shape and reshape people from the inside out, altering and guiding how they see themselves, relate to others, and imagine their overall place in the world. If we think along these lines, we could say that spirit is that skilled and deeper than words 'practical sense' (Bourdieu) or bodily disposition of people which motivates and reinforces their collective belief in the possibility and necessity of democracy. To speak in similes, every resilient democracy rests upon a deep-seated belief in what counts as 'fair play' in any given sport; or, to switch similes, democratic spirit resembles speakers' unquestioned acceptance of syntax, the primordial sets of rules that govern how words, phrases and clauses are combined to make meaningful well-formed sentences in a mother tongue. Spirit is the collectively felt belief that reinforces and reproduces people's sense of what counts as reality and what is possible and why democracy is a good thing. Spirit is more than 'knowledge' or a 'state of mind'. It is the underbelly of what Gabriel Almond, Sidney Verba and other political scientists have called a 'participant political culture' in which citizens are well-informed about matters of government and feel they can influence political outcomes. Spirit is a deep-seated and taken-for-granted 'mood' or 'feel' for how the world is and how it should be, the certainty of what's what, and what's right and wrong. It's the retrospective and anticipated certainty that the rules of the game called democracy are playable, and worth defending. Spirit is thus not a synonym for fleeting, one-off feelings. It is habitual. Aristotle called it *hexis*, the 'settled' felt disposition which prepares and shapes how people think, speak and act. The word spirit, to recall Edmund Husserl's famous mid-1930s reflections on the spiritual crisis of Europe, refers to the more-or-less taken for granted and unspoken rules which enable and empower us to sit on chairs and drink tea from a cup, to look both ways before crossing roads, and generally to live our everyday lives continuously in the company of others. Spirit is the acquired disposition to act in a certain way; it is the sensibility shared with others which gives energy and significance to everyday life and the goings-on around people. Although there's a definite time-bounded arbitrariness and contingent artificiality of spirit, people don't normally question its certainties – except in those moments when large numbers of people are gripped by the sense that things are going in the wrong direction.

Rethinking spirit

Thomas Mann's lectures were prompted by a deeply personal change of heart about democracy—in earlier publications such as *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (1918) he had denounced democracy as a decadently un-German product of French and British 'civilisation'—and gripped by a sense that parliamentary democracies everywhere were an endangered political species. We are again passing through such a moment of breakdown of the spirit of democracy. In more than a few democratic countries, many hundreds of millions of people nowadays feel that when it comes to the biggest decisions bending and twisting their daily lives, despite all the public talk of 'democracy' and 'the people', they have zero control over those who decide things in their name. Their shared experience of organised powerlessness is amplified by fears that our small blue planet is spinning out of control. Survey evidence shows that people are not just annoyed and angry. They've grown convinced that elected governments have become so blind and corrupt that they no longer notice or even care that we earthlings are hurtling towards a future bruised and battered by more than a few perilous forces. Naked big power rivalries. Endless wars and nasty genocides. Organised hatred of immigrants. Border closures. Widening gaps between rich and poor. Corporate greed. Trade and tariff disputes. Extreme weather events. Pandemics. Polls show that millions of people are equally bothered by another unpromising political trend: the mounting anxiety that demagogues, despots and a strange new kind of Russian-style despotism with thoroughly twenty-first-century characteristics are gaining traction and everywhere getting the upper hand.

Such trends are arguably unsettling the spirit of democracy, and they are consequently raising old-fashioned, perennial and rather elementary questions about the meaning of democracy and whether it's a form of government and way of life better than all others. To the surprise and dismay of many observers, we are moved back to the point of Thomas Mann's lectures: when people grow tired of democracy and its spiritual foundations begin to crack and crumble, democrats of all persuasions, gripped by a sense of emergency, must

become aware that the institutional dynamics of democracy are rendered challengeable and vulnerable to rejection, that anti- or phantom democratic solutions perforce come to have a definite attractiveness to millions of people. Confronted by this possibility, more ‘demosophia’ (Jean-Luc Nancy) is needed. A fresh case must be made for the ideals of democracy and for why a resilient and robust democracy requires the maintenance and strengthening of its spirit. If the spirit of democracy is foundational in the exact sense that it shapes and pre-determines everything we call democracy then, in the new conditions of turbulence and decadence, we must ask: what exactly does it mean to speak of the spirit of democracy? What are its unique features? How internally robust and publicly attractive is this spirit of democracy?

Three forms of democracy

The urgent task of providing answers to these long-neglected, simple but highly controversial questions—they last featured in the great debates during the late 1930s and 1940s about the future of —is made trickier by the fact that through time, as I have shown in my *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009), democracy has appeared in three strikingly different but interconnected historical forms.

Assembly democracy, a West Asian, Eastern Mediterranean invention, proved that humans could gather in a public assembly for the purpose of deciding for themselves, as equals, how they would live together on earth. Assembly democracy meant self-government among equals, the lawful rule of public assemblies of people whose sovereign power to debate and decide things freely was no longer to be given over to imaginary gods, the stentorian voices of tradition, to tribal chiefs, monarchs, tyrants and aristocrats, to those in the know, or simply handed over to the everyday habit of laziness, unthinkingly allowing others to decide matters of general importance.

Towards the end of the 18th century, an extraordinary reimagining of democracy as **electoral democracy** happened. The commonplace phrase ‘representative democracy’ was born of Anglo- French- and American parentage.[3] It was used by constitution makers and political writers to refer to a new type of government structured by periodic elections and popular consent. Here was a breathtakingly new and profoundly creative way of thinking about democracy, by which was now meant a type of government in which people, understood as voters faced with a genuine choice between at least two alternatives, are free to elect others who then for a time act in defence of their interests, that is, *represent* them by deciding matters on their behalf.

A no-less-dramatic third episode in the history of democracy happened during the 1940s. During that decade, against tremendous odds, in defiance of economic collapse, dictatorship, totalitarianism and total war, the ideals and institutions of democracy experienced a reincarnation as **monitory democracy**. Conventionally misdescribed as ‘liberal democracy’ or ‘polyarchy’ (Robert Dahl), or through metaphors such as the ‘third wave’ and the ‘end of history’, this new species of democracy, my research on the history of democracy has taught me, was neither a Western invention nor synonymous with American-style government. It was something different: a variety of democracy defined as popular self-government backed by scores of power monitoring institutions and forms of accountability unknown to earlier democrats. As I see it, this monitory democracy, born of the disasters to which Thomas Mann responded, was a newly-imagined third form of democracy defined by the rapid growth of many new kinds of extra-parliamentary, power scrutinising mechanisms: ‘guide dog’, ‘watchdog’ and ‘barking dog’ institutions. It included inventions such as election monitoring, human rights networks, activist courts, workplace co-determination and participatory budgeting as well as bodies such as future generations commissions, anti-corruption agencies, bridge doctors, coral reef monitoring networks, and truth and reconciliation forums.

[3] The French nobleman, foreign minister under Louis XV, the Marquis d’Argenson (1694 – 1757) was perhaps the first person to re-imagine democracy as representation. D’Argenson did so by distinguishing between ‘false’ and ‘true’ democracy. “False democracy,” he said, thinking of Athens and other early assembly democracies, “soon collapses into anarchy. It is government of the multitude; such is the people in revolt, insolently scorning law and reason. Its tyrannical despotism is obvious from the violence of its movements and the uncertainty of its deliberations. In true democracy,” he continued, “one acts through deputies, who are authorised by election; the mission of those elected by the people and the authority that such officials carry constitute the public power.”

Equality

These three historical forms of democracy remind us that democracy has no fixed institutional forms. Democracy, like water, has no predefined form or substance. It's a whole way of life that ebbs and flows in many unexpected shapes and different sizes. Adventuresome, restless, anarchic, chronically disappointed and dissatisfied, democracy isn't equivalent to citizens' assembly gatherings or free and fair elections or, as observers often say, merely synonymous with the removal of rulers who have overplayed their hand. Democracy is a peculiar political form defined by the fact that transitions to democracy always remain transitions. Democracy is never fully realised; it is always to some extent unconsolidated and defective and permanently in crisis. We could say that the struggle of the spirit of democracy against unaccountable power is one of those human struggles that is never fully victorious but can never be abandoned. Democracy rests on the premise that although perfection always proves impossible to reach, steps towards self-correction, innovation and improvement are still possible. Democracy is always the democracy to come, as Jacques Derrida rightly said. But if democracy wants to be more than it is, a tricky question immediately surfaces: given these multiple and different historical forms of democracy, whose resonance is still felt today, is it still possible to speak of a common spirit of democracy? I believe it is, beginning with the most obvious common spiritual element of these different forms of democracy: people's felt commitment to ongoing and unending struggles for *equality*.

The taste for equality and the outright rejection of claims to social and political privilege based on the supposed superiority of characteristics such as skin colour, class, brain talent, blood type, bodily strength, or ethno-national identity distinguishes the type of government and society called democracy from all other political regime types. Democracy has a 'communist' quality. It has no love of capitalism. It is the vision of a political order in which people act together as equals. Democracy is disdain for vainglory and snobbery and a calling open to the weakest of earthly mortals. The spirit of democracy urges people to treat each other as equals and to appreciate the social, political and personal benefits of equalising and enhancing life for all living creatures. It requires people to feel that they're good enough to govern themselves and to shape their own lives, and that democracy is therefore desirable not because all women and men are 'naturally' equal, but because no man or woman is perfect enough to rule unaccountably over their fellows, or the fragile lands and seas in which they dwell. This 'deeper than words' commitment to the equal harnessing of people's 'capabilities' (Amartya Sen) and a whole way of life guided by the principle that people considered as equals can 'make the best of themselves' (C.B. Macpherson) means that democracy stands for the rejection of every form of human and non-human indignity.

In practice, the spirit of democracy favours equal access to decent medical care and sympathy and a helping hand for those who have tripped and fallen. Democracy stands for higher taxation of the rich and the reigning in of banks which use their credit primarily for speculative rather than productive purposes. Democracy is freedom from hunger, humiliation and violence. It's the felt belief (as people say in southern Africa) that rain falls on every roof and (a proverb hailing from medieval Europe) that at a round table there's no dispute of place and that (my Irish father used to say) we're all free and equal in the grave. Democracy is the security of being private in a voting booth and public disgust for callous employers who maltreat workers paid a pittance for bullshit jobs. It is equal access to affordable public transport, clean running water and unpolluted air. Democracy is the ability to say sorry and to eat servings of humble pie. It is the orderly queue. The gentle hand extended to a child. Democracy is writing and reading novels which win major literary prizes for compelling works about the breathtaking bravery and humble solidarity of fearful citizens during a bloody military crackdown on a popular uprising (Han Kang's *Human Acts* [2014]), or awards for short stories about the resistant voices of Muslim women contending with social exclusion, perpetual pregnancy and patriarchal husbands who are either useless or bullies, or both (Banu Mushtaq's *Heart Lamp* [2025]). Democracy is respect for women, dislike of misogyny, sensitivity and support for those of different preferences and different faiths. Democracy is sharing and caring for others considered equals, but it is equally private and public respect for their different ways of living.

More recently, under conditions of monitory democracy, the spirit of democratic equality has grown savvier and more sophisticated. Not only are democrats acutely aware that democracy is peculiarly vulnerable to the toxins of *ressentiment* produced when it fails to live up to its professed commitment to the principles of equality. They know that democracies play dice with their future when they violate these principles, when they breed peoples' fears of being marginalised, feelings of anger, indignation and envy, sour grapes yearnings for revenge against those who are more fortunate and more privileged. Democrats nowadays fear times when democracy as a whole way of life is allowed to fall into disrepair; they know that jokes about how democracies are societies in which the rich as well as the poor are equally entitled to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread are no laughing matter. In contrast to times past, democrats grow nervous about the anti-democratic effects of extreme weather events, species extinctions, pestilences and other environmental emergencies. They recognise that democracy, the most anthropocentric ideal ever conceived, will have no future unless its ideals and practices are rid of the deep-seated prejudice that 'humans' live outside 'nature', whose own living and dying rhythms are now crying out for democratic recognition and respect.

Many democrats meanwhile embrace the principles of equality in more worldly-wise ways. They frown when they hear the oft-quoted phrase that it is a self-evident truth that all men are created equal. They understand that democracy is no longer the struggle for sameness, as so many past critics complained. Plato considered that democracy was a disorderly form of government dispensing equality to equals and unequals alike. Aristotle said that the worst form of inequality resulted from the attempt to make unequal things equal. Tocqueville and most 19th century liberals similarly worried that democracy's rejection of the spirit of 'aristocracy' would produce a homogenised *société de semblables*. These old moral objections to democracy as a recipe for sameness no longer apply.

Equity

The spirit of democracy nowadays acknowledges that the struggle for the equalisation of life chances is a hydra-headed ideal. There's not only the familiar tension between the notions of equality of outcome and equality of opportunity. There's awareness that democracy requires support and respect for different ways of life in different ways, and that different zones of life measure and evaluate equality differently. Drab uniformity is not democracy's thing. Nor is democracy synonymous with a generalised commitment to so-called equality of opportunity, the meritocratic principle that when people considered as equals are encouraged to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, they deserve their unequal winnings. Equity and equality are related but different.

The spirit of democracy harbours a paradox. Equality requires equity, which in turn requires that in different spheres of life disadvantaged people must be unequally entitled to resources and opportunities to develop their powers as equals so that in other zones of life they become capable of living as the equals of others. Democracy requires both Robin Hood distributive justice—taxing corporations and high earners in support of poorer people—and 'contributive justice' (Michael Sandel) using various measures supportive of different people's differing demands for equal social recognition.

Take the example of elections, where things are comparatively straightforward: it's one person, one vote, perhaps accompanied by calls to extend the equality principle to younger people, to immigrants, or felons, and by complex disputes about different systems of representation and the harmful role played by money and lobbying in promoting inequality. In courts of law, by comparison, it's presumed upfront that people's equal rights of legal representation require deferential respect for the superior knowledge and skills of highly paid professional jurists. Similarly, in the field of healthcare, while the operative democratic principle is that all patients must be treated and cared for with dignity, the same principle demands that some patients, including women about to give birth to a child and accident victims facing death, are to be given priority in the treatment queues.

These complications aside, the spirit of democracy counsels a general reminder: democracy is much more than pressing a button or marking a box on a ballot paper. It goes beyond the mathematical certitude of election results and majority rule. It isn't the same as attending local public meetings or watching breaking news stories scrawled across a screen. Understood as the self-government of equals who decide for themselves how they want to live with the help of their chosen representatives, democracy is a whole way of life in which people understand that since politics is not a rosy love-in, compromise born of stalemates is often necessary in order that people can dwell together non-violently in various social associations and ecosystems and see eye to eye, rub shoulders, bargain and cooperate, and generally strive to treat each other as equals worthy of respect and dignity.

Unaccountable power

There's a flipside to the equality principle. The unspoken belief in people's guts that a 'fair go' is a good thing and that people are and ought to be treated as equals, is intimately connected to a neighbouring precept, the felt suspicion that people who exercise power over others must acknowledge and respect those over whom they rule and whose lives they shape. The spirit of democracy urges people to put rulers permanently on trial so that, if they rule without self-restraint or fail to give plausible explanations of why they acted as they did, their *unaccountable power* is judged to be imprudent, and potentially dangerous. If there were a people of gods, they would govern themselves democratically, said Rousseau, but his remark failed to capture its flipside implication: since people are not gods and can't become gods nobody is entitled to pretend or act as if they are gods.

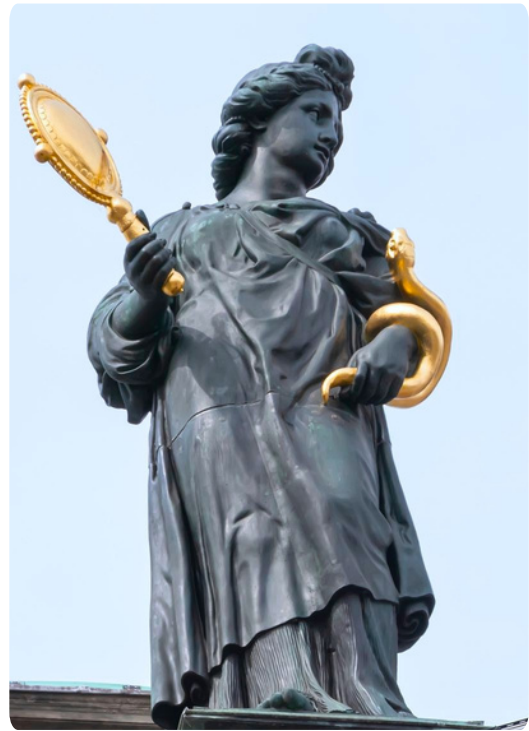
Democracy is the unending struggle to equalise life chances and to protect people and their ecosystems against the damaging effects of rule by the few. Democracy has a defiantly punk quality. It takes seriously warnings about the perils of foolish groupthink, wilful blindness and other pathologies of unchecked power. There's a streak of 'anarchism' running through the spirit of democracy. Power and authority aren't the same. In every field of life, from the bedroom to the battlefield and heavens above, no power is reckoned legitimate unless it is granted consent and thus authorised by those whose lives it shapes, twists, distorts or destroys. The punk quality of democracy appears with a sudden vengeance during transitions to democracy when, like a geological upheaval, the *ancien régime* is accused of murder, searches for the disappeared begin, clandestine mass graves are exhumed, and people are urged to tell their stories of suffering. But even in ordinary times, democracy is saying no to all forms of human arrogance and brutality. The spirit of democracy dislikes snobbery as much as it dislikes toad-eating. It has no taste for vanity, condescension and hubris. The spirit of democracy prickles in the presence of demagogues and despots. It refuses to support laws that ban opposition parties, redefine fraud, corruption and breach of trust as legitimate, and condone the appointment of judges by bigoted politicians (current Israeli specialities). Democracy has an insurrectionary quality. It is insubordination: the refusal to put up with smoke and mirrors manipulation, bossing and bullying, the vision of a political order that ensures that the matter of who gets what, when and how should always be permanently an open question, not the monopoly of any individual or group or institution. It comes as no surprise that the spirit of democracy regularly triggers disputes about the meaning of democracy. Democracy is generally suspicious of Grand Narratives. It has no timeless first principles and it is not justifiable or even thinkable in terms of such supposedly fixed absolutes as God, History, Truth, Law or State Sovereignty. Those who say that democracy functionally requires prior agreement on who are 'the people' and therefore an uncontested identification of people with the Nation (this was political scientist Dankwart Rustow's argument) are wrong. Philosophically speaking, there are no Right or True Golden Standards in its favour. Just the reverse: the spirit of democracy is the precondition of breaking their grip. It is thus the champion of a radically different idea of the universal. For every living creature, democracy is a universal with a difference: a global way of life committed to the defence and coexistence of a rich variety of particulars.

Precaution

From the time of Plato, past critics of democracy thought of it as a dangerous friend of mindless passion, tumult and disorder, violence and war. But in our times, the spirit of democracy is their nemesis. Democracy has a precautionary quality. It is the opposite of reckless betting and insatiable lust for power. In matters of power, democracy stands on the side of vigilance and prudence. It shares an affinity with European style 'conservatism', Islamic conceptions of justice (*adl*), Hindu/ Buddhist/Sikhist understandings of *dharma* and other influential world creeds. When democratic mechanisms function properly and their spirit is strong, democracy functions as an early warning system. It puts citizens and their representatives on alert, warning them not to ignore the world, urging them to understand the need for self-restraint in the face of possible dangers of unknown consequences of consequences of consequences.

In practice, this means that the spirit of democracy not only demands public ownership and control of the means of deciding who gets how much, when, and how. It calls upon people to recognise and respect the old political problem of how to prevent reckless rule by the few, or by the rich or powerful who claim to be better than others. It has no faith in the arbitrary power of all the king's horses and all the king's men. It despises rulers who arrogantly refuse contrary advice, move recklessly this way and that, never pausing along the way to inspect the damage they heap upon the world.

Consider the matter of leadership. The spirit of democracy acknowledges and welcomes the need for leaders in the fields of government and social life. But democratic leaders are considered leaders with a difference. The spirit of democracy despises psychopathic demagogues—King Lear political figures who are narcissistic, paranoid and sadistic, superficially charming, philanderers who lack empathy for others. It is wary of leaders hooked on bossing and bullying backed by lies, bullshit, hypocrisy and the cunning fist. Whether elected or unelected, the democratic leader is not just a sane and decent and empathetic team player. The spirit of democracy reckons that competent leaders are those who lead because they manage to get people to look up to them, rather than manipulating them by the nose. Leadership is the capacity to mobilise persuasive power, the ability to energise people to do things for themselves. Genuine leadership is narrative intelligence, the capacity to win respect by wisely mixing such qualities as level-headed focus, inner calm, courteousness, and the refusal to be biddable. True leadership is also respect for the unknown and the ability to poke fun at oneself, a certain radiance of style and the power to bind together contradictory qualities such as strength and vulnerability, and singularity and generality, and to do so effortlessly, as if leadership is the embodied art of gestalt switching. And, as Max Weber taught, robust leadership is prudence: the courage to deal with realities, the art of juggling incompatibilities and deciding what better means, all the while knowing that in organisations, as in life, humility is a precious virtue because good intentions and reckless convictions can pave pathways to nowhere, or highways to hell.



'Prudence', Royal Palace, Netherlands
Source: Shutterstock

The precautionary spirit of democracy embraces the ancient theme of *prudence*: the virtue (*phronēsis*, *prudentia*), which is not itself a First Ethical Principle, that counsels that whenever in any given context decisions are being made those who are taking decisions must pay attention to the dangers of foolish recklessness and heed the need to act responsibly, to take into account the foreseeable and possible unintended consequences of any and every chosen course of action. Friedrich Nietzsche famously complained that democracy stands for the disbelief in rule by elites and strongmen. Well, it does, the spirit of democracy replies, for the convincing reason that untempered power is always the playground of devils. The spirit of democracy turns upside down the old (Platonic) complaint that democracy resembles a ship of fools, or a rollicking circus run by monkeys, or a rabble of people denounced in Erasmus's *In Praise of Folly* (1511) as an "enormous and powerful monster swayed by absurdities." The spirit of democracy boomerangs these criticisms onto unruly and charlatan leaders. It refuses to suffer idiots and charlatans gladly. Foolish power on stilts is not its thing. Fools are imprudent human creatures whose all-too-human foolish behaviour stems from their thoughtless habit of ignoring wise counsel, gagging their critics and generally blocking efforts to render their power publicly accountable. Against such figures, the spirit of democracy strives to bring matters back to earth. It serves as a reality check on unaccountable power. It's a means of ensuring that leaders in all spheres of life don't stray into cuckoo land, wander into territory where stupid misadventures of power are camouflaged by fine words, or by conniving and silence, or thuggery. And since it is not blessed by universally Right or True Golden Standards, the spirit of democracy is the friend of practical judgment. It understands that in any given time-space context making decisions about what is to be done unavoidably requires trade-offs, choosing prudently from a mixed array of conflicting norms (equity versus equality, for instance), different available strategies and a variety of possibly contradictory tactics.

Denaturing power

The acquired taste for precaution and prudence within the spirit of democracy might give newcomers and outsiders the impression that democracy is dithering, timidity, cowardice and the fainthearted unwillingness of citizens to rise to the occasion to change the world around them.[4] There are indeed moments when democracies dither and dance over the abyss, to speak in Nietzschean terms, but democracy is not deliverance from hell or a dreamy recipe for salvation on earth. Democracy is the only political form in human history which enables public recognition and controversy about its own flaws and failures. This is why the spirit of democracy is the enemy of dogmatic pessimism—the attitude of those who complain about the noise when opportunity knocks (Oscar Wilde) or who fall victim to what Albert Hirschman called 'fracasomania', the compulsive obsession with failure and decline—and why it is the dutiful accomplice and faithful friend of surprise resistance to unaccountable power. As the non-violent champion of the less equal against the privileged, democracy calls upon people to defend the principle that the tempering and self-restraint of power is a good thing. Less obviously, when the spirit of democracy takes hold of people's lives, it does much more than prod them into getting off their backsides and taking responsibility for their own lives. It has far 'deeper than words' effects.

Think for a moment about previous political forms, for instance early modern European monarchies, which were a form of government guided by God-given rules that explained why superior blood lineage 'by nature' entitled a few to rule, how crowns were to be passed on, and why loyal subjects were obliged to cope in peace with their daily uncertainties. Now consider how, in striking contrast, the spirit of democracy 'denatures' power. It injects time into things that seem to be timeless. Democracy is disjunction rather than continuity,

[4] This is the exaggerated prejudice running through David Runciman's *The Confidence Trap* (2017) and *How Democracy Ends* (2019). Democracy is procrastination, he complains. Democracies take forever to read writings on the wall let alone to get things done. They're easily distracted by frivolous media events, party political bickering and fake crises and sedated by their track record of success (it's what he calls the confidence trap). Burdened by elections and fickle public opinion and constitutional proprieties, democracies typically muddle their way into crises, twiddle their thumbs, usually for so long that finally, if they are lucky, they're forced to make wise decisions and spring into action. "Democracies survive their mistakes," he concludes, but "the mistakes keep coming."

succession rather than succession, or, as ancient Greek democrats might have said, more *kairos* than *chronos*. It tutors people's everyday sense of the malleability of the world. Its spirit springs surprises by drawing people's attention to things they hadn't noticed before, or that they had forgotten, as the Belgian philosopher of science Vinciane Despret likes to say. It spreads the defiant awareness that people's lives aren't fixed in stone, that all things, human and non-human, are built on the shifting sands of space time, even that time and space have no fixed boundaries or quintessence. Democracy is thus the enemy of the taken-for-granted. When it works well, it casts public doubts on what Wittgenstein called "complete conviction, the total absence of doubt." We could say that the spirit of democracy helps trigger a long-term mood swing, a transformation of people's perceptions of the world. It's a spreader of the sense that what's called 'reality' is both challengeable and transformable.

This spiritual 'denaturing' of power is the combined effect of periodic elections and the continuous public scrutiny of power by watchdog institutions and social media platforms that together breed unpredictability and surprise in matters of deciding who gets how much, when and how. The upshot is that the spirit of democracy is good at fomenting troubles, whipping up political surprises, and delivering bolts from the blue. It has a 'sauvage' (wild) quality, as the French thinker Claude Lefort liked to say. The value placed by the spirit of democracy on public openness, institutional pluralism and continuous public scrutiny of arbitrary power enables individuals, groups, networks and whole organisations to question and overturn the supposedly 'natural' order of things. With the help of bodies such as anti-corruption agencies, investigative journalism, independent courts and periodic elections, democracy promotes indeterminacy. It heightens people's awareness that the way things are now isn't necessarily how they will be in future. The spirit of democracy challenges people to see that their worlds can be changed. That's why it sometimes sparks major upheavals and revolutions.

Hope

While it offers no historical guarantees of success or survival, and while it can breed setbacks, disappointments and *ressentiment*, the spirit of democracy makes unthinkable breakthroughs possible. Consider the way the spirit of democracy springs surprises. During the largest-ever civil society rallies in the history of Serbia, students tired of corruption and despotic rule gather in public assemblies, mount bicycles and peddle all the way to Strasbourg then set off in a relay-style 'ultra-marathon' jog to Brussels in support of their struggle for democracy. In South Korea, several corrupt presidents have been impeached under pressure from street-level citizen 'protestivals', a Korean specialty. In Morocco, in defiance of government restrictions, the spirit of democracy has surfaced in the ranks of football fans who erected banners, chanted "God help Palestine" and sung songs in solidarity featuring lyrics such as "You for whom my heart is saddened." Elsewhere, universal basic income experiments in scores of cities and regions are under way. There are anti-corruption initiatives, as in South Africa, where the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, commonly referred to as the Zondo Commission, has investigated allegations of public sector fraud and corruption. The spirit of monitory democracy has even made its presence felt in cross-border settings, where democratically negotiated and binding restrictions on the human destruction of ecosystems have been agreed, as in the Kunming-Montréal Biodiversity Framework Agreement (2022) and the Escazú Agreement's formal guarantee of Latin American citizens' rights of access to environmental information and public participation in environmental decision-making processes.

Previous forms of rule, whether by tyrants, monarchs, aristocrats, or oligarchs, supposed their own necessity and fixity. By contrast, as these examples show, democracy gets people to see that things aren't written on stone, and that what appears to be 'natural' or unalterable can be changed, for the better, even against tremendous odds. Every single recorded institutional innovation in the history of democracy—the invention of citizen assemblies, the birth of parliaments, the abolition of monarchy, the adoption of the secret ballot and the universal franchise, the legalisation of trade unions, the outlawing of genocide—is infused with this spirit of hopeful adventure and imaginative experimentation. That's why democracy can deliver unexpected thrills as well as unexpected disappointments. When Martin Luther King, Jr. said he dreamed that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and slave owners would be able to sit together at the "table of

brotherhood,” and that his four little children would be able to live in a country where the colour of their skin did not matter, he gave voice to the defiant inner spirit of democracy. Later gunned down when showing support for striking African-American city sanitation workers, denied a state funeral, his parting request was that at his burial there was to be no mention of his awards and honours, only that he had strived to “feed the hungry,” “clothe the naked,” to oppose the racist Vietnam war, and to “love and serve humanity.”

In such instances, democracy stirs up hopes for a dignified society of equal but different citizens. The earliest founding visions of a democracy of equal citizens were built on hope. Nothing has since changed. Democracy remains the condition of possibility of hope. When confronted by setbacks and sticky situations that tempt people to conclude, “Well, that's the way things are,” the spirit of democracy urges wise people to think twice. It encourages them to say: “Actually, things can be different.” It has faith in the sense of possibility—in the capacity of people to see that what now exists has no privileged status, and that the way things are can be challenged by the way things might become.

Even when people are ground down, perplexed, and demoralised by social indignities and political calamities, the spirit of democracy encourages them to look beyond their present miserable horizons, to expect and to demand positive improvements in their lives. The spirit of democracy steers a course between dogmatic pessimism and naïve optimism. It even stretches the scope of hope. Hope isn't just the anticipation of a future that's judged to be possible and desirable. Hope can also be the active remembering of a past that can be rescued and resuscitated, brought back to life in much changed circumstances, with an eye on the future. Hope can be a way of remembering past wisdoms in support of struggles to bolster the dignity of those who are presently wronged, to help them move towards a better future.

The point is that the spirit of democracy not only licences citizens to rebel against social injustice and lawless and unaccountable power. When the going gets rough, democracy fosters hope against hope. It calls on people to hold back the night and draw back from the brink. Democracy stirs up insurrections. It urges people to grasp that shit situations can be fertilisers of a different and better future. It gives them energy to imagine and believe in the practical possibility that on our tiny spinning planet we call Earth, against all odds, despite everything, people can indeed build a better future guided by precious precepts: no famine or slavery, no more 5,000-pound buster-bunker bombs, more freedom with equal access to clean running water, better schooling and decent health care, greater social equality, less political bossing and bullying. In moments when democracy falls sick, as Thomas Mann told his audiences, this is the most important virtue of the spirit of democracy: in our quite depressingly unbeautiful world, it inspires people in their own contexts and in their own ways to take full advantage of what they have and what comes their way, to build a better future for everybody, not just for the rich and powerful mendacious and self-satisfied few.

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A Democrat..or...Reason and Philosophy by James Gillray (1793)
Source: Supplied by the author



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