

DEGENERATIONS
of DEMOCRACY

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*We dedicate this book to the Center for Transcultural Studies
and its predecessor, the Center for Psychosocial Studies,
which have enabled us to learn together for more than thirty years.*

Contents

Introduction	<i>1</i>
1 Degenerations of Democracy	<i>18</i>
2 Contradictions and Double Movements	<i>48</i>
3 Compromises with Capitalism	<i>88</i>
4 Authenticity and Meritocracy	<i>129</i>
5 Making the Demos Safe for Democracy?	<i>159</i>
6 The Structure of Democratic Degenerations and the Imperative of Direct Action	<i>181</i>
7 What Is to Be Done?	<i>208</i>
Conclusion	<i>258</i>
Notes	<i>289</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>333</i>
Index	<i>337</i>

DEGENERATIONS
of DEMOCRACY

Introduction

The future of democracy seems increasingly dark. We want to say democracy can be renewed, that it can flourish, that it can be more inclusive, more egalitarian, and more empowering. Yet we have to admit this would be a reversal of the trends we see around us.

Americans could take heart in the remarkably high voter turnout in 2020. At least long-standing apathy had been reduced. But then the losing presidential candidate and millions of his followers refused to accept the results. There was even an invasion of the US Capitol amid widespread efforts to reverse the election. The extremity, malice, and even violence of partisan division remain alarming.

Nor are disunity and conflict limited to the United States. Democracy is under duress worldwide. Similar issues and emotions shaped Britain's 2016 Brexit vote and have bedeviled the country since. Anxieties about change, the power of citizens, and national identities are prominent in France, Germany, Poland, Hungary, and most European countries. Russia is officially but not practically democratic. Despite impressive resilience, the world's largest democracy in India is challenged by polarization and majoritarian nationalism. Democracy that seemed to be taking root is instead disintegrating in Ethiopia and becoming increasingly fraught in South Africa and much of Central America. China has long vacillated between long claiming to be building a kind of democracy, and contrasting its own model—variously

DEGENERATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

termed Confucian, communist or just Chinese—to what it sees as the growing failures of Western democracies. As more liberal democracies suffered during the Covid pandemic, China became ever more authoritarian, yet boasted that it manifested “democracy that works.”

In this book, our focus is not on troubled or halted transitions to democracy. It is on degenerations in what have long been considered strong democracies. Of course, there is a relationship. Degenerations of democracy in countries such as the United States make it look less promising to would-be democrats elsewhere. Ethnonationalist rule and increasing disregard for constitution and law make India less of a model.

There is no shortage of books and articles on the crisis and possible loss of democracy. This one is distinct in stressing both the long-term degeneration of democracy from within, as distinct from just external attacks and the depredations of bad leaders, and the importance of social and cultural foundations, not just narrowly political reforms, to renewing democracy.

To be sure, democracy *is* damaged by corrupt and self-serving leaders who promote social division as a tactic of power. It is weakened by manipulation of its rules, suppression of votes, gerrymandering, and attempts to discredit elections. But “saving” democracy requires more than just processual or technical repairs.

Renewal must address two kinds of foundations for democracy that are not entirely contained within political democracy as such: first, republican constitutions and norms of civic virtue, and second, social conditions for effective citizenship, including social solidarity and limits to inequality. Democracy cannot thrive without rebuilding these foundations.

The foundations are partly cultural and moral. Rebuilding must restore commitment to civic virtue and the public good; it must renew collective identity and reduce corruption. Constitutional protections for the rule of law, good government, and the rights of *all* citizens need not only be present on paper but also be understood and respected. Material factors are also crucial. Inequality has increased dramatically—in income, in wealth, even in the quality of health care during the coronavirus pandemic. This means that, in many countries, whole categories of citizens have sharply divergent experiences of policies and social changes; they literally are not “in it together.” But inequality is not the whole story, either. At least as important is an erosion of social connections—communal and crosscutting—that knit citizens together across lines of difference. Social solidarity is not simply a sentiment; it is also a structure of social relations. It needs to be rebuilt at

the scales of local communities, national institutions, and the many kinds of intermediate associations in between.¹

Dimensions of Degeneration

In Chapter 1, Charles Taylor outlines three factors central to recent downward spirals of degeneration: disempowerment of citizens, failures of inclusion, and hyper-partisan and majoritarian pursuit of political victories at the expense of shared futures. These are not the only possible components to degeneration, but they are crucial, and we return to them repeatedly through this book.

Robust democracy is a way of empowering all citizens, both in politics and in the rest of their lives. Such empowerment encourages controversy and reveals tensions between public and private interests. It brings resistance from some elites. It also brings capacity for mobilization to solve common problems and keep improving common life. Liberty, equality, and solidarity are not mere abstractions. They are of practical importance in the lives of democratic citizens. But each can degenerate.

Democracy depends on the empowerment of citizens—and degenerates with disempowerment. This undercuts both having an effective voice in public affairs and efforts to meet personal challenges. Disempowerment comes not just through explicit blockages, such as voting restrictions, but from loss of social conditions for effective action. To benefit from democracy in routine ways, as well as to fight for more democracy, requires not just individual but social capacities. Citizens are empowered by communities and neighborhoods, organizations such as trade unions, networks formed in churches and synagogues, parent-teacher associations, youth sports leagues, and social service associations. Social movements empower those they mobilize, building on existing connections and developing new ones. They can be empowering even when they fail to achieve their explicit objectives.

Disempowerment is increased by extreme economic inequality, as well as by *political* inequality. Government is opaque and distant, inaccessible to ordinary people, and run by an apparently distinct political class. To say that the members of this class are privileged elites is not to say that they are the same privileged elites who dominate corporate and financial capitalism. They are different factions of the dominant class and not always completely aligned.² The so-called populist movements exemplified by Brexit in Britain and Trumpism in the United States, showed that even relatively well-off people can feel they lack political power. This is not just a

DEGENERATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

matter of not being heard in Washington or Westminster; it is a matter of not being able to get garbage collected or neighborhood roads fixed.

Another dimension of democracy is political inclusion. Rather than having more or less power, this involves having a stronger or weaker sense of membership and participation. Democracy has often been limited by restrictions on formal political inclusion—as, for example, in the withholding in the United States of voting rights from slaves, women, and men without enough property. US democracy has advanced with wider voting rights, and it degenerates when efforts are made to curtail these—as happened after Reconstruction and is happening in many states today. And vote suppression is not limited to the United States.

But informal inclusion is also important. Do citizens recognize each other as common and equal members of the polity? Is formal recognition by the state matched by informal recognition among fellow citizens? Race, ethnicity, religion, immigration status, and other divisions can fragment and limit political inclusion. The issue is not just the rights of minorities; we need to ask how some people get recognized as the majority in relation to whom others are treated as minorities, or what happens when people who think they are the rightful majority confront the rising prominence of other groups. Majority status is a matter of cultural politics, not just numbers.³

A sizable fraction of US citizens resists redefining American identity to be inclusive of Blacks, American Indians, Latinos/as, Asians, and others. Some embrace an older idea of a white Christian nation.⁴ They do not want to become the minority. Similar issues are at play as Canada seeks to put anglophone and francophone citizens on an equal footing, to give full citizenship and recognition to First Nations, and to integrate new immigrant populations. Anxious Englishness was basic to Brexit and undermines more inclusive British identity. Dominant ethnic groups seem obvious majorities—they are often described as constituting “legacy nations.” Yet national majorities are always constructed—through material change as well as discourse—as much in France or Hungary as in more explicitly diverse countries such as Canada, the United States, and Britain.

When saying “We, the people,” ceases to include the whole and expresses instead the hostility of a real or imagined majority to all minorities, the result is a distorted, pernicious expression of the genuine need for solidarity among democratic citizens. Solidarity is not conformity and seldom involves unanimity. Democracy is almost always contentious. Citizens pressing their different agendas are agonistic but not necessarily antagonistic. They want

Introduction

to win arguments, but not necessarily to win at each other's expense. This is different when extreme political polarization makes taking sides primary. Democracy degenerates when citizens ask first what do people in my camp believe or think or do—not what is good for the whole society.

Partisanship can be constructive, or at least manageable, when subordinated to concern for the public good. Advocates may clash over what is best for all. It is, however, a small step from seeking to win an argument to valuing victory more than pursuit of the public good. Unsurprisingly, partisans seek tactical advantages. Unfortunately, as Ezra Klein has argued, a variety of incentives routinely lead rational political actors to seek short-term advantage in ways that undermine good government and encourage polarization.⁵ Extreme or hyper-partisans put winning ahead of all other considerations—and this is a problem. Extreme partisans do not merely find themselves in confrontations but seek them out and engineer them, seeing cooperation as betrayal of their factional cause. They stalemate effective government when they do not get their way, and they increase public rancor and frustration. They harness themselves to cultural divides so that the electoral interests of individual candidates align with the preferences of polarized voters. They demand complete adherence to extreme party positions, stopping elected officials from acting with any independence. Extreme partisanship can put a party at odds not just with other parties but with the preferences of most citizens—yet allow it to remain electorally effective in the near term. In short, extreme partisanship can be a major factor in democratic degeneration.

Extreme partisanship cannot be explained simply by the attitudes of individuals. It is encouraged by the careerism of politicians, but this is not an adequate explanation either. Extremes of partisanship reflect social divisions. They arise when social foundations for democracy are not shared. When connections among different social groups are weak, their members can more easily develop sharply different understandings of what is going on in society, clashing narratives of how things got this way, and strident attributions of blame for producing problems and blocking the way forward. And extremes of partisanship are typically reactive. They are not simply stable differences of views; they are movements stimulated by destabilizing changes—by great transformations.

The division of society into mutually uncomprehending factions is shaped by geography, by different positions in relation to economic change and security and to ethnicity and religion, and by politics. It overlaps the often-remarked echo chambers of different media networks. Siloed media reinforce

DEGENERATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

social division. They make partisanship into an almost epistemological divergence when a primary criterion for truth is what those on my side believe. On each side, not only do people stick to their favorite channels or feeds; they also filter out discordant messages and evidence. Views of “reality” are distorted by emotional as well as intellectual effort to reduce cognitive dissonance. That is, people recognize those facts that fit with their established ways of thinking, feeling, and acting and resist or ignore those that don’t.⁶ For decades, highly mobile elites have looked at globalization and believed that “we are all becoming cosmopolitan.” Nonelites have been more frustrated by changes and likely to believe in QAnon or other conspiracy theories. Different media spread and reinforce such beliefs but do not by themselves cause them.

Polarization is thus more than extreme differences of opinion; it is divergence in ways of seeing the world. It comes not just from tactical sacrifice of the public good, but from fundamentally different understandings of both the public and the public good. These different ways of seeing the world are grounded in different social positions with different material prospects as well as different ways of life. And these differences tend to be correlated with voting patterns: rural versus urban, more and less educated, professional and nonprofessional, actively religious and not, red states versus blue states.

Democracy is not solely a project of reasoned discourse. Emotions, identities, and interests all matter. Where democracy is robust, different identities are recognized and competing interests are negotiated. Sensing political exclusion and feeling impotent may sometimes lead to resignation and disengagement from politics. But at other times a sense of neglect, or exclusion, or being consistently on the short end of policy choices calls forth anger, resentment, and partisan efforts to find culprits to blame.

Frustrations rise when people experience disruption or deterioration in their lives and communities, when they feel they can’t promise their children that things will be better in the future, when, in short, “the system” does not work well for them. Frustration is exacerbated when political elites fail to address popular pain or anger. Inequality affects experiences of globalization, of new technology, and of the role of finance, among other things. But political alignments are not simple, direct reflections of material interests or hardships.

Disempowerment, failed inclusion, and extreme polarization get their most visible public face when they come together in political movements claiming to give voice to the “real people” neglected by conventional politics. Commonly described as “populist,” these movements are reactions to

Introduction

perceived (and perhaps real) neglect. Their motivation is less ideological than emotional, reflecting resentment and frustration. Driven by degenerations of democracy, such movements can bring further disruption, but also new participation to the democratic process.

Angry and resentful populists need not be socially marginal. Of course, some are direct victims of economic change. Many live outside the metropolitan areas that get most public attention. Some are genuinely neglected; some simply do not have their expectations met. They feel that they don't get their due, even when they live in upper-middle-class suburbs and send their children to private schools. Convinced that they are really *the* people, they chafe when “too many” opportunities go to immigrants or racial minorities. Some defend traditional gender roles. They are alarmed by social changes—even changes in intimate relationships—that make their countries seem unfamiliar or less fully theirs.

Taken by Surprise

For years, people who lived in the older liberal democracies simply assumed that these represented the future of humankind. To characterize those democracies as “liberal” means that they protected the rights of individuals, minorities, and open political dissent—as distinct from democracy understood as the pursuit of equality or other potential progress by authoritarian means. As we argue, especially in Chapter 2, complementing democracy with republicanism is what produces its liberal variant.

Sooner or later, the thinking went, everyone would come around to adopting this form of government. This belief is rooted in an optimistic reading of the history of modern democracy generally, as though it has been good and getting better since the Magna Carta or the American Revolution rather than proceeding in fits and starts and struggling to overcome significant limits. Americans, for example, told themselves (and taught schoolchildren) a story of a republic that was always democratic despite slavery and civil war, brutal treatment of American Indians, and long exclusion of women from voting rights.

The optimistic narrative was strengthened by the successive waves of democratization that occurred in the twentieth century: after World War I, after World War II, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The confidence survived even the failures and breakdowns of some of the new democracies that succeeded each wave. But it is shaky now.

DEGENERATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Considering how extreme the crises of global depression, world war, and decolonization were, it is impressive that in their wakes so many people in different countries would think that democracy was almost inevitable. Democracy became a guiding project of Europe's separate countries and eventually the European Union, of all three North American countries, of Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. Postcolonial countries embraced democracy despite recognition that hypocritical colonizers had often been democratic at home and imperialist abroad. India stands out but is not alone. Quite remarkably, South Africa is a multiracial democracy, despite difficulties inherited from its apartheid past. After 1989, democracy came to Eastern Europe and some parts of the former Soviet Union. There was a brief wave of near euphoria—and, too often, complacency.

Optimists argued that democracy spoke directly to an innate human desire for freedom and to the obvious justice of equality. When people saw it in action, they would want it for themselves and their countries. This is not entirely false, but it is drastically oversimplified and misleading. Democracy is not simply a static, preestablished set of procedures that can be adopted like a new technology or the practice of wearing Western business suits and shaking hands at meetings. It is impoverishing to think of democracy as a set of formal procedures or minimum legal guarantees such as freedom of the press. It can be established only through processes of transformation. And once some package of democratic procedures is in place, change will necessarily continue. Democracy flourishes when approached as a project.

Democracy itself raises expectations that existing structures cannot meet. Citizens with some democracy will commonly want more and better democracy—and differ on what that means. As social and economic conditions keep changing, so, too, do the wants and desires of citizens, as well as their capacities for collective action. Both tendencies remind us that democracy is not simply on or off like a light switch, present or absent, or even more or less fully achieved on a linear rating scale.

Democracy, we argue, is necessarily a “telic” concept. It denotes not just a set of conditions but also commitments and aspirations; it is defined by purposes even if these are never perfectly met. Not only its routine operations but also its transformations are guided by ideals. To participate in democracy is to work for more and better democracy. In this sense, democracy is more than the most immediate expressions of popular will. The republican tradition is again important as a source of the idea that de-

Introduction

mocracy can be better, but it is not the only one. Considering the well-being of future generations can be simply an enlargement of the democratic idea of the people. But for democracy to both endure and thrive, it is crucial that it be oriented to the future and open to evaluation and improvement.

And yet, insofar as democracy inherently raises expectations, it can also produce frustration with existing limits. Limits to democracy do not come simply from political mechanisms that incompletely realize its ideals (or the ideals of any particular democratic constitution). They come largely from economic and other social changes that democratic processes do not completely control, but to which they must respond—such as technological change, increases in scale, and the inequality and volatility of capitalism. There can be good aspects to these developments, including greater wealth and longer life-expectancy. But they also cause upheavals in communities and social institutions and at least temporary disempowerment of citizens. How democracies respond is crucial.

Karl Polanyi famously traced such a process of “great transformation” during the first 150 years of industrial capitalism. Enclosures restricted communal access to land, agricultural and craft work were devalued, novel property rights were absolutized, supports for the poor and unemployed were abolished. A new market society was built, bringing new wealth but distributing it unequally and always accompanied by great instability and insecurity.⁷ After two world wars and a global depression, the “double movement” of disruption and reaction was tamed by active state intervention and the building of new institutions for public welfare.

We suggest that a new “great transformation” has been underway since the 1970s. It has brought financialization and globalization, successive crises and brutal austerity policies in response. It has made higher education more important than ever before, more expensive than ever before, and more unequal than ever before. It has been liberating for some and brought new respect for cultural diversity. But it has been sharply disempowering for members of the industrial working classes and created new challenges for many citizens. It has brought a populist response but not yet the needed rebuilding of institutions and communities.

Even while a political system remains formally democratic—conducts elections, for example, and has peaceful transfers of power—democracy can degenerate. Citizens can feel disempowered, and communities can lose capacity to organize collective life. Instead of progressively including a wider range of citizens in full participation, a democratic nation can embrace

DEGENERATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

exclusion and hierarchy. Partisan polarization can fracture not just politics but ordinary social solidarity.

When social conditions change, democracies need to renew their political institutions. Too often, elites have instead stood aloof, deploring extreme problems, but also benefiting from changes that are disruptive or even destructive for others. Globalization is a prime example. It is an economic benefit for corporations, their shareholders, and their higher-level employees. It is a benefit for consumers who are offered new variety of products and competitive pressures to keep prices low. It is a tax benefit for those able to hide their wealth in foreign havens and shell companies. But it is not a benefit for workers who lose jobs or are forced to relocate, or for others who live in communities undercut by the loss of industrial employers. For decades, elites have enjoyed the benefits and been complacent about the losses. This has driven a weak policy response not just to globalization but to the transformations of globalization, financialization, new technologies, and new structures of corporate power.

Indeed, we can now see degenerations of democracy shaping responses not just to economic changes and disruptions, but to pressing global concerns, ranging from the coronavirus pandemic to climate change and migration. These challenges clearly cross borders. Response demands transnational collective action. Instead, we have seen renewal of competitive and sometimes belligerent nationalism. Citizens face these crises with little trust in government. Institutions are too often damaged or dysfunctional. The actual history of elite leadership inspires resentment more than confidence.

The coronavirus pandemic is a case in point. Hopes for recovery . . . have led many to speak of a return to “normal.” This is misleading, not just because the pandemic is likely to last longer than many imagine, and its socioeconomic consequences to last still longer. More basically, recovery will not be a return to some imagined previous stable conditions. We will recover from the pandemic only with transformation. This will involve not just public health but systemic issues, from supply chains to restructured employment to global cooperation. Likewise, it is hard to conceptualize what might be meant by a return to normal in global migration. And it is at most a fantasy with regard to climate change.

To face these challenges without further degenerations of democracy, we need both to recover from degenerations of the last fifty years and to rebuild democracy’s social foundations. It is vital to renew republican political norms and complement this with rebuilding structures of solidarity from

Introduction

communities to state institutions. And as we recover from each disruption, we will also face new challenges.

It will not be possible to save democratic freedoms, constitutional processes, and political cohesion without such transformation. This will require resuming historical struggles to deepen democracy; it will require commitment to new agendas.

In this book, we come at these challenges from two angles. Craig Calhoun and Charles Taylor focus mainly on the United States and other Western democracies that have grown wealthy through a compromise with capitalism. They examine deep problems and yet insist that these can be addressed and democracy can resume its telic improvements, albeit in non-linear transformations. Dilip Gaonkar focuses on India, where an impressive democratic history has contended with massive inequality and deep heterogeneity. He offers a counterweight to Calhoun's and Taylor's determined optimism, pointing to the "politics of the street" in which popular will is expressed without being fully integrated into republican or other telic agendas for improvement. He recalls Greek arguments that democracy was necessarily unstable.

The cases are not diametrically opposed. India shows that republican institutions and telic pursuit of better democracy can take root outside the West and in a country contending with enormous poverty and division—even if the success of that achievement is now challenged. Conversely, the United States and Europe are not without a politics of the street, not without citizen mobilizations that express anger or resentment without clear agendas for improvement. And while Calhoun and Taylor stress the importance of more inclusive democracy, they recognize that it is a challenge and will be incomplete for the imaginable future. Gaonkar worries about a phase of "ugly democracy" but hopes renewal of republicanism and social solidarity can mitigate it.

Conventional stories and assumptions about democracy can be prone to illusions. For example, many Americans tell themselves stories of innocent origins that minimize the significance of exclusions and oppressions, not least of slavery. Or they acknowledge that there were problems but believe that these have been eliminated in a linear story of progress, forgetting the Civil War among other setbacks. And there are Indians who narrate a story in which the Mughal and British Empires brought distortions to an essentially Hindu country that would be a more thriving democracy and stronger nation if they were removed, forgetting both the need for struggles against inequality and their partial successes.

DEGENERATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

We should overcome these illusions, but not replace them with cynicism. It would be a mistake to see injustice and oppression as constants, to fail to recognize the extent to which democrats have not only fought for greater liberty, equality, and solidarity but sometimes achieved a great deal. Degenerations of democracy have undermined what these democratic struggles achieved, but attention to the past struggles shows that achievements are possible. Indeed, achievements have been remarkable. We will, for example, point to failures and difficulties in the social and political inclusion of migrants. This is a serious challenge. Even famous nations of immigrants such as the United States and Australia have recurrently been abusive. But the historical record is not one of unremitting failure. It is one of impressive achievement despite setbacks and obstacles. After long struggles, women did gain the right to vote. Inequality was reduced and opportunities for social mobility increased when universal public education was matched with expanding job markets and the support of trade unions. Now it seems to many that these possibilities are foreclosed. We do not agree.

Limits of Liberalism

For fifty years, dominant elites in the developed world have pursued broadly liberal agendas. These shared emphases on freedom and rights but with very different priorities. Classical liberalism, and then “neoliberalism,” were grounded in “possessive individualism” and focused on giving maximal rights to the owners of property and minimizing government regulation and ownership. The other agenda has been an “expressive liberalism” seeking to expand the extent to which individuals can choose their own identities and goals and pursue them without obstacles.⁸ Both have supported individual liberties, even if differently construed. They could converge in recognizing a similar right for different reasons—for example, to freedom of religion on the grounds that beliefs and conscience are forms of private property or because religion is a form of self-expression. But, as Calhoun and Taylor discuss in Chapter 4, emphasis on individual freedom can come at the expense of equality and social solidarity. In recent decades the two forms of liberalism have coincided to help upend the balance necessary to a viable democratic—and indeed, liberal—society.

Neoliberalism has shaped an economy with opportunities and rewards for entrepreneurs. Together with financialization, it has contributed to capital flows away from the richest countries and toward several historically

Introduction

underdeveloped but rapidly growing ones, and notably facilitated the rise of China. Domestically, it has brought dramatically increased inequality, disrupted communities, and damaged the environment. Expressive liberalism has brought important expansions of individual freedom. It has promoted rights for the previously underrepresented and disadvantaged—but only so long as these do not include economic reorganization or redistribution.⁹ Too often, the inclusion has been more symbolic than material. Together, liberals of the two orientations have embraced cosmopolitanism but not community, technological change without enough care for those whose lives became more precarious.

In this context, right-wing populism flourished. However much it may have been manipulated from above or steered by financial contributions, it also expressed a popular reaction. First, populists reacted against fifty years of deindustrialization and neoliberal globalization, which had undermined communities, eliminated good jobs, deprived middle-aged workers of anticipated happy retirements, and brought devastating opioid addictions. Second, populists reacted against what they saw as disrespect from political elites and against the sense that less deserving minorities or immigrants or women were gaining at their expense. To an outside critic this might look like panic over potential loss of privilege but many experienced it as a threat to just entitlements. In the extreme, they feared that although they were the “real” citizens and “true” representatives of the legitimate nation, they were being replaced.

Initially informed more by anger, frustration, and resentment of elites than by ideology, these populist and grassroots mobilizations have been successfully claimed by demagogues and conspiracy theorists with the help of new media. Racism and hostility to immigrants are voiced in the name of “the people” and thus of democratic citizens even while they violate the democratic promise of inclusivity. Not least, at both national and international levels, new information and communication technologies join with corporations, markets, and finance to dramatically increase the scale of sociotechnical systems, embedding individuals in ever more indirect relationships that are hard to see, let alone manage. Citizens have faced all of these changes with too little social support from communities, intermediate associations, and institutions of the welfare state; many have experienced them as deeply disempowering. Collective identity, belonging, and well-being have suffered at the same time that economic capacity and political voice have declined.¹⁰

DEGENERATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

We can see examples in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Rich countries organized to produce vaccines, but not to deliver them throughout their societies—let alone the whole world. This undercut their effectiveness and opened paths for mutations and recurrent surges. Inequalities intensified by neoliberalism have manifested in different medical treatments and death rates for rich and poor. Stock and other asset markets have soared, making billionaires richer; millions of their fellow citizens have lost jobs or been forced to leave the labor force to become unpaid caregivers. Others have taken precarious employment as drivers, cleaners, and health aides. The call for “social distancing” has disguised the real social and economic distance between those able to readily adapt in comfortable homes and professional occupations and those forced by necessity to work in more problematic conditions. Response to the pandemic has been neither egalitarian nor unified.

Despite its wealth, the United States was initially unable to deliver needed protective equipment to health workers and ventilators to patients in intensive care. Public health professionals had warned of the risks for years, but planning and preparation did not keep pace. On the contrary, single-minded pursuit of efficiency in health care institutions has been the enemy of preparedness and resilience, since saving money by not keeping stock on hand brought reliance on long supply chains intended to deliver equipment “just in time”—supply chains that failed to perform. Not only have institutions been overstretched, but resistance to public health responses has been politicized. Leaders have exacerbated conflict when cohesion and common purpose have been needed. Citizens have felt helpless, unable to take charge of their own lives, shorn of influence over national policy or the global spread of disease. The United States has not been the only democracy unable to overcome regional, class, and occupational disparities—and political polarization. In Germany, for example, state governments have also rebelled against federal restrictions. In Britain and France, necessary public health efforts have been met with politicized opposition and rejection. Like many, India’s government has vacillated between complacency and erratically imposed emergency measures that have weighed hardest on the poor.

An increasingly authoritarian China has suggested that Western (read liberal) democratic societies are too weak to deal with challenges such as Covid-19. This is trebly distorting. It ignores the part played in Covid’s early rise by pathologies of China’s authoritarian governance, not least of which

Introduction

was that local authorities hid crucial information for fear of what would happen if they shared it with higher authorities—let alone citizens. It ignores how well some democracies—New Zealand, for one—have done at managing Covid-19 and how democracies have led the world in developing vaccines. And it exaggerates the extent to which particular regimes, like Donald Trump’s in the United States, represent failings of democracy as such, rather than degenerate forms. Still, the question of democratic capacity must be asked, as must questions about climate and other emergencies beyond the pandemic.

Amartya Sen famously argued that among the virtues of democracy was preventing famines.¹¹ Pestilence, floods, and crop failures have brought catastrophic reductions in food supply throughout history. But who starved depended not just on how much food there was but also on how it was distributed; entitlement to a share was basic to survival. In democracies, everyone had a claim on available food, and starvation was minimal, even among the poor and socially marginal.¹² One might have thought a similar commitment to the welfare—even just the survival—of all citizens would have kept fatalities low in democratic countries during the Covid-19 pandemic that started in late 2019. This has not been the case. The United States, Brazil, India, and several European democracies have been among the most affected. Democracy may be good at minimizing famine, but it has not proven equally good at preventing plagues—at least not in its degenerate forms.

How the consequences of the pandemic will play out is not entirely clear; there are still choices to be made. As Calhoun and Taylor argue in Chapter 7, a key question is how much they will be made on the basis of an egalitarian and unified pursuit of the public good. What is clear is that Covid-19 has made it impossible to ignore what was once called “the social question.” During the Industrial Revolution, the term referred to challenges of poverty, unemployment, food shortages, toxic pollution, and inadequate housing. Now it has become apparent that the old evils have not vanished even from rich countries, let alone poorer ones.¹³ Inequalities in vulnerability, vaccination, and care have become a new social question.

Democracies have faltered in handling the pandemic not so much because their governments lacked resources, power, or policy capacity as because they lacked social cohesion and commitment to the public good. The problem is not that democracy is necessarily weak. The problem is that democracy has degenerated.

DEGENERATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Sources of Degeneration

The degeneration of democracy is caused not simply by poor political leaders, though too many are either puerile or corrupt, or by “technical” deficiencies of electoral systems. Nor does it stem entirely from external pressures, though these are real: massive economic upheaval, geopolitical shifts, destabilization of national institutions, failure of global cooperation, insidious manipulation of media and information systems, and intensification of inequality.

Democracy degenerates when ordinary people feel they are deprived of the ability to make good lives for themselves and their families. It degenerates when communities are not able democratically to shape their own futures, so fully are they determined by choices of distant powers and impersonal characteristics of capitalist markets or other large-scale systems. It degenerates when some citizens seek to marginalize others, not just blocking their votes but also restricting their access to public institutions and even public spaces. Democracy degenerates when citizens no longer treat each other with basic respect and recognition and when citizens refuse to accept that they really belong together.

Degenerations reflect erosion in the social foundations for democracy. Citizens have lost stable communities, supportive and enabling institutions, and political parties able to forge effective internal coalitions and external alliances to work for the common good. We are linked across communities by abstract and impersonal systems—most importantly markets. But we have too few occasions to forge more personal connections across the distances among us. Mass military participation did this for Americans in World War II. It achieved less solidarity in the ill-conceived and divisive Vietnam War. But in the wake of that conflict, the United States unfortunately replaced selective but compulsory military service not with a fair model of universal national service, but with “volunteer” recruitment that made participation a matter of class position, a caste-like continuity in families, and for some, a very politicized patriotism. Likewise, participation in religion can connect the local to wider networks, national denominations, international missions. But even in the United States, where religious participation long remained much higher than in most of the developed world, it has plummeted by more than a third in recent decades (and local church membership is less often integrated into national denominations).¹⁴ Legacy media—newspapers, broadcast television—once supported public discourse

Introduction

partly by establishing such crosscutting connections and a common background of knowledge. But they have been undermined by the loss of their economic foundations in an era of new electronic media. New media have opened up democratic participation but not yet achieved adequate ways to stay oriented to truthful knowledge and cooperation, rather than deception and conflict.

Democracies have weathered deep crises before, but then again, they have also sometimes succumbed. The most famous instance is the end of Germany's Weimar Republic, as the National Socialists—the Nazis—came to power.¹⁵ The end of Germany's democracy reflected degenerations of the kind we describe here, combined with economic crisis, adverse international relations, and an effective, organized, and ruthless movement to claim power. Democracy was reestablished only after Germany lost a catastrophic war, and only in one part of a newly divided country.

Still, democracy can survive and even thrive after degenerations—if they are countered by vigorous constructive action. We offer our account of degenerations of democracy in the hope that it can further such projects of renewal and regeneration. We hasten to add that these projects must involve more than mere repair or attempts to return to an old “normal.” In Chapter 7, we outline some possibilities. What is crucial is to treat democracy as a project—to create stronger democracy and more generally a better future.

I

Degenerations of Democracy

CHARLES TAYLOR

Let's start off by repeating some very widely known things about the history of the word "democracy," because they help cast light on our present predicament.

"Democracy," as everyone knows, stopped being a pejorative term only two hundred years ago. The bad rap goes back to Aristotle. For Aristotle, democracy was the unchecked, as it were, uncontrolled, power of the *demos*—the *demos* being the nonelite of the society—over everyone else, including the elites, meaning aristocrats and those with money. Likewise, on the other side, oligarchy was unchecked control by the rich and noble. So, for Aristotle, the best society was what he called a *politeia*, a balance between the two, a balance of power.

Up until the eighteenth century, if you proposed democracy, including to the authors of the American Constitution, they would have said, "That's not what we want at all." They, too, thought in terms of balance, and they called their new polity a "republic," which is one possible translation of Aristotle's term: *politeia* is, after all, the original title of Plato's great work, which today we call *The Republic*. But democracy in the late eighteenth century was really bad news.

And then suddenly it becomes our word for the most desirable society. In other words, the term that was previously defined in contrast with a "polity" or "republic"—namely, "democracy"—suddenly usurps their prestige

and legitimacy. It becomes our word for what we are fighting to make the world safe for, the highest form of political life.

But this shift leaves in its wake a certain ambiguity, which we can see in the double meaning of the words we use to translate *demos*—that is, *people*, *peuple*, *Volk*, *popolo*, and so on. They always have two senses. On one hand, they mean the whole population of the nation, or political entity, as when we speak of the French people or Dutch people being liberated from Nazi occupation in 1944–1945. But, on the other hand, we often use the term for what the Greeks called the *demos*—that is, the nonelites—just as early moderns distinguished “demotic” languages from Latin and the languages of often conquering elites, or as, today, when political leaders claim that the people are being tricked, exploited, or otherwise maltreated by the elites.

Democracy Is a Telic Concept

Double meaning is ineliminable, because it reflects the ambition behind the word “democracy.” In the end, ideally, these two senses of the word would be fused: there would be a society ruled by the whole people, but without an elite that manages to put the rest in the shade and to operate to their disadvantage. In other terms, democracy would be a truly equal society. Democracy is a telic concept, necessarily a matter of purposes and ideals, not merely conditions or causal relations. It is defined by standards that can never be met.

So, we have different ways of identifying democracy: we say that some countries have a democracy because they have the rule of law, for example, or because they have elections in which all the people can participate. Universal suffrage is the key here, along with the requirement of “free and fair” elections, which in turn require that the media are free. But then we also frequently make another judgment about certain societies that pass the “free and fair” test, to the effect that they are very “undemocratic” because of inequalities—of income, wealth, education, class, or race—which are linked as both cause and effect with disproportionate elite power.

The electoral criterion is of an on / off kind: a country either passes the universal suffrage “free and fair” requirement, or it doesn’t. (The world is, of course, much more fuzzy, but our judgments are categorical.) But the second notion of democracy is telic.

This is a concept of what the ideal should be, what democracy should integrally realize. This would be something like a condition of ideal equality,

Index

Page numbers in *italics* indicate figures.

- abandonment, 207. *See also* neglect
acclamation, 168
achievement, possibility of, 12
Adams, John, 63, 178
Adenaue, Konrad, 91
advertising, 232
AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), 39–40
affirmation, 213–215
affirmative action, 145
affluent society, 91
Affordable Care Act, 23
Africa, 258. *See also individual countries*
African Americans. *See* Black Americans
aged, care for, 241–242
agency. *See* efficacy, citizen
AIDS, public health response to, 256
Alcibiades, 173
Alexander, Jeff, 34
Algeria, 93
all, definition of, 129
Allen, Robert, 85, 266
Allende, Salvador, 108, 163, 262
Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), 39–40
Amazon, 122, 278. *See also* information and
communication transformation
American dream, 157. *See also* meritocracy
American Indian Movement, 56, 127
American Indians, 54, 69, 106, 116, 126. *See also*
indigenous populations
anarchists, 251
anger bank, 161
anti-elitism, 123
antifa, 227
anti-intellectualism, 102
antitrust law, 71
Anywheres, 135–136, 276
AOL, 278
Apple, 278
Arab Spring, 20, 162–163, 205, 262
Arendt, Hannah, 42, 59, 176
arete, 173
Argentina, 258
aristocratic inheritance, 144
Aristophanes, 170
Aristotle, 18, 21, 171, 173, 175, 260
Asia, 42, 258. *See also* China
assembly, 203. *See also* crowds; riots
associations, 80, 89, 99, 272; civil society organ-
izations, 234–235; climate action and, 256;
erosion of, 236, 249; importance of, 65; neolib-
eralism and, 117; newspapers and, 66; road
travel and, 95. *See also* community; connections;
organizations; social support; solidarity; unions
attention economy, 232
austerity programs, 32, 40, 131, 245. *See also* euro crisis
authenticity, 24, 105, 129–130, 131–142, 175, 220,
275–276; appeal of, 130; as form of individualism,
133; meritocracy and, 147; neglect of less fortunate,
139; Silicon Valley and, 137. *See also* autonomy;
identity; individualism; self-sufficiency

Index

- authoritarian democracy, 166
- authoritarianism, 22, 44, 179, 208, 258, 263;
dynamics of, 265; information flow and, 232;
nationalism and, 22; resurgence of, 261; surveil-
lance by, 231. *See also* China; Soviet Union
- authoritarian populism, 165
- automation, 26, 31, 121, 136, 273–274. *See also*
technology; work, transformation of
- autonomy, 130. *See also* authenticity
- backsliding, 20, 23, 38, 165. *See also* degenerations
of democracy
- banks, 120
- Bannon, Steve, 166
- Belgium, 93
- benefits: demands for, 107; loss of, 101; retirement,
71, 90, 101, 119, 240, 242; in *les trente glorieuses*,
100. *See also* health insurance; retirement
- Benioff, Mark, 125
- Benjamin, Walter, 283
- Bezos, Jeff, 123, 124, 125
- Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), 166, 169, 179, 188, 192
- Biden, Joe, 110, 138, 232, 244, 250
- billionaires, 120, 123–124. *See also* elites
- Bill of Rights, 52, 282
- BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), 166, 169, 179, 188, 192
- Black Americans, 220, 222–223, 229; citizenship
of, 53; Constitution and, 52–53; demands for
equality of, 106; discrimination against, 57, 58;
economic exclusion of, 100; empowerment
and, 220; eugenics and, 148; exclusion of in New
Deal, 249; GI Bill and, 57; great migration,
75; illth and, 116; mass incarceration and, 220,
228–229; police violence against, 37, 141–142,
205, 207, 226–227; recognition of, 140;
veterans, 57, 58; wealth of, 126. *See also* civil
rights movement; exclusion; slavery; voter
suppression; voting rights
- Black Lives Matter, 37, 142, 198, 207, 226, 251
- Black men, 222–223, 229. *See also* Black
Americans
- Black Panthers, 206
- Blair, Tony, 146, 274
- Bolshevism, 46
- Bolsonaro, Jair, 166, 168
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 104, 146, 157
- Bourdieu catch, 104–105, 106, 146, 185–186
- bourgeois revolution, 276–278
- Braunstein, Ruth, 213
- Brazil, 166, 258
- Bretton Woods, 92
- Brexit, 1, 3, 4, 38, 103, 136, 157, 216, 230, 252, 262
- Brighouse, Harry, 151
- Britain: Brexit, 1, 3, 4, 38, 103, 136, 157, 216, 230,
262; collective identity in, 4; Conservatives
against Labour, 36; Covid-19 response in, 14;
democracy's endurance in, 160; education in,
153; historical context and, 48; institutions in,
240; internal decay and corruption in, 262;
money-politics in, 230; Reform Acts, 54;
undemocratic institutions in, 160; voting rights
in, 54. *See also* England
- Brown v. Board of Education*, 178
- Bryan, William Jennings, 70, 119, 266
- Buffett, Warren, 123, 124
- “Build Back Better,” 250
- bureaucracy, 25, 103–104, 106, 249
- Burke, Edmund, 117
- Bush, George H. W., 164
- Bush, George W., 27
- business: government economic engagement
and, 99. *See also* companies; corporations
- businesses, small and medium-sized, 255
- Cambridge Analytica, 231, 233
- campaigns, 26, 167, 169. *See also* elections
- Canada, 4, 48, 218, 219. *See also* Quebec
- Canetti, Elias, 199
- capitalism, 9, 182, 268; changes in, 184, 249;
compromise with democracy, 88, 97–102, 106,
268–269, 283 (*See also* *trente glorieuses*, *les*);
disruption by, 82–87, 185
- capitalism, crony, 26
- capitalism, organized, 98–102, 121, 269, 273.
See also *trente glorieuses*, *les*
- capitalism, stakeholder, 113–114
- capitalism, surveillance, 231
- capital markets, 76
- Capitol, assault on, 1, 208, 214–215, 223, 227,
262
- care homes, 241–242
- Carlson, Tucker, 280
- cars, 95–96
- ensorship, 233
- Census, US, 64
- centralization, 74, 80, 236, 244, 249, 255, 256.
See also decentralization
- CEO compensation, 115
- change, movements for, 203. *See also* social
movements
- changes, social, 7, 10, 85, 86, 87, 185–186, 195, 209,
217, 286. *See also* institutions; transformation;
trente glorieuses, *les*
- Chávez, Hugo, 166, 168
- childcare, 101, 222. *See also* institutions
- Chile, 108, 163, 258, 262, 274

Index

- China, 46, 130; authoritarian governance of, 14–15; Covid-19 and, 14–15; loss of, 93; Mandarin elite, 144; mass group incidents in, 198; model of government, 1–2, 164–165; predictions of democracy in, 22; rise of, 274; surveillance in, 231; totalitarian rule in, 42
- Christensen, Clayton, 82
- Christians, Evangelical, 228
- cities, 70, 72, 75. *See also* cosmopolitanism
- citizens, 49; corporations as, 114; disempowerment of (*See* disempowerment of citizens; efficacy, citizen). *See also* demos; “people”
- citizenship: of Black Americans, 52–53; equal, decline of, 24–26; in India, 204; removing restrictions on, 53–58. *See also* equality; inclusion
- Citizens United*, 112, 114, 230
- Civic Sphere, The* (Alexander), 34
- civic virtue, 2. *See also* social foundations of democracy
- civility, 280
- civil rights, 90. *See also* voting rights
- Civil Rights Act of 1875, 54–55
- Civil Rights Act of 1957, 55
- Civil Rights Act of 1964, 97
- civil rights movement, 56, 58, 94–95, 127, 176, 178, 194, 225. *See also* social movements
- civil society, 272
- Civil War, US, 54–55, 56–57, 225, 282
- class, socioeconomic, 100. *See also* elites; inequality; middle class; nonelites; working class
- class conflict, 24, 174, 182–186, 283
- class consciousness of frequent flyers, 81–82
- climate action, 128, 253
- climate change, 10, 42, 209, 249. *See also* Green New Deal
- Clinton, Bill, 28, 274
- Clinton, Hillary, 157, 167, 212
- coalitions, majority, 190–191. *See also* majoritarianism
- cohesion, 15, 59, 60–61; achieving, 59; democracy’s need for, 134; loss of, 128; neoliberalism and, 117; in *les trente glorieuses*, 100. *See also* identity; public good; solidarity
- Cold War, 89, 92, 93, 106, 274. *See also* *trente glorieuses, les*
- collectivities: political capacity of, 173. *See also* demos; nonelites; “people”
- college. *See* education, higher
- colonialism, 93
- colonialism, internal, 70
- communication, 268. *See also* information and communication transformation; media
- communism, 88, 91, 92, 134, 258, 269. *See also* China; Soviet Union
- community, 16, 89; Anywheres, 135–136, 276; building new, 76; climate action and, 256; deindustrialization and, 122; erosion of, 2, 74, 96, 128, 209, 215, 218, 236, 239, 249; loss of young people, 74; neoliberalism and, 117; polarization in, 237–238; renewing, 85, 235–239; self-organized, 236, 238; Somewheres, 135–136, 276. *See also* associations; connections; mobility, geographic; relationships; solidarity; support systems
- community, deliberative, 42–43
- community, imagined, 176. *See also* “people”
- companies. *See* business; corporations; employment; jobs; work
- complacency, 8, 23
- compromises, 271–272. *See also* *trente glorieuses, les*
- conflict: between classes, 13, 24, 123, 161, 174, 181, 182–186, 283; culture wars, 275–276; social change and, 195. *See also* social tension
- conformity, 272
- Congo, 93
- connections: democracy and, 81; economic ideology and, 78–79; erosion of, 2; media and, 235; national service and, 218, 236; need for, 217; renewal of democracy and, 257; republicanism and, 81. *See also* community; social connections; solidarity; support systems
- connectivity, technologies of, 279. *See also* information and communication transformation
- conservatism, 109
- conservative label, 273. *See also* neoliberalism
- conservatives, classical, 117
- conspiracy theories, 208
- Constitution, US, 21, 49, 50; amendments to, 281; Bill of Rights, 52, 282; Black Americans and, 52–53; contradictions in, 51–53, 57; discrimination in, 146–147; exclusion in, 51–52; First Amendment, 112, 114; Nineteenth Amendment, 53; overcoming contradictions in, 53–58; removing restrictions on citizenship in, 54–58; revision of, 52; Second Amendment, 52; task of, 62
- constitutional-institutional strategy, 177
- constitutions: erosion of democracy and, 264; republican, 50; undermining, 178–179
- consumerism, 24, 91, 98
- consumption, conspicuous, 151
- coronavirus pandemic. *See* Covid-19 pandemic
- corporate social responsibility, 112–114
- corporations, 77–78, 111–118, 230, 273. *See also* business; employment; jobs; work

Index

- corruption, 2, 26, 154–156, 204, 211
 cosmopolitanism, 81–82. *See also* cities
 Cottom, Tressie McMillan, 155
 Coughlin, Charles, 266
 counter-powers, 44
 coups d'état, 108, 163, 261–263
 Covid-19 pandemic, 37, 123, 209; democracies
 and, 14–15; disempowerment of citizens and,
 80; elites during, 81–82, 120, 139; health care
 workers and, 243; job losses and, 243–244;
 knowledge workers during, 278; polarization
 and, 208; recovery from, 10, 241, 244, 254;
 resilience and, 238; response to, 14–15; revela-
 tion of weaknesses by, 30, 239; service workers
 and, 243–244; technological transformation
 and, 279; vaccines and, 15, 244, 256, 280
 creative class, 278
 creativity, 121
 crime, reproduction of, 228
 crises: elites during, 123; euro crisis, 32, 40; financial
 crisis (2008–2009), 119, 120, 123, 131, 240, 274,
 278; financialization and, 118–127; Great
 Depression, 90, 99, 247–249; neoliberalism
 and, 108–111; of 1970s, 106–127, 241, 272–273.
 See also climate change; Covid-19 pandemic
 crowds, 194, 199–200, 211, 213–214. *See also*
 protests; riots
Crowds and Power (Canetti), 199
 cultural capital, 104, 146, 156
 cultural change, 217. *See also* social change
 cultural fear, 40–41
 culture, 41, 179. *See also* identity
 culture wars, 275–276
 cynicism, 12, 251

 Dahl, Robert, 170
 Dalit Panthers, 206
 data collection, 67–69, 104, 230–233
 Davis, Mike, 206
 debt, student, 126, 155
 decentralization, 236, 244
 Declaration of Independence, 51–52, 58–63, 94
 decolonization, 93
 de Gaulle, Charles, 91
 degenerations of democracy, 1–2, 16, 20, 31, 33–41,
 193, 208–209, 218, 261
 deindustrialization, 13, 87, 98, 113, 119, 121, 122,
 249, 269. *See also* job loss
 Deleuze, Gilles, 203
 demagogues, 208, 213–216. *See also* populism;
 Trump, Donald J.
 democracy, 18–19, 88, 126; adaptability of, 282;
 backsliding, 20, 23, 38, 165; compromise with
 capitalism, 88, 97–102, 106, 268–269, 283 (*See*
 also *trente glorieuses, les*); confidence in, 7–8;
 contradictions in, 53–58; excluding from eco-
 nomics, 110 (*See also* neoliberalism); expanding
 capitalism and, 182; failure of, 244; future of,
 1, 209; goal of, 38; historical contexts and, 48;
 identifying, 19–20; legitimacy of, 240; main-
 taining appearance of, 264; modern vs. ancient,
 30; moving toward, 20; need for social trans-
 formation, 209; as only legitimate form of
 government, 164 (*See also* legitimacy); as
 permanent struggle, 193; predictions of end of,
 164; as process, 128; as project, 8–9, 17, 48;
 resistances to, 160, 162; as self-transforming, 286;
 survival of, 161; telic character of, 19–22, 27, 31,
 32, 48, 128, 160, 186, 281–283; undermined from
 within, 165, 262, 263–265; uneven progress by,
 282; versions of, 159 (*See also* democracy, ugly);
 views of, 18–19, 21, 61–62; vulnerabilities of,
 261, 265. *See also* degenerations of democracy;
 renewal of democracy; social foundations of
 democracy
 democracy, Athenian, 170–172, 282
 democracy, authoritarian, 166
 democracy, direct, 61
 democracy, failed, 17, 178–179, 244
 democracy, illegitimate, 165
 democracy, illiberal, 41, 166, 190, 265
 democracy, representative, 26–28, 192–193
 democracy, rigged, 41, 46. *See also* Iran; Russia;
 Turkey
 democracy, social. *See* social democracy
 democracy, ugly, 11, 165, 166–167, 178, 196, 264–265
Democracy in America (Tocqueville), 174
 democratic breakdowns, 162, 163. *See also* degen-
 erations of democracy
 democratic crisis, 265
 democratic method, 169
 democratic recessions, 163. *See also* degenerations
 of democracy
 democratic regeneration. *See* renewal of democracy
 democratic socialism, 90, 209. *See also* social
 democracy
 democratic theater, 264
 democratic transitions, 7–8, 162–164, 258–259,
 274, 278
Democratic Vistas (Whitman), 186
 demonstrations, 204. *See also* direct action; protests
 demos, 18, 49, 60; capacity for participation, 172;
 liberal anxiety about, 170–174; loss of cohesion,
 128; Plato's image of, 199; recalling and
 remaking, 161–162, 178–180 (*See also* renewal of
 democracy); redescribed, 37 (*See also* exclusion);