

University of Vienna  
Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies

**5<sup>th</sup> Gerald Stourzh Lecture**  
**on the History of Human Rights and Democracy 2013**

***James T. Kloppenberg***  
**(Harvard University)**

**Tragic Irony**  
**Democracy in European and American Thought**

held on 15th May 2013

Edited on behalf of the Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies  
by Thomas Angerer, Birgitta Bader-Zaar, and Margarete Grandner

The history of human rights and democracy is a major field of activity in which the Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies at the University of Vienna is engaged. Gerald Stourzh, professor emeritus of modern history and one of the most renowned Austrian historians of his generation, has prominently positioned the history of human rights and democracy at the University of Vienna during nearly three decades of research and teaching. At the same time, his academic achievements in the field have provided profound and lasting incentives internationally. In the annual *Gerald Stourzh Lectures on the History of Human Rights and Democracy* distinguished scholars present new insights in this field and put them up for discussion.

The lectures are published at <http://www.univie.ac.at/gerald-stourzh-lectures>.

Swept forward by the volcanic flow of popular passion, democracy has buried all alternatives to become the world's ideal. Democracy has served as the stated aim of almost all the world's insurgent movements in the twenty-first century, no matter how diverse the histories or traditions or aspirations of the people involved. When Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, received the first Nobel Peace Prize awarded in this century, he proclaimed with confidence "three key priorities for the future: eradicating poverty, preventing conflict and promoting democracy." Fifty years earlier, a UNESCO report had already signaled the dramatic change: "For the first time in the history of the world, no doctrines are advanced as antidemocratic."<sup>1</sup>

It was not always so. In many parts of the world, the appeal of democracy remained mysterious long after the popular revolutions of the eighteenth century swept aside old regimes and resulted in the establishment of the United States and the first republic in France. But in time the effect of those revolutions became not only unmistakable but undeniable. In 1848, shortly after the armies of Central European autocrats had turned back the latest wave of democratic revolutions, King Maximilian II of Bavaria invited the most celebrated German historian of the nineteenth century, Leopold von Ranke, to help him understand the puzzling revolt of his previously contented subjects. In a series of private lectures for the new king, Ranke explained that "ideas spread most rapidly when they have found adequate concrete expression." When the Americans rebelled against Great Britain, Ranke observed, they "introduced a new force in the world." Until then "the conviction had prevailed in Europe that monarchy best served the interests of the nation. Now the idea spread that the nation should govern itself." Only when the United States had actually taken shape "did the full significance of this idea become clear. All later revolutionary movements had this same goal." Prior to the creation of the United States as a nation, Ranke continued, Europeans agreed that "a king who ruled by the grace of God had been the center around which everything turned." After the American Revolution, "the idea emerged that power should come from below." It was

---

<sup>1</sup> Kofi ANNAN quoted in *The New York Times*, December 11, 2001, A3. Other influential assessments of the universality of democracy at the turn of the twenty-first century include Amartya SEN, *Democracy as a Universal Value*. In: *Journal of Democracy* 10/3 (1999) 3-17; and the widely circulated report by FREEDOM HOUSE, *Democracy's Century: A Survey of Global Political Change in the 20th Century* (New York 1999), which reported that the number of democratic nations had mushroomed from a mere handful in 1900 to over sixty percent by the end of the century. Although those nations contained less than forty percent of the world's population, the report confidently predicted that the further expansion of democracy, now praised if not yet practiced everywhere, was only a matter of time. In Sen's formulation, the intrinsic, instrumental, and constructive values of democracy transcend cultural differences and render it the standard worldwide. See also Richard MCKEON (ed.), *Democracy in a World of Tensions* (Paris 1951).

the conflict between those two principles, Ranke concluded, that would now determine “the course of the modern world.”<sup>2</sup>

Ranke was right. Until the eighteenth century democracy was usually a term of abuse, a term usually used to denigrate one’s opponents. From the 1770s to the 1870s things began to change. But if democracy erupted with volcanic force throughout the North Atlantic world, different preexisting cultural and institutional topographies remained beneath the surface to shape the emerging forms of popular government. Democracy was the ideal of the radicals in British North America who created the United States. Democracy inspired revolutions in France and across continental Europe. Democracy fueled reform movements that eventually transformed nineteenth-century Great Britain, even though the nation’s monarchical form of government remained. In the German-speaking states, no political party in power outside Swiss-influenced Württemberg would dare designate itself “democratic” until 1918, when the First Austrian Republic and the Weimar Republic were established. After 1945, Austria and each of the two Germanies established on the ruins of the Third Reich proudly proclaimed themselves a popular government, and each denounced the other as a traitor to the true principle of democracy, “the idea,” as Ranke had put it a century earlier, “that power should come from below.”

The noisy disputes that raged between the Bundesrepublik and the GDR until the latter collapsed in 1989, like the current struggles among competing groups within nations just emerging from long experience under autocracy, signal the central questions I address in my study of the rise of democracy in European and American thought. What does democracy mean? Why did it emerge? How and why has it failed? In the book I am completing, I argue that for most men and women in modern Europe and the United States, democracy has meant something beyond the indispensable institutions of constitutional government and free elections. Democracy in the modern North Atlantic world has had a broader cultural significance, which can best be understood by examining what lies beneath the ideas of autonomy, reciprocity, and popular sovereignty. Rather than thinking of democracy primarily or exclusively in terms of political – or even economic or social – institutions or arrangements, we should think of democracy as an ethical ideal.

---

<sup>2</sup> Leopold von RANKE, *Aus Werk und Nachlaß*, vol. 2: *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte*. Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, ed. by Theodor SCHIEDER, Helmut BERDING (Munich 1971) 415-417, quote translated by Willi Paul ADAMS, *The Liberal and Democratic Republicanism of the First American State Constitutions, 1776-1780*. In: Jürgen HEIDEKING, James A. HENRETTA (eds.), *Republicanism and Liberalism in America and the German States, 1750-1850* (Cambridge/New York 2002) 128.

Democracy is rooted in the premise that all citizens should have the capacity to shape their own lives within boundaries established by the standards and traditions of their communities, and that all citizens should be able to participate in shaping those standards and revising those traditions.

My history of democracy in European and American thought begins with Michel Montaigne, the French writer who lived during the wars of religion that convulsed sixteenth-century Europe. From his chateau in Perigord, east of Bordeaux and west of Bergerac, Montaigne could see the roaming bands of Catholic and Protestant soldiers that made life in the region insecure for decades and sometimes made it a living hell. From Montaigne's perspective, nothing done by the so-called savages recently discovered in the Americas could match the barbarity or cruelty of Europe's religious wars. A visit to Montaigne's charming chateau today imparts a good sense of the life he lived. In his study, where Montaigne wrote the *Essays* that many scholars rank among the most important works of the early modern era, you can still see, painted on the beams of the ceiling, Montaigne's watchwords, the words he lived by. These include the words he inscribed on a medal he had cast for himself. One side reads "je m'abstiens," or "I restrain myself," and, on the verso, "que sais-je?" or "what do I know?" Those qualities, restraint and humility, lay at the heart of Montaigne's personal creed, along with two other values, his emphasis on personal autonomy, or self-rule, and his ethic of reciprocity, which most of us know now as the golden rule. Those four values – restraint, humility, autonomy, and reciprocity, are the principal components of my argument concerning democracy as a way of life, the conception of democracy whose history I trace in my forthcoming book "Tragic Irony: The Rise of Democracy in European and American Thought."<sup>3</sup>

Now, it is certainly true that institutions and legal safeguards have been an essential part of understandings of democracy from the ancient world to the present. Social scientists have argued that the defining features of democracy include a wide suffrage, majority rule, the independent authority of elected officials, civil liberties, and the rule of law. But crucial as those qualities are, from a historian's perspective a conception of democracy limited to institutions and law is too narrow, too thin, and too static. It is too narrow to allow us to understand the diverse forms of democracy and the stutter-step ironies and tragedies of its emergence from the early sixteenth

---

<sup>3</sup> James T. KLOPPENBERG, *Tragic Irony: The Rise of Democracy in European and American Thought* (forthcoming from Oxford University Press). Recent studies of Montaigne include Felicity GREEN, *Montaigne and the Life of Freedom* (Cambridge/New York 2012); and David QUINT, *Montaigne and the Quality of Mercy: Ethical and Political Themes in the *Essais** (Princeton, N.J. 1998).

through the late nineteenth centuries. It is too thin to capture the cultural preconditions without which democracy is impossible. It is too static because all of these qualities of selfgovernment have changed – and continue to change – over time. That is why I believe we need a new history of democracy in the North Atlantic world.

Some of those cultural preconditions are especially crucial. First are restraint, humility, and the ethic of reciprocity, all of which are required if people are going to be willing to let their worst enemies govern if they win an election. That willingness is always fragile, as we know from our own day, and the consequences of its destruction can be disastrous. Think how often elections in emerging democracies precipitate a new round of civil war between rival ethnic groups, or rival religious groups, or groups inhabiting regions with different histories and traditions. Unless individuals internalize and follow legal and ethical norms, majority rule is inadequate, because any group of three can yield a majority of two committed to enslaving the other one. Yet all of these values, restraint, humility, autonomy, and reciprocity, like the principle of popular sovereignty itself, are delicate, intricate, and multi-dimensional cultural constructs, internally unstable and exceedingly difficult to fit together using the blunt instruments of politics. So, successful democracies depend on preserving cultural resources that the struggle to achieve democracy endangers. To make matters worse, the conflicts generated by functioning democracies have often unleashed forces that erode and sometimes destroy the cultural resources on which democracy depends. Even success has at times led to failure. That is why the title of my history of democracy in Europe and America is “Tragic Irony.”

The history of democracy has been a history of trying to reconcile persistent tensions present from ancient Athens until today. These tensions are perennial, because they result from a number of basic dichotomies that cannot be fully resolved. Each element in each of these dichotomies is essentially contested, which further complicates the difficulties involved in trying to reconcile them with each other. Democracy requires balancing contradictory aspirations, impulses, and values, which is why democracy in practice, in all the forms it has taken from the ancient world to our own day, has never been stable. Democracy inevitably generates dissatisfaction. It comes into being because it promises a way to manage or resolve disagreements, but democracy by its nature also breeds deep conflicts of its own.

A partial list of those tensions, which together provide the central themes of my history of democracy in European and American thought, includes five that I will mention briefly by way of introduction: First is the tension between popular

sovereignty, or the will of the people, as the fundamental source of government, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need to insure the stability of law and the inviolability, and independence of legitimate authority, despite the volatility of public opinion. Second is the tension between individual liberty, on the one hand, and, on the other, the inevitable boundedness of individuals in particular, historically constituted communities, from which all individuals spring and within which they must exist, the condition that Hegel called *Sittlichkeit*, or “situatedness.” Third is the persistent tension between the value of participation, on the one hand, and the value of representation on the other. Although this tension becomes obvious in large-scale city states or nations, it exists even in fairly small town meetings, such as those that still exist all over New England and in other regions of the United States as well. That tension persists not only because all individuals simply cannot be involved at all times in the affairs of government, which is true enough. We all have other things to do. But the process of *selecting* certain individuals to serve in government is itself valuable, for two reasons. First it fosters debate on issues of common concern, and second, it is important to authorize certain people, those we elect as our representatives, to deliberate in assemblies as an effort to determine the public interest. Since the 1960s, many people, especially in the academic world, have come to believe that participation is the essence of democracy and that representation is a bastardized, or second-best, form. It has become conventional to designate a representative democracy as a republic, and to distinguish it from real democracy, which is said to require the direct participation of citizens rather than the election of representatives. My study challenges that false distinction, which has only a flimsy historical foundation. It has been projected backward from the post-World War II era by conservatives and radicals alike for reasons having more to do with contemporary ideology than with historical evidence. Hybrid forms of democracy, which combine participation – as in, say, service on juries – and representation – as in, say, the election of legislators and executives, have been far more common historically – and for reasons that are important to acknowledge.

Fourth is the tension between political democracy and social or economic democracy. Some of democracy’s champions and some of its critics have considered democracy strictly a matter of politics and law: one person, one vote; equal rights before the law, and so on. From that perspective, democracy has nothing to do with forms of social and economic organization. Some see in that separation the reasons for the success of democracy. Others think it explains why democracy has been such a

disappointment in our day, with fewer than 50 percent of the US electorate even bothering to vote in presidential elections. Viewing democracy historically, there has been no single or “essential” relation between politics and economics or politics and social organization, or between politics and the workplace or civil society, that has persisted across time and across different cultures.

Fifth, there is a tension in democratic cultures between Montaigne’s recommended restraint and humility, on the one hand, and the boundless hopes of reformers, on the other, or between resignation and aspiration. The very willingness to put things to a vote, which Henry David Thoreau likened to a kind of gaming, upsets some people. Democracy empowers the majority to make decisions that the minority must accept. It requires individuals to accept the possibility that others, including those whom they consider ignorant or evil, might be empowered to govern. The passions generated by democracy derive from this tension between the acceptance of our limitations, on the one hand, and our often immoderate desire to see our friends win and our enemies lose. The firmer our convictions, the likelier we are to demonize our opponents, and that dynamic can lead – and all too often has led – to civil war, which is the death of democracy. For that reason the history of democracy in the Atlantic world is inseparable from the history of religion. My book shows how and why ideas of democracy emerged from the carnage of religious warfare and how and why our understandings of the history of democracy are inadequate unless we pay close attention to the overlap between religious doctrines, religious practices, and ethical principles, on the one hand, and the shaping of social, political, and legal frameworks on the other.<sup>4</sup>

For a century and a half, many scholars have taken for granted that understanding democracy means understanding economic and social dynamics. Barrington Moore’s formula, “no bourgeoisie, no democracy,” and Charles Tilly’s emphasis on social dynamics are just two of the many versions reflecting that tacit assumption. Other ideas guided the analyses of Marx, Weber, and most of the social scientists who followed them, generations of scholars for whom it was self-evident

---

<sup>4</sup> Recent studies surveying the rise of democracy over the long term include Iain HAMPSHER-MONK, *The Historical Study of “Democracy.”* In: Graeme DUNCAN (ed.), *Democratic Theory and Practice* (Cambridge/New York 1983) 25-36; George Reid ANDREWS, Herrick CHAPMAN, *The Social Construction of Democracy, 1870-1990: An Introduction.* In: George Reid ANDREWS, Herrick CHAPMAN (eds.), *The Social Construction of Democracy, 1870-1990* (New York 1995) 1-30. Recent studies surveying the rise of democracy over the long term include John MARKOFF, *Where and When Was Democracy Invented?* In: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41 (1999) 660-690; John DUNN, *Democracy: A History* (New York 2005); Charles TILLY, *Democracy* (Cambridge/New York 2007); and John KEANE, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (New York/London 2009).

that politics is primarily about the distribution of wealth and power and that everything else is epiphenomenal. I disagree. Having lived through a half century of violent conflicts throughout the world in which religious and ethno-cultural divisions, not class struggles, have defined many if not most of the wars in most parts of the world, we should concede something understood by earlier analysis of human affairs ranging from Montaigne to James Madison: power operates in multiple registers, and humans divide along many fault lines, including religion, region, culture, tradition, race, ethnicity, and a half dozen others, of which class as Marx understood it is only one.<sup>5</sup>

Because I take seriously the injunction of Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics to see the past from the perspective of those I am studying, my history of democracy is neither a Whig history nor an anti-Whig history. It is not teleological. I emphasize neither triumph nor decline but tragedy and irony, the necessity but also the destructive consequences of conflict – the tragedy – and the striking distance between intentions and results – the irony. My study is neither exceptionalist nor anti-exceptionalist but post-exceptionalist in that I consider every national tradition distinctive and reject attempts to treat one national history or another, whether that of the United States, or of England, or of France, or of the German states, as the norm and others as variants. I believe it is possible to write a coherent history of the diverse northern Atlantic traditions of democratic discourse and democratic practice, but I do not consider any of them the standard by which the others are to be evaluated.

The word “democracy,” as you know, descends from the Greek word for the people, the “demos.” It has always meant popular government, but for most of Western history it was a term of abuse, not the almost universally accepted ideal it has become in recent decades. The word democracy itself entered European discourse only with the translation of Aristotle's “Politics” into Latin in 1260, when the Dominican monks charged with “purifying” Aristotle's pagan texts invented the terms *democratia* and *politizare*, the first to make sense of popular government and the second meaning “to take an active part in public affairs,” or “to act as a citizen,” concepts that suggested power might ascend from below instead of descending from above. But the threat implicit in that idea had to be contained. Just a decade later Aquinas declared that “a government is called a democracy when it is iniquitous, and

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Barrington MOORE, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, Mass. 1993, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1966); Charles TILLY, *Contention and Democracy in Europe, 1650-2000* (Cambridge/New York 2003); and TILLY, *Democracy*.



when it is carried on by a large number of people.” Democracy, he continued, is “a form of popular power in which the common people, by sheer force of numbers, oppress the rich, with the result that the whole populace becomes a kind of tyrant.” So the very name of popular government entered medieval European lexicons, via translations of Plato’s and Aristotle’s critiques of democracy, through the work of Catholic scholars intent on bolstering the idea of hierarchical authority.<sup>6</sup>

Paradoxically, the earliest Christian communities had proclaimed the revolutionary idea that all God’s children are equal and that all are brothers. They had settled on the use of elections to choose some of their leaders and lot, the process used to fill many positions in ancient Athens, as the appropriate way to designate others. Pope Gregory the Great, at the end of the sixth century, characterized the elected bishops of the early church as the “servants of the servants of God.” But by the thirteenth century things had changed. Legitimate authority was understood in medieval Europe to descend from God through the successors of St. Peter and to the secular rulers in whom God had invested authority.<sup>7</sup>

Yet challenges to that descending model of authority emerged soon enough, and a rival theory, the theory of popular sovereignty, took shape as early as the fourteenth century. A number of writers began to challenge papal authority. In the words of Marsilius of Padua, the most influential of these critics, “the elected kind of government is superior to the non-elected,” and “the ultimate legislator in any well ordered community must be the people or the whole body of citizens, or the weightier part thereof, through its election or will expressed by words in the general assembly of the citizens.” Crucially, Marsilius envisioned a brotherhood of Christians in which decisions were reached by what he called the “method of common deliberation.” The

---

<sup>6</sup> On William of Moerbeke’s translation of Aristotle, see David KNOWLES, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (New York 1962) 191-192; Jeannine QUILLET, *Community, Counsel and Representation*. In: James H. BURNS (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought, c. 350 - c. 1450* (Cambridge/New York 1988) 526-527; and Walter ULLMANN, *A History of Political Thought: The Middle Ages* (Baltimore 1965) 171. AQUINAS, *De Regimine Principum*, in: A. P. D’ENTRÈVES (ed.), *Aquinas: Selected Political Writings*, translated by J. G. DAWSON (Oxford 1959) 6.

<sup>7</sup> Gregory the Great quoted in Hans KÜNG, *The Catholic Church: A Short History* (New York 2001) 65. The distinction between “descending” and “ascending” models is usually associated with the scholarship of Walter Ullmann. Although often challenged as overly schematic, it remains useful if seen as an ideal type and understood in terms of an ongoing struggle rather than as a hinge between early and late medieval thought. For a classic statement of the distinction, see ULLMANN, *History of Political Thought*.

entire community was to be governed by the ethic of benevolence that the original apostles had learned from Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

This idea of popular sovereignty emerged, of course, as ideas always do, in particular contexts. Marsilius and other fourteenth-century champions of the idea found their models in self-governing monastic communities and self-governing communes struggling to fend off the authority of popes and worldly powers that threatened ruling oligarchies. The aristocrats who ruled City republics such as Padua and Florence cherished traditions in which self-governing organizations such as guilds had operated for centuries. Although the aristocratic families who ruled such cities sought to legitimate and bolster their own authority, not to empower the ordinary people, they could invoke republican principles to oppose papal power. Inventing Latin words for democracy and political participation was important, but it was only the first step down a long road that led toward making participation a reality for more than a very small segment of the most privileged parts of the populations of European city states.<sup>9</sup>

By then monarchs had already found themselves constrained to acknowledge the limits of their power. On one side of the English Channel, Magna Carta was the first charter to secure what was later termed the “rights of Englishmen.” On the other side, the French King Philip IV had assembled the clergy, the nobility, and the bourgeoisie in 1305. But in their quarrels with kings neither the early English Parliament nor the French Estates General represented anything but the interests of a tiny minority. Fledgling forms of representative government existed in elected assemblies scattered from Italy to Iceland. Yet more widespread challenges to aristocracy as well as monarchy – challenges that can properly be described as democratic because they rested on explicit proclamations of the authority of the people – did not emerge until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the

---

<sup>8</sup> MARSILIUS OF PADUA, *The Defender of Peace*, vol. 2: *The Defensor Pacis*, ed. and trans. by Alan GEWIRTH (New York 1956) 32-33, 45. The most thorough analysis is Jeannine QUILLET, *La philosophie politique de Marsile de Padoue (L'Église et l'état au moyen age 14*, Paris 1970).

<sup>9</sup> See John P. MCCORMICK, *Machiavellian Democracy* (Cambridge/New York 2011); Bernard MANIN, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambridge/New York 1997) 51-67; Daniel WALEY, *The Italian City Republics* (London 1988); J. G. A. POCOCK, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J./Chichester 1975); and Leonardo BRUNI, *History of the Florentine People*, 3 vols., ed. and trans. by James HANKINS (The I Tatti Renaissance Library 3, 16, 27, Cambridge, Mass./London 2001-2007). On the renegade Catholic writers who followed Marsilius in challenging papal authority between the Council of Constance in 1414-1418 and the Council of Basel in 1431-1447, see Quentin SKINNER, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, vol. 2: *The Age of Reformation* (Cambridge/New York 1978) 39-42.

ideas of Renaissance humanism mingled with radical varieties of Christianity to shake the foundations of European culture.

From Thomas More's "Utopia" of 1516 to the peasant rebellions of the 1520s and the rapid spread of Lutheranism and Calvinism, revolutionary ideas about ordinary people challenged prevailing ideas about hierarchy and prevailing practices of governance. As religious warfare intensified, the savagery that sparked Montaigne's emphasis on restraint and humility ultimately convinced him that ordinary people are not capable of self-government. The only alternative to endless carnage appeared to be unchallengeable authority. For that reason the anti-democratic ideas of royal absolutism, articulated in France by Jean Bodin and in England by James I, Thomas Hobbes, and Robert Filmer, came to dominate debate.<sup>10</sup>

Democracy in Europe and America emerged against the backdrop of murderous wars of religion and in reaction to the authoritarian regimes that emerged to bring order to that chaos. Early modern misgivings about popular government have to be understood in the context of the awful violence, perpetrated in God's name by ordinary people against other ordinary people, that raged for more than a century. If we pay attention to that gruesome background of horrific violence, we might not so complacently dismiss as elitism the doubts about democracy expressed in the seventeenth century. We might also recover an appreciation of just how revolutionary were the eighteenth-century ideas and the experiments with limited or partial popular government when viewed in that context.

---

<sup>10</sup> On the roots of the Reformation in late medieval Europe, see Steven OZMENT, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (New Haven, Conn./London 1980). Recent overviews of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic response are Ulinka RUBBLACK, *Reformation Europe* (Cambridge/New York 2005); and Ronnie Po-Chia HSIA, *The World of Catholic Renewal* (Cambridge/New York 2005). A more detailed account is Diarmaid MCCULLOCH, *The Reformation* (New York 2004). See also Brendan BRADSHAW, *More on Utopia*, in: *Historical Journal* 24 (1981) 1-27; Brendan BRADSHAW, *The Controversial Sir Thomas More*, in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985) 535-569; Brendan BRADSHAW, *The Christian Humanism of Erasmus*, in: *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 33 (1982) 411-447; and Brendan BRADSHAW, *Transalpine Humanism*, in: J. H. BURNS, Mark GOLDIE (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700* (Cambridge/New York 1991) 95-131. On the French wars of religion, see Mack P. HOLT, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* (Cambridge/New York 2005); and Denis CROUZOT, *Les guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion* (Paris 1990). Historians who pay attention to the meaning imputed to their own experiences by those they study are now less inclined than they once were to treat religious conflict as a surface manifestation of supposedly "deeper" economic or post-feudal conflicts. See Brad S. GREGORY, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Harvard Historical Studies 134, Cambridge, Mass./London 1999). On the nature and long-term consequences of the Protestant Reformation, and how historians should understand it, see Charles TAYLOR, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass./London 2007); Jerome SCHNEEWIND, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge/New York 1998) 15-57; Brad S. GREGORY, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass./London 2012); and Alister CHAPMAN, John COFFEY, Brad S. GREGORY (eds.), *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, Ind. 2009).

American historians in the middle decades of the twentieth century took for granted what Ranke knew in 1848, that the story of the United States was, among other things, a story of democracy. Today many American historians tend to assume the opposite. In one recent study by the distinguished historian Alan Taylor, the only democratic communities in early America are to be found aboard pirate ships. Many historians of eighteenth-century America lament the shortcomings of the Revolution and see the Constitution as a retreat from democracy. I think those judgments are unbalanced. The history of democracy in early America is not a triumphal march, but neither is it a non-story. It is instead the history of a series of struggles between people with different and often incompatible ideas about restraint and humility, autonomy and reciprocity, authority and community – and, perhaps above all, about salvation.<sup>11</sup>

In the early seventeenth century, few of those who designed the institutions and inaugurated the practices of popular government on either side of the Atlantic thought of themselves as democrats. Most of them associated that idea, as had Aristotle, Aquinas, Bodin, and James I, with the absence of discipline, the degradation of government, the indulgence of sin, willfulness, and excess. Even so, some of the first English settlers in North America embraced, for religious reasons, the doctrine of self-rule that had led them to emigrate from Anglican England and establish their own communities of saints in the harsh climate of New England. Individuals such as Roger Williams and Thomas Hooker set up colonies in places such as Providence and Hartford, in what became the states of Rhode Island and Connecticut, to escape the authority of people just as firmly committed to the principle of divine sovereignty as they were to the principle of popular sovereignty. Strikingly, some of the towns and colonies established in New England in the first half of the seventeenth century self-consciously chose the word “democracy” to designate the form of government they were putting in place.

By 1660, various forms of self-government had emerged throughout England’s North American colonies. These political institutions rested more firmly and explicitly on the principle of popular sovereignty, and they incorporated more

---

<sup>11</sup> See Alan TAYLOR, *American Colonies* (New York 2001) 294-297; and Jon BUTLER, *Becoming America: The Revolution before 1776* (Cambridge, Mass./London 2000), who writes flatly, “Colonial politics was not democratic” (p. 90). On the problems I see with this interpretation, see James T. KLOPPENBERG, *Life Everlasting: Tocqueville in America*, in: James T. KLOPPENBERG, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York/Oxford 1998), chapter 5; and James T. KLOPPENBERG, *Tocqueville, Mill, and the American Gentry*, in: *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville* 27/2 (2006) 351-379. Another version of this article – *Gli “informatore” di Tocqueville* – was published in *Ricerche di storia politica* 8/3 (2005) 305-326.

elements of popular participation, than did any forms of government found almost anywhere in seventeenth-century Europe. I want to emphasize that no one set out from England intentionally to achieve that result. The irony of democracy in America thus begins with the first English settlements. The charters and records of town meetings throughout New England, and the writings of individuals such as Williams and Hooker and others, contain vibrant debates about the meaning of “democracie,” or “democratie,” the words used in the founding documents of towns such as Providence, Hartford, Newport, and Dedham. It was a term with multiple spellings and multiple meanings. But democracy, in whatever form, was indeed the term many of these early settlers used to describe both their ideal and the institutions they created as they worked to do God’s will. In the process, they inadvertently turned the idea of God’s covenant with his chosen people into concrete practices of local self-government.

Conflicts developed within these colonies almost immediately. Important differences separated New England from the English colonies to their south. But all of England’s North American colonies developed forms of self-government in their legislative assemblies, even those that lacked the particular institutions of town meetings so pivotal in New England. When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in the 1830s, he called the New England town “the cradle of democracy.” I think he was right. I have published a couple of articles on Tocqueville, explaining why I disagree with historians who deny there was any democracy in early America. My argument will be less controversial now thanks to two recent books that established the centrality of democratic practices in seventeenth-century New England. Jason Maloy’s “The Colonial American Origins of Modern Democratic Thought,” which originated in a graduate seminar he took with me, and David D. Hall’s “A Reforming People,” which developed out of another graduate course that Hall and I co-taught on the history of democracy in America, document convincingly and show in detail the origins of American democracy in the New England town.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> See J. S. MALOY, *The Colonial American Origins of Modern Democratic Thought* (Cambridge/New York 2008) 24-41, and 114-135, who traces the roots of New England Puritans’ use of the idea of magistrates’ accountability from the ancient world through Protestant resistance theory; and David D. HALL, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (New York 2011), who demonstrates the uses of popular sovereignty in early New England. Hall is at pains not to describe the Puritans as “democrats” or “proto-democrats.” His evidence, however, makes clear both that the early settlers of New England used variants of the term themselves and, even more significantly, that they self-consciously reined in the authority exercised by magistrates on behalf of the people. Although their conception of authority located sovereignty in God rather than the people, in its exercise on earth they effectively pioneered popular authority in both ecclesiastic and civil governance. See especially pp. 13-28.

At roughly the same time that some colonists in North America were experimenting with new forms of self-government in the 1630s and 1640s, the ideas of religious dissenters back home were plunging England into civil war. Some of these radical English Puritans, called Levellers by their opponents, argued for replacing monarchy with forms of popular government similar to the experiments bubbling up across the Atlantic. But whereas democrats in New England became the leading figures of new colonies such as Rhode Island and Connecticut, similar ideas in England led to a bloody struggle for power that culminated in the execution of Charles I and the Protectorate under Oliver Cromwell. Leveller leaders were imprisoned, or put to death, as dangerous radicals. Roger Williams traveled to England during these years, trying to secure a new charter for Rhode Island. The time he spent teaching Dutch to his friend and fellow dissenter John Milton was a momentary lull in a tumultuous time. Whereas Williams was able to return to the boisterous democracy of the colony he founded, his fellow radicals in England met a different fate.<sup>13</sup>

When the monarchy was restored in 1660 under Charles II, the story of popular democracy in England came to a standstill. Even today the monarchy – against all odds – remains as popular as ever. Of course England was much changed

---

<sup>13</sup> Illustrative examples of the longstanding tendency to resist the claim that struggles over democratic ideas were at the heart of the conflicts of the 1640s include Russell L. HANSON, *Democracy*. In: Terence BALL, James FARR, Russell L. HANSON (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge/New York 1989) 68-89; and Blair WORDEN, *Republicanism, Regicide, and Republic: The English Experience*. In: Martin VAN GELDEREN/Quentin SKINNER (eds.), *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, vol. 1: *Republicanism and Constitutionalism in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge/New York 2002) 323-325. For a thoughtful and careful discussion of the reasons why twentieth-century commentators – most of whom identified democracy with universal suffrage, multi-party politics, dissent from religious beliefs, the representation of individuals rather than households, and often with direct participation and radical social and economic egalitarianism – resisted claims dating from Thomas Hobbes concerning the significance of democratic ideas in mid-century England, and of the reasons why it might be necessary for historians to reconsider that inclination, see David WOOTTON, *Leveller Democracy and the Puritan Revolution*, in: BURNS, GOLDIE (eds.), *Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700*, 412-442. The most recent collection of Leveller writings is Andrew SHARP (ed.), *The English Levellers* (Cambridge/New York 1998), which contains a fine introduction and bibliography, an excellent selection of texts, and short biographical portraits of the leading Levellers. Historians disagree concerning the appropriateness of using the term “democracy” with reference to the Levellers. David WOOTTON, in *Leveller Democracy and the Puritan Revolution*, warns against anachronism; Andrew SHARP, in his introduction to *The English Levellers*, pp. vii-xxii, defends the use of the term “Leveller democrats” and considers it fair to characterize the Levellers as “liberal democrats” under “impossible circumstances.” Against the claims of many prominent historians who have sought to minimize the significance of the Levellers’ ideas or their grounding in ancient republican thought, S. D. GLOVER presents convincing evidence to the contrary in *The Putney Debates: Popular versus Élitist Republicanism*, in: *Past and Present* 164 (1999) 47-80. Glover demonstrates the existence of a popular strain of classical republicanism that sought to empower the poor instead of merely the propertied, and he shows that Leveller leaders explicitly invoked classical and Renaissance texts from that tradition in their writings. See also Jason PEACEY, *Politicians and Pamphleteers: Propaganda during the English Civil Wars and Interregnum* (Aldershot/Burlington, Vt. 2004).

by the efforts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century reformers, and the nation eventually embraced universal suffrage. In recent decades, the House of Lords has been transformed into something more nearly resembling the US Senate than a bastion of the hereditary aristocracy made familiar from the television show “Downton Abbey.” But the English Civil War – especially the regicide of 1649 – poisoned English politics for centuries. Until the twentieth century, the word democracy featured in mainstream English political life almost exclusively as an epithet. Although earlier generations characterized the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 as a triumph of English liberty, it is more accurately described as a coup d’état in which one ruling family of Protestants replaced another ruling family of Catholics. The consequences for popular government in England were very limited.<sup>14</sup>

Across the Atlantic, however, 1688 was far more significant. The new royal governors sent to England’s colonies, charged with reasserting the power of the crown, discovered that the colonial assemblies had grown increasingly willing to challenge royal authority and assert their power to govern themselves. A minister in Ipswich, Massachusetts, with the appropriate name John Wise argued in 1717 that what he called “democratical government” is the original form. He dismissed all others as defective derivatives, and the people of Massachusetts evidently agreed. They voted to endorse Wise’s plan of government. Paradoxically, however, Wise himself disapproved of the decision to submit it to the people. Although he offered powerful arguments for democratic government, Wise considered the people unqualified to create a legal code embodying democratic principles. That was work better left to people with the education and experience necessary to hone their judgment, another irony in the history of democracy. In the aftermath of 1688, convictions concerning the legitimacy of the principle of popular sovereignty and the desirability of self-government were already becoming established throughout England’s North American colonies. Differences from mother England were becoming more pronounced.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Judicious assessments of the consequences of the Civil War, which illustrate the range of historians’ judgment, include Christopher HILL, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London 1975, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1972); Lawrence STONE, *The Results of the English Revolutions of the Seventeenth Century*. In: J. G. A. POCKOCK (ed.), *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776* (Princeton, N.J. 1980) 23-108; G. E. AYLMER, *Rebellion or Revolution: England from Civil War to Restoration* (Oxford/New York 1986); Mark KISHLANSKY, *A Monarchy Transformed: Britain, 1603-1714* (London/New York 1996); and Jonathan SCOTT, *England’s Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge/New York 2000).

<sup>15</sup> John WISE, *A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches* (Boston 1717) 33. Wise has been a lightning rod for many historians. Cf. the well balanced treatment of the different, albeit likewise self-consciously tough-minded, mid-century interpretations by Perry Miller and Raymond

“Tragic Irony” provides detailed analysis of the writings of many theorists and some ordinary people, legislators, and jurists to flesh out the meanings of democracy as it developed over a long period of time on both sides of the Atlantic. I examine the staccato process whereby ideas and proposals emerged and were debated, experiments with democracy were conducted – sometimes deliberately, sometimes inadvertently or for different purposes – and results were assessed, sometimes positively and much more often negatively. To reiterate, those who advanced radical ideas in England, such as the Levellers in the 1640s, and later John Locke, who was harried into exile, and Algernon Sidney, who was put to death, were silenced. In England’s North American colonies, by contrast, such ideas were not only openly advocated, as they were by John Wise, but also institutionalized and defended against royal authority. In short, the seeds of America’s democratic revolution were planted long before the 1760s and 1770s. They developed into different forms depending on the institutional soil and the cultural climates prevailing in different colonies, but they all pointed in the general direction of self-government.

The cluster of ideas characterized as the Enlightenment certainly fed that process of growth. In Europe different national traditions produced different strains of enlightened thought. Some thinkers gravitated toward forms of radical skepticism, now more familiar than ever thanks to the writings of the historian Jonathan Israel. This skeptical Enlightenment has received so much attention that in some circles it is considered the central thrust of eighteenth-century thought. Yet important as such ideas were in Holland, in France, and, through the influence of David Hume, in parts of Britain, radical skepticism was hardly the only form of enlightened thought. In much of Europe and certainly in North America, the ideas of the moderates were much more influential. The ideas of Montesquieu and Scottish common sense moral philosophers such as Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Thomas Reid resonated much more powerfully than did the skepticism descended from Baruch Spinoza. In fact, radical skepticism of the sort articulated by thinkers ranging from Holbach and Condillac to Hume played almost no part in American debates.<sup>16</sup>

---

Stearns in: T. H. BREEN, *The Character of the Good Ruler: A Study of Puritan Political Ideas in New England, 1630-1730* (New Haven, Conn. 1970) 251-261; the crafty acknowledgment and dismissal of the significance of Wise’s “Vindication” in Edmund S. MORGAN, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York/London 1988) 141-143; and the tortured reading in Brendan MCCONVILLE, *The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688-1776* (Chapel Hill 2006) 45-48.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jonathan I. ISRAEL, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford/New York 2002); Jonathan I. ISRAEL, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford/New York 2006); Jonathan I. ISRAEL, *Democratic*



My own analysis of the American Enlightenment in relation to European thinkers places America's democratic revolution and, perhaps even more controversially, America's democratic constitution in the framework of the European debates that informed the Americans' ideas. I challenge two widespread assumptions. The first is that Jean-Jacques Rousseau valued only the direct participation of all citizens and dismissed representative democracy as a travesty. The second is the equally mistaken belief that James Madison feared rather than prized democracy – and that the U.S. Constitution put in place a “republic” rather than a “democracy.” Both of those familiar claims I consider misleading.

When Rousseau proposed actual rather than hypothetical constitutional arrangements, as he did when invited to write frameworks for Poland and for Corsica, he envisioned regimes of representative democracy. He intended his idea of the general will, a concept often caricatured as a blueprint for totalitarianism, merely to clarify the difference between the common good, by definition what is in the public interest, and the momentary will of the majority, which is often misguided by passions. The will of the people, Rousseau believed, must be measured against a standard more permanent, more enduring. When he invoked the general will, he had in mind something more like a constitution than a public opinion poll. To summarize a complicated argument, I contend that the plans for Poland and Corsica that Rousseau submitted, like the sketch he offered for Geneva in his dedication of the *Second Discourse*, were more similar to than different from those that emerged from the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.<sup>17</sup>

The democratic thrust of the American Revolution is evident from the work of the three men charged with writing the Declaration of Independence and those who developed the most persuasive arguments on behalf of the Constitution a decade later. If the similarities linking Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson illustrate the widely shared commitments to unconventional Christian and Enlightenment thought in the northern, middle, and southern colonies, their differences too are illuminating. Franklin was a champion of the simple virtues extolled in “Poor Richard’s Almanac,” virtues such as humility and restraint that

---

Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights, 1750-1790 (Oxford/New York 2011); Anthony PAGDEN, *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters* (New York 2013); and Henry F. MAY, *The Enlightenment in America* (Oxford/New York 1976).

<sup>17</sup> See the still valuable studies by Jean STAROBINSKI, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* (Chicago 2018); Roger D. MASTERS, *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* (Princeton, N.J. 1968); and Judith N. SHKLAR, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory* (Cambridge/New York 1969).

made self-government possible. Yet the cosmopolitan Franklin nevertheless delighted in the company of refined Europeans who found his down-home charm irresistible. Franklin's commitment to democracy, as Gerald Stourzh demonstrated sixty years ago in "Reason and Power in Benjamin Franklin's Political Thought," was rooted in his hatred of aristocracy and his unwavering belief in equality. In the words of Franklin quoted by Stourzh, "All the Property that is necessary to a Man, for the Conservation of the individual and the Propagation of the Species, is his natural Right, which none can justly deprive him of: But all Property superfluous to such purposes is the Property of the Publick, who, by their Laws, have created it, and who may therefore by other Laws dispose of it, whenever the Welfare of the Publick shall demand such Disposition."<sup>18</sup> Adams, whose sensibility was powerfully shaped by dissident Puritans such as the preacher Jonathan Mayhew, contributed several of the seminal texts articulating the case for independence in the 1770s, a case premised on Adams's hatred of inherited privilege and his convictions concerning the superiority of democracy to monarchy.<sup>19</sup> Jefferson, who was initially less a creator than a consumer of the ideas animating the American Revolution, nevertheless emerged as the champion and symbol of self-government despite his complicity with the very antithesis of democracy, the institution of slavery.<sup>20</sup> The tragic choice made by this generation, which decided to forge American unity on the backs of enslaved Africans, reflects the depth of the entanglement between slavery and American democracy. Without that unity there would have been no independent United States, but the refusal to challenge slavery only put off the eventual reckoning with an institution that mocked the principles of restraint, humility, autonomy, and reciprocity.

The templates for the United States Constitution emerged during the years of the Revolution, when each of the colonies wrote or revised its charter to establish its own form of democratic government. Reflecting popular awareness of his indispensable contributions to the debates leading up to the break from England,

---

<sup>18</sup> See Gerald STOURZH, Reason and Power in Benjamin Franklin's Political Thought. In: *The American Political Science Review* 47/4 (1953) 1092-1115; reprinted in Gerald STOURZH, *From Vienna to Chicago and Back: Essays on Intellectual History and Political Thought in Europe and America* (Chicago/London 2007) 29-59; the quotation from Franklin, in Henry Albert SMYTH (ed.), *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 9 (New York 1906) 138, appears on pp. 55-56 of STOURZH, *From Vienna to Chicago and Back*.

<sup>19</sup> On Adams's enthusiasm for self-government in the years before the French Revolution (and his experience serving as Vice President and then President of the United States) soured his views on the people's capacity to exercise sound judgment in public affairs, see John ADAMS, *Revolutionary Writings, 1755-1775*, ed. by Gordon WOOD (New York 2011); and John ADAMS, *Revolutionary Writings, 1775-1783*, ed. by Gordon WOOD (New York 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Of the countless studies of Jefferson, the most comprehensive account of his ideas remains Noble E. CUNNINGHAM, JR., *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Baton Rouge 1987).

John Adams was selected to write the Constitution for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1780. Actually, that was his second attempt, because the first version was rejected by the town meetings that voted on it. It remains unclear whether the second version, the 1780 Constitution that is still in force in the Commonwealth today, was actually ratified by the majority of voters. But that 1780 Constitution, the most influential model for other states and then for the nation, proclaimed the Commonwealth a democracy. The Constitution represented, as Adams himself wrote proudly, the ideas of Locke, Sidney, de Mably, and Rousseau “reduced to practice.” As furious as Adams was in the 1790s with the French Revolution and all it stood for, in the 1760s and 1770s he had found much wisdom in Rousseau. The idea of the general will from “The Social Contract” pops up repeatedly in his speeches and writings during these decades, including, as he noted himself, in the Constitution of Massachusetts.<sup>21</sup>

Disagreements among Americans ran deep in the 1780s. Widespread dissatisfaction with the flimsy union created by the Articles of Confederation of 1777 prompted the calling of the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Scholars in the last century, however, have disagreed about how we should understand the Constitution almost as passionately as did Americans during the spirited debates over its ratification. The best recent studies of these years, including Jack Rakove’s “Original Meanings,” Richard Beeman’s “Plain, Honest Men,” and Pauline Maier’s “Ratification,” show that the Constitution cemented rather than betrayed the new nation’s commitment to democracy. Of course many historians disagree. From Charles Beard a century ago through Gary Nash, Woody Holton, Terry Bouton, Benjamin Carp, and other Beardians in our own day, many scholars have characterized the Constitution as a reversal or at least a blunting of the Revolution’s democratic urge. I think that critique, understandable as it is given the distance separating eighteenth-century ideas from ours, needs to be complicated by taking a closer look at the arguments advanced in defense of the Constitution by Adams, Jefferson, and the two leading architects and proponents of the scheme itself, James Madison of Virginia and James Wilson of Pennsylvania. The frequently misunderstood Madison thought of himself as working, first to last, toward the

---

<sup>21</sup> On Adams’s account of his work on the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, see Charles Francis ADAMS (ed.), *The Works of John Adams*, vol. 4 (Boston 1851) 216. For Adams’s own description of the writing and ratification of the Massachusetts Constitution as constituting “a Kind of Epocha, in the History of the Progress of Society,” see his letter to William Gordon, May 26, 1780, in ADAMS, *Revolutionary Writings, 1775-1783*, 306-308. For the text of the Constitution itself, see ADAMS, *Revolutionary Writings, 1775-1783*, 249-277.

creation of a form of government premised on the principle of popular sovereignty. He believed that popular government could survive only if the potential dangers of democracy – unrest leading either to anarchy or to the reestablishment of tyranny, as had been common in the ancient world – could be harnessed by democratic means. The goal, as he put it in his opening speech at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, was to find a “defense against the inconveniencies of democracy consistent with the democratic form of government.”<sup>22</sup>

So “democracy” was the word that Madison himself used to describe what he took to be the delegates’ aim. It was Alexander Hamilton who later introduced the word “republic” into a version of Madison’s formulation in “Federalist” Number Nine. Hamilton forced Madison’s hand. After that essay appeared, Madison, who was writing the articles in the “Federalist” anonymously with Hamilton and John Jay under the pseudonym Publius, had no choice but to embrace the distinction between a democracy and a republic that Hamilton had introduced in “Federalist” Number Nine. Until then Madison had used those two words, the one deriving from the Greek and the other from the Latin words for popular government, more or less interchangeably. As Willi Paul Adams demonstrated in “The First American Constitutions,” his fine study of the state constitutions written during these years, so did many other American contributors to these debates from the 1760s through the 1780s.<sup>23</sup> Both democracy and republic meant government by the people, as opposed to monarchical government. Everybody on all sides of the debates understood that both a republic and a democracy, at least for a nation on the scale of the new United States, would have to have a representative form of government. Nobody, not even the radical Tom Paine, advocated anything else. The idea of direct democracy had no

---

<sup>22</sup> For Madison’s speech in the opening session of the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, June 6, 1787, see James MADISON, *Writings*, ed. by Jack RAKOVE (New York 1999) 92-93. The best studies of Madison’s ideas are Lance BANNING, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison and the Founding of the Federal Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1995); and Jack RAKOVE, *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York 1996). Among the most influential of the many recent studies of the Revolution and Constitution inspired by Charles Beard’s landmark study “An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States” (1913) see Richard BEEMAN, *Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the Constitution* (New York 2009); Pauline MAIER, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* (New York/London 2010); Gary B. NASH, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York/Toronto 2005); Woody HOLTON, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York 2007); Terry BOUTON, *Taming Democracy: “The People,” the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York/Oxford 2007); and Benjamin L. CARP, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (New York/Oxford 2007).

<sup>23</sup> See Willi Paul ADAMS, *The First American Constitutions: Republican Ideology and the Making of the State Constitutions in the Revolutionary Era* (Chapel Hill 1980).

American champions, even among the most rabid opponents of the Constitution, in the 1780s.

From Madison's perspective, the various checks and balances of the federal plan, and especially the filters operating from the local to the state to the national government, would do just what he had said the new nation had to do to survive. Those institutions would provide, to repeat his formulation at the beginning of the debates in Philadelphia, "the only defence against the inconveniences of democracy consistent with the democratic form of government." Representative democracy would ensure that only those Madison called "virtuous," by which he meant people capable of seeing beyond narrow self-interest to the common good, would be chosen to serve in positions of authority. That is the thrust of Madison's speeches in Philadelphia, his contributions to the "Federalist," and his speeches on behalf of ratification back home in Virginia. One of the principal objectives of my book is to establish – or more accurately to reestablish, since Ranke and almost everyone else took it for granted from the 1780s through the end of the nineteenth century – the fundamentally and essentially democratic nature of the American Revolution and the United States Constitution. For the first century after its ratification, no one in the United States or Europe doubted that the United States was the first democratic nation. In Philadelphia, James Madison's principal ally James Wilson wrote the most decisive speeches in favor of the Constitution with a copy of Rousseau's "Social Contract" at his elbow. He believed that the purpose of the institutions of the representative democracy was to identify and secure the general will. The purpose of the Constitution, as both Madison and Wilson said over and over, was to secure democracy. They envisioned a form of popular government that would not empower self-interested individuals or enable majorities to form around particular interests. The American form of democracy would instead provide the cultural resources, as well as the institutional framework, necessary to enable the citizens of the new nation to govern themselves by defending, through "democratic methods," against "the inconveniences of democracy." Representative democracy would provide the best means to the end that Rousseau, and sometimes Wilson, called the "general will," and that Madison more often called the "common interest" or the "public good."<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Readers can follow Madison's and Wilson's arguments, and those of the Antifederalists who opposed ratification of the Constitution for a wide variety of reasons, in the splendid two-volume collection Bernard BAILYN (ed.), *The Debate on the Constitution. Federalist and Antifederalist Speeches, Articles, and Letters During the Struggle over Ratification* (New York 1993), which includes the most familiar

If regicide and restoration all but snuffed out the flickering idea of popular government in England, and if revolution and constitution-writing secured the principles and practice of democracy in the United States, the failure of the French Revolution several years later left a much more complicated legacy. The French Revolution metamorphosed from its originally moderate forms to its fatal explosion only when it turned into a renewed war of religion. Initially those who challenged Louis XVI envisioned a constitutional monarchy in which royal power would be checked by reinvigorated aristocratic and clerical authorities. But those enjoying privileges in France lacked experience making bargains and forging compromises of the sort that Americans had been making for over a century in their local and colonial assemblies. As the National Assembly formed and popular demands escalated, the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the Catholic hierarchy all dug in their heels, not only against increasingly insistent forms of popular rebellion but against each other. When moderation and conciliation failed, the revolution turned radical. First it wiped out the feudal laws that had governed social and economic relations. Then republicans proclaimed the “Rights of Man and of the Citizen” in a nation of subjects who had enjoyed no such rights before. Americans’ experiences balancing rights against civic obligations had matured for a century through the often frustrating exercise of popular sovereignty. By contrast, the rights declared by the French Revolution were conceived as absolute and unassailable. The exercise of “Reason” with a capital “R” was thought capable of achieving results that Montaigne, veteran of religious wars and champion of humility and restraint, would have recognized as impossible. But when you know the truth, you do not need to compromise with those who do not. Champions of the French revolution, confident that it embodied such immutable truths, did not see the need to bargain with those who opposed it. Thus in 1790, the revolutionaries committed their most catastrophic error when they proclaimed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. That law transformed Catholic priests into civil servants. Moreover, it forced them to declare allegiance to a regime that most of them distrusted and that many of them, and an increasingly large number of their parishioners, came to hate with a burning passion.<sup>25</sup>

---

contributions, notably the Federalist papers by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, and many little-known writings and speeches on all sides of the debate.

<sup>25</sup> The literature on the French Revolution is voluminous and growing rapidly. François FURET, Mona OZOUF (eds.), *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass./London 1989), remains a useful guide to the issues, as does Robert R. PALMER, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, new foreword by David ARMITAGE (Princeton, N.J. 2014). More recent studies of particular importance for my interpretation include Dale K. VAN KLEY, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From*

When Louis XVI tried to escape from Paris, where he was essentially under house arrest, and when aristocrats began abandoning their estates to seek refuge across France's borders so they could ally with the nation's enemies, those left to govern a new French regime found themselves in an impossible situation. First they pretended the king had been kidnapped and tried a constitutional monarchy, but it failed within a year. With enemy armies massing on their borders and the nation itself tumbling toward chaos, the revolutionary vanguard declared a second revolution and the Jacobins set out to consolidate their authority by purging their enemies. The tragedy of the French Revolution was that its foes, domestic and foreign, really did aim to destroy it, and the revolutionaries resorted to terror at home and war abroad because there seemed to be no better alternative. After Robespierre declared terror the order of the day, anyone who resisted or expressed criticism could be accused of treason. Not only aristocrats and the royal family but thousands of ordinary people were put to death. Eventually not only those who clung to tradition but fervent revolutionaries such as Marie-Olympe de Gouges, Danton, and, eventually, even Robespierre himself, all found themselves condemned as enemies of the people. When the Revolution spun out of control and became a bloody civil war, it had the same consequence as the wars of religion that rocked all of Europe more than two centuries earlier. Again years of violence ended in the restoration of absolutism, first under Napoleon and later under a restored monarchy, then a Second Empire, as the only alternative to continuing carnage.

The failure of the French Revolution intensified the earlier conviction of most Europeans that democracy inevitably ends in anarchy. Not only did it discredit the idea of popular government on the continent and in Britain, it prompted many of those in the United States who had created the world's first democratic nation to have second thoughts about what they had done. Some, like John Adams, reacted in horror against what he considered the orgies of violence in France. After the Terror, the tenor of Adams's writings about popular government turned sour. The resulting animosities not only turned friends against each other, as they turned Adams against his longtime friend and ally Jefferson, they gave rise to the first party system in the United States. Partisan rivals now began to call each other traitors, a development

---

Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791 (New Haven, Conn./London 1996); James LIVESEY, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (Harvard Historical Studies 140, Cambridge, Mass./London 2001); Patrice HIGONNET, *Goodness beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass./London 1998); and Malcolm CROOK, *Elections in the French Revolution: An Apprenticeship in Democracy, 1789-1799* (Cambridge/New York 1996).

incomprehensible outside the context of the tragic failure of the French Revolution. John Adams, previously a champion of popular government and an avid reader of French literature who had recommended that his wife Abigail read Rousseau, and who had himself found inspiration in Rousseau's idea of the general will, now renounced everything French and declared radical democracy the work of the devil.<sup>26</sup>

Such reactions, however, did not lead the US to renounce democracy, as did happen throughout most of Europe. The rapid expansion of the suffrage and the new state constitutions written during the early nineteenth century in the United States demonstrate that the Constitution provided the framework for an increasingly inclusive democracy. But President Andrew Jackson and his followers, those who called themselves Democrats but were called by their opponents, quite properly, the Jackson Party, did not advance the principles of autonomy and reciprocity. Theirs was instead a *Herrenvolk* democracy, a democracy of masters authorized by the assent of ordinary white men, and it functioned in practice to bolster slavery and white supremacy. It rolled back the limited gains made by women in the era of the Revolution and engineered the removal of Indians from their homelands in the South to the Indian territory that is now Oklahoma. It was instead the Whigs, long characterized as elitists by self-styled American democrats, who championed education and the cause of slaves, Native Americans, and disfranchised women.<sup>27</sup>

Tocqueville's analysis in "Democracy in America" is crucial for my argument. Tocqueville owed deep debts to several New Englanders he met during his stay in Boston, a city he considered more cosmopolitan, more refined, more, well, French, than any other American city. Tocqueville spent a lot of time in Boston with John Quincy Adams, former President of the United States, and with the historian and future President of Harvard College Jared Sparks. Along with his reading, particularly of Jefferson and Madison, Tocqueville's exchanges with Adams and Sparks shaped his understanding of American democracy as a culture depending crucially on civic participation and social equality – at least equality among white men if not for women or slaves. Tocqueville's conception of American democracy followed his informants' emphasis on an ethic of reciprocity, a sensibility they correctly

---

<sup>26</sup> See Rachel Hope CLEVES, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (Cambridge/New York 2009); and Matthew Rainbow HALE, *The French Revolution and the Forging of American Democracy* (forthcoming with University of Virginia Press).

<sup>27</sup> Interpretations of antebellum American history have long been highly contentious. Cf. the fine books by Sean WILENTZ, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York/London 2005); Daniel Walker HOWE, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York/Oxford 2007); and Andrew ROBERTSON, *The Language of Democracy: Political Rhetoric in the United States and Britain, 1790-1900* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1995).



understood to be descended from earlier Christian and classical republican ideals. Tocqueville thought Americans practiced reciprocity in their town meetings, their voluntary associations, and their juries, and in other forms of civic life that helped citizens see things from each other's point of view. That sensibility was shared by abolitionists and by champions of women's rights such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Margaret Fuller. Theirs was a worldview congenial to self-government and antithetical to the emphasis on the primacy of self-interest central to much Anti-federalist discourse during debates over the Constitution and central to the rhetoric of the Jackson party. It was equally antithetical to what Gerald Stourzh has called the "ständische" social order of the American South, which conceived of social hierarchies as immutable because God-given.<sup>28</sup>

In Abraham Lincoln's speeches of the 1850s and 1860s that Whig sensibility, with its emphasis on empathy and equality, reached its pinnacle. Lincoln's ability to inspire sacrifice for the Union and, eventually, at least for many Northerners, to generate support for the emancipation of slaves, showed the potential power of linking popular sovereignty with the ethic of reciprocity and the ideal of autonomy. One of the achievements of Stephen Spielberg's recent film "Lincoln" is that it shows how Lincoln came to understand the need to end slavery as well as showing how it happened, the deal making and arm twisting and chicanery that went on in the sausage factory that we call democratic governance. In the disheartening retreat from that expansion of democracy that occurred soon after the Civil War ended, white Americans in the North as well as the South revealed the depth of their racism. They also revealed that the nation's commitment to the ideal of autonomy and the ethic of reciprocity prized by the Whigs, Tocqueville, and Lincoln was rooted in soil far too rocky and barren to survive war and its aftermath.<sup>29</sup>

Of course democracy continued to develop on both sides of the Atlantic after the end of the American Civil War and after Reconstruction failed to uproot the culture of white supremacy. In Britain the Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, and 1884 gradually widened the suffrage. In the twentieth century, the aristocracy slowly and

---

<sup>28</sup> On these issues see James T. KLOPPENBERG, *The Canvas and the Color: Tocqueville's "Philosophical History" and Why It Matters Now*, in: *Modern Intellectual History* 3/3 (2006) 495-521; KLOPPENBERG, *Tocqueville, Mill, and the American Gentry*; and the essays by Gerald STOURZH: *Equal Rights: Equalizing the Individual's Status and the Breakthrough of the Modern State*; *Liberal Democracy as a Culture of Rights: England, the United States, and Continental Europe*; and *Tocqueville's Understanding of "Conditions of Equality" and "Conditions of Inequality."* In: STOURZH, *From Vienna to Chicago and Back*, 275-358.

<sup>29</sup> Fine recent studies of Lincoln include Eric FONER, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York/London 2010); and John BURT, *Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism: Lincoln, Douglas, and Moral Conflict* (Cambridge, Mass./London 2013).

reluctantly eased its stranglehold on British government, even though the vestiges of monarchy persist. In France the Third Republic finally established the principle of popular sovereignty after a series of failed revolutions, followed by restorations of monarchy and empire, had enabled the aristocracy and the haute bourgeoisie to stave off challenges to their rule. In German-speaking Europe these struggles were even more protracted. Not until after the Great War was democracy even attempted, and it was planted firmly in the soil of central Europe only after 1945, with the spadework done, one might say, by bayonets. Yet the principles undergirding the eventual triumph of democracy were clearly articulated in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, nowhere more clearly or compellingly than in the late writings of the British philosopher John Stuart Mill, not only his classic “On Liberty” but also his critiques of slavery and the American Confederacy and in the book he wrote with his wife Harriet Taylor, “On the Subjection of Women,” with its compelling arguments for women’s equality. Mill, his friend Tocqueville, and Abraham Lincoln, the American whom Mill most admired, are the central figures in the concluding chapters of “Tragic Irony.”<sup>30</sup>

I will close with some reflections on contemporary democracy in Europe and America. The wounds that were opened during the American Civil War, like those opened by most civil wars, have not fully healed. The divide between the Confederacy and the Union remains the principal cultural divide in the United States today, the divide that continues to poison our political discourse and to threaten the ethic of reciprocity in American democracy. If you trace the lines of the most vociferous criticism of the twenty-first-century Democratic Party in general and of President Barack Obama in particular, they lead back to the Confederacy, to its tenacious defense of the rule of white men, and its resistance to the legitimacy of the authority of the federal government. The Civil War had ironic as well as tragic consequences for American democracy. In its aftermath suffrage and civil liberties expanded in the North and contracted in the South. Slavery was abolished, but forms of racial subjugation were reconfigured and reinvigorated until the Civil Rights movement at last forced the nation to dismantle the regime of Jim Crow.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> See Nadia URBANATI, *Mill on Democracy: From the Athenian Polis to Representative Government* (Chicago 2002); Alan KAHAN, *Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe: The Political Culture of Limited Suffrage* (Houndmills, Basingstoke/New York 2003); Leslie BUTLER, *Critical Americans: Victorian Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform* (Chapel Hill 2007).

<sup>31</sup> See David BLIGHT, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass./London 2001); and James T. KLOPPENBERG, *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton, N.J./Woodstock 2011).

“Tragic Irony” concludes with the argument that the United States Civil War had the same long-term consequences as the sixteenth-century European wars of religion, the seventeenth-century English Civil War, and the eighteenth-century French Revolution. Like those conflicts, the American Civil War severely weakened the ethic of reciprocity on which democracy depends. It sanctified the liberty of some individuals at the expense of the liberty of others, and like all civil wars, it left a legacy of hatred and distrust that has made further progress toward democracy less likely rather than more likely even today, a century and a half later. Democracy begins in blood, and it comes to life only through conflict. In the Atlantic world, from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century at least, when that conflict has taken the shape of civil war it has meant, if not the end, then at least indefinite suspension of the cultural underpinnings on which democracy must rest. Montaigne was right to emphasize the importance of restraint and humility as well as autonomy and the ethic of reciprocity. In the absence of those qualities, he believed that democracy was impossible. Without humility and an ethic of reciprocity, individuals would prize freedom only in order to dominate others. In such circumstances, only absolute authority could ensure peace. When we look at the history of democracy in Europe and America, it is apparent that the struggles to achieve self-government have often generated conflicts that have subverted the cultural qualities required for democracy to survive. The hyperpartisanship of current American politics reinforces destructive tendencies toward selfrighteousness, dogmatism, and intolerance, and it threatens the cultural preconditions on which democracy depends. That dynamic has been the tragic irony of democracy.

Citation:

James T. KLOPPENBERG, *Tragic Irony: Democracy in European and American Thought*. 5th Gerald Stourzh Lecture on the History of Human Rights and Democracy 2013, online at <<http://gerald-stourzh-vorlesungen.univie.ac.at/vorlesungen/>> and <<http://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:397699>>.