

April 23, 2006

THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

Export This?

By JIM HOLT

Democracy is a wonderful thing. We Americans have been enjoying it for over two centuries. Gradually, fitfully, much of the rest of the world has joined us. Although competing systems may menace it for a time, they will eventually collapse because of their internal contradictions. That is why the advance of democracy is inevitable. And the best the United States can do is to help history along by pushing it on recalcitrant parts of the world, like the Middle East.

But wait. Are we sure that what we are enjoying and promoting is democracy? True, we call it that. But the regimes of the former Soviet bloc also called themselves democracies. Suppose their system had won out — a possibility that may be hard to imagine now but that was once a source of anxiety in the West. They, too, would have proclaimed a triumph of democracy. But surely, you want to say, their democratic pretensions were ludicrous. When [Kim Jong Il](#) refers to his nation as the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea," it sounds like a case of a double positive yielding a negative. Our claim to be a democracy, by contrast, is fully merited. Just like the Greeks who, two and a half millennia ago, both coined the term and invented the thing, we have government by the people.

There are two problems with this line of thought. The first is that our form of government bears scant resemblance to what the ancients called *demokratia*. Tellingly, we hardly recognize the name of its inventor, Kleisthenes. The most distinctive feature of Athenian democracy, as the British political theorist John Dunn reminds us in his forthcoming book, "Democracy: A History," was its "fierce directness." Laws were made by an assembly that every full citizen had the right to attend, address and vote in as an equal. (Excluding women, resident aliens and slaves, that left about 30,000 participants.) The assembly's agenda for each meeting was decided on by a council of 500 citizens, chosen by lot. The only elected figures were military generals, and this was considered the least democratic aspect of the system.

Our own government, to the Athenians, would look like an elective oligarchy. In fact, it was deliberately set up to ensure, as James Madison wrote in the Federalist Papers, "the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity, from any share" in it. Yet we insist on applying a Greek label to it as an honorific. And that is the second problem. For most of history, "democracy" was a term of abuse, connoting the rule of the vulgar multitude. The founding fathers fought shy of it, taking care to use "republic" instead.

Today, democracy is what has been called an "essentially contested concept." We project our various pet values onto it, and then are puzzled that it cannot consistently hold them all. Francis Fukuyama, who has argued that democracy is "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution," refuses to admit the Athenian demos to the club, on the grounds that it failed to protect human rights — notably, the right of its most famous citizen, Socrates, to corrupt the young and invent his own gods. Others are similarly loath to extend the rubric of democracy to present-day Iran, where elections are held under the supervision of a priestly caste, or to the Palestinian entity, on the grounds that the newly elected [Hamas](#) government is a terrorist organization.

The United States is governed neither by priests nor by terrorists (notwithstanding some overheated rhetoric to that effect) but by professional politicians — or "electoral entrepreneurs," as the economist Joseph Schumpeter called them — who compete for our votes. They are said to represent us, but representation is as vexed a notion as democracy itself. Clearly, politicians do not represent us in the sense of being like us: quite apart from some peculiar psychological characteristics common to the breed, they are older, maler, whiter and lawyers almost to a man. Ideally, though, they represent us in the sense of looking after our interests, the way a guardian represents an infant in law. Unlike an infant, we have an intermittent right to replace them with other politicians if we judge them to be ineffective in this representative role. But, owing to a byzantine division of labor, much of what politicians do is hidden away from the public eye. Moreover, in one of the more devastating theoretical arguments against democracy, Anthony Downs observed that most citizens have no economic incentive to learn enough about what politicians do to vote intelligently. Nearly half of American voters acquiesce in their infantilization by not voting at all.

Should any of this make us yearn for Athenian-style demokratia, where citizens come together on terms of equality to reach consensus about the common good? An innovation in this direction has been proposed by James Fishkin, a political scientist at Stanford, and Bruce Ackerman, a [Yale](#) law professor. They envisage a new national holiday, called "Deliberation Day," a couple of weeks before each major election. On this day, voters would gather in groups as large as 500 and hash out issues together, like the ancient Athenians. (Unlike the Athenians, participants in Deliberation Day would be paid \$150 each.) If this sort of thing sounds appealing, keep in mind that the right to address your fellow citizens is accompanied by the less agreeable duty to heed what they have to say, and that means all of them.

If nothing else, the system we sloppily call democracy provides a way to get rid of a lousy regime without the bother of overthrowing it by force. As for its apparent historic inevitability, that may owe largely to the difficulty of finding any other source of legitimacy besides "the people." "Virtue"? That went out with Plato. "Embodying the national spirit" became unfashionable with [Hitler](#) , as did "expressing the will of the proletariat" with [Stalin](#) . True, some rulers continue to imagine that they were chosen by God. But almost no one takes that idea seriously anymore.

Jim Holt is a frequent contributor to the magazine.