Theories of Democracy

A critical introduction

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This book aims to provide a map through a selection of contemporary democratic theories. As with an actual map, readers already familiar with the terrain will find it lacking in important detail, and as is known by students of cartography there are alternative and quite different strategies for organizing a map. Still, the book should give readers with little prior background in democratic theory one overall picture of the lay of the land. Or rather, it covers some land, as the map is not a global one, but is confined to democratic theories in Western Europe and North America and, even more narrowly, to theorists whose work is written in English or that have found their way into widespread publication in this language. The reason is not belief that no other important democratic theorizing is to be found, but simply because the book is prepared by an Anglo-North American, drawing upon the democratic-theoretical work of his own intellectual environment.

Just as a map indicates routes to a variety of destinations while remaining mute about which of them one should take or what to do on arrival, so this book will be more descriptive than prescriptive. At the same time, it would be naive of me or of readers to suppose that the discussions that follow are not influenced by my political values and democratic-theoretical proclivities. Partly to make these opinions transparent, Chapter 8 (‘Democratic Pragmatism’) will outline the perspective in terms of which I strive to make sense of democracy and democratic theories. It is adopted from the political theory explicated by John Dewey in his *The Public and Its Problems* (1927). While I shall not attempt to persuade readers of views I favour, there is one respect in which Deweyan pragmatism structures the approach of the rest of the book.

Central to this orientation is the conviction that practical and theoretical undertakings in politics (as elsewhere) are mainly efforts in problem solving. Accordingly, Chapter 2 will list some main problems said to beset democracy: that it involves majority tyranny, that it makes for ineffective government, that it is beset by irrational decision-making procedures, and other challenges. Subsequent chapters will then summarize the main tenets of current theories of democracy – liberal democratic, participatory, deliberative,
and so on – looking for resources within them to address one or more of the problems. This forms the basis of the book’s organization, which, however, is deviated from in three ways.

At the end of the book it will be indicated how the democratic theories abstractly discussed in it are concretely applied by taking up one of many possible examples, namely globalization. A second deviation concerns the treatment of themes independently of specific theories. Most studies of democratic theory are organized around such themes: freedom and equality, rights, collective decision-making, legitimacy, justice and democracy, and so on. These and related themes will be touched on within treatments of relevant theories, but three will be addressed in a more concentrated way in ‘discussions’ appended to appropriate chapters. These are: the relation of liberal democracy to capitalism (Chapter 3); conceptions of democratic representation (Chapter 5); and the value of democracy (Chapter 8).

While the theories surveyed have mainly been expounded from the mid-twentieth century, all of them draw on the work of historical antecedents, for instance, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, James Madison, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill. Key features of their ideas will be summarized where appropriate, and, in a third deviation, this chapter will conclude by outlining the thought of three such theorists, namely Aristotle, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Joseph Schumpeter, to whom nearly all current theorists make frequent reference. First, some complexities about how to conceive of the ultimate subject matter of this book – democracy – should be flagged.

**Conceptualizing democracy**

Not long after military suppression in 1989 of the demonstration for democracy by Chinese students in Beijing’s Tiennanmen Square, I had an occasion to talk with a participant. He told me that although he had risked his life in Beijing and some of his friends had lost theirs in the democratic cause, neither he nor they could claim to know just what democracy is. In expressing this uncertainty, the student differed from contemporary democratic theorists who, like their predecessors, either advance definitions of ‘democracy’ with confidence or write of the preconditions, value, or problems of democracy in a way that assumes their readers understand the meaning of the term. Interrogation of the presupposed meanings or a survey of the definitions quickly reveals, however, that taken collectively the theorists are in a similar situation to that of the Chinese student, since their conceptions of democracy diverge (Naess et al. 1956).

The confidence of theorists is easy enough to understand. For the most part academics, they are employed to answer questions not to ask them, and they learn early in their careers the professional risks of tentativeness. More instructive is the divergence of conceptions of democracy. At its root, I speculate this results from the fact that almost all current democratic theorists
are writing within and with respect to societies that consider themselves
democratic; hence, their theories of democracy are directly or indirectly
implicated in actual democratic politics. This means that democracy, like
‘justice’ or ‘freedom,’ is what some call a ‘contested’ concept embedded
within rival theories (Connolly 1993b, who takes the term from Gallie
1955–6). In a book that surveys contemporary theories of democracy this
creates the by no means unique but nonetheless challenging situation for
author and reader alike that there is lack of consensus over what the theories
surveyed are about.

EXERCISE

This point can be illustrated by reporting on an experiment conducted in
courses on democratic theory where students are asked to write down an
example – historical or current, fictional or real – of the most democratic
and of the most undemocratic situation, institution, or practice they can
think of. Readers of this book may wish to participate in this experiment
before continuing; those who do will find the ensuing discussion more mean-
ningful. The exercise has been given to senior students of political science and
of philosophy at my university, and in addition to constancy over several
years at this locale, I received similar results from students in Japan and in
the Netherlands during visiting teaching engagements in these countries.

Surveying responses, I note that they can initially be divided into two
categories. The majority of respondents ignored the instruction to give
concrete examples and instead offered formal characterizations based on
favoured theories. Some samples are:

i. small, participatory community/totalitarianism;
ii. a state where every citizen plays a role in political decision-making/
a state which does not fulfill this condition;
iii. constitutional guarantees of individual rights/rule of an individual or
of mass opinion;
iv. decisions are made by all members of a society, and all are rational
and well informed/a tyranny where even those in charge are victims
of false consciousness.
v. a community where the common good is decided by consensus after full
debate/a society where rulers decide what counts as the public good.

Readers who followed the suggestion to do this exercise and whose ‘exam-
pies’ are similar to these are no doubt possessed of theoretical aptitude, but
can likely profit from trying practically to instantiate their theories. Nonethe-
less, some tentative lessons about methodologies for theoretical approaches
to democracy can be learned from consideration of these responses (fully
recognizing that they are drawn from a limited sample). Abstract characterizations of democracy lend themselves to drawing dichotomies such that anything matching the characterization is democratic and anything else is not democratic, while the exercise invites the students to think of democracy as a matter of degree. (To employ James Hyland’s terms, conceptions of democracy may be either ‘sortal’ or ‘scalar,’ 1995: 49–50.) Many agree with Samuel Huntington (1991: 11–12) that the political world should be classified simply into democratic and nondemocratic categories. The pair of ‘examples’ labelled ii exhibits such dichotomization, as does iii (where the intent must charitably be interpreted to specify a necessary condition for democracy, unless it is assumed that democratic rights are among those guaranteed).

Of course, any abstract characterization can be regarded as an ideal type susceptible to degrees of approximation. But this creates an onus to spell out how approximation is ascertained, which is difficult to do without examination of concrete examples. For instance, regarding iv, fewer than all people may be rational and informed, or people may be partially informed or partly rational (itself a contested concept), or they may be rational regarding some matters and not others. In the case of v, something short of the common good, but better than an unmitigated evil might be agreed upon, and/or there may be only partial consensus, or debate may be less than full. The example of the most undemocratic situation in v suggests that the key criterion for ideal-typical democracy is consensus. The most undemocratic characterization of iv is indeterminate because it includes two democracy-defeating elements, tyranny and false consciousness. Attempting to give concrete examples forces precision or at least the sharpening of theoretical decisions on such matters.

Another advantage to seeking examples is that abstract characterizations can be instantiated in alternative ways, about which there will be good grounds for disagreement. More radically, someone may challenge an example for not being democratic or undemocratic at all, in which case either finer specifications are needed in the abstraction or the instantiation counts as evidence that democracy should be characterized in some other way. This point may be illustrated by considering the following list of concrete examples, also taken from a class experiment, where the first three of the ‘most democratic’ sites might be taken as candidates for i (small community participation) and the next several examples could be viewed as different ways that citizens might play a role in decision-making:

a. Swiss canton/Hell;
b. an Israeli kibbutz/a fascist state;
c. an election in the US or Canada/the maximum security prison in Newark, New Jersey;
d. a referendum (the most frequently given ‘most democratic’ example)/appointment of supreme court judges;
e. decision-making by consensus in aboriginal council meetings/competitive economic markets;
f. student input to a course curriculum/monopoly power in Mexico by one political party;
g. amicable negotiations about the allotment of chores among roommates/police crackdown on a (recent) student demonstration;
h. consensus-supported affirmative action campaigns/systemic sexism and racism;
i. employment or university admission based only on merit and open to all/reverse discrimination policies;
j. a soccer team during play/a high school;
k. an elephant herd/a military school;
l. gambling in a public lottery/rape;
m. a free economic market/a police state.

Striking about this sample is its heterogeneity and the oddness of some of the examples. One interpretation of these features reflects poorly on the thinking (or the motivations) of those who proposed them. Readers who attempted to find examples themselves will likely seek interpretations more charitable to the students. It is not easy to give prototypical examples of democracy precisely because the latter is a contested concept. Moreover, the task can be approached from a variety of optics, which are themselves combinable in a variety of ways. Thus, the ‘most democratic’ examples a through e, in contrast to f and g, suppose democracy to be a formal or quasi-formal matter. In examples a through g democracy centrally requires or is a form of collective decision-making. If such decision-making is involved in j and k, this is only incidental to what is likely thought most important about them, namely coordinated group action, while in the last two examples independently pursued individual actions suffice for democracy. It will be seen that developed theories of democracy can be sorted in a similar way.

Another similarity with the formal theories is that while students were asked to construct examples of general if not universal applicability, there is clearly a bias in favour of local concerns, which is why examples taken from university experiences disproportionately figure. This also helps to explain the apparently bizarre feature of the examples that many of them seem exaggerated. With all the instances of gross undemocracy in the world – brutally totalitarian regimes, overt and thoroughgoing paternalism, and the like – it is strange to adduce suppression of a student demonstration as the most undemocratic thing one can think of, and laudable from a democratic point of view as allowing student input to university curricular decisions may be, this is hardly the most democratic thing imaginable. But then, this exercise was put to university students.

Three more features – all of which I found in other such experiments, both in my university and abroad – bear mention. First, a direct contradiction
should be noted, namely that affirmative action and its pejoratively described analogue, reverse discrimination, are taken by some as democratic and by others as undemocratic, as are competitive markets. In this, the students’ diverse reactions map those of democratic theorists, who are also divided on these matters. Among professional theorists, to take note of a second feature, the participatory democrats see democracy as best exercised communally and in small, relatively intimate groups, but such democrats are by no means in a majority or even in a large minority. Students, by contrast, generally, if not unanimously, pick out small group interactions as the most democratic examples.

Finally, in the experiment it is often hard to see how the most and least democratic examples constitute poles of a spectrum except in those cases where they are clearly correlated with states of affairs deemed morally praiseworthy or condemnable. Thus, presumably a lottery is the most democratic because it is a matter of individual choice whether to play, and it is fair since the chances of any one ticket being the winner is equal to that of any other ticket; while rape is an extreme example of force and inequality. In class discussion, it becomes clear that for nearly all students democracy is highly valued, and nondemocratic situations are identified by thinking of negatively evaluated alternatives. As will be seen, not all democratic theorists, and particularly those in earlier centuries, positively evaluate democracy.

**Touchstone theorists**

Democratic theorists pursue their thought in intellectual vacuums no more than do theorists of any subject, and Aristotle, Tocqueville, and Schumpeter are among the more prominent of traditional thinkers often and appropriately referred to in current writings. This, and the fact that each of these classic predecessors confronts democracy with serious challenges, is one reason for summarizing their essential conclusions about democracy in this introduction. Also, there are additional lessons about the methodology of theorizing about democracy to be learned from seeing how they might approach the exercise put to my students.

**Aristotle**

Born in Macedonia and living during his intellectual prime in Athens during the fourth century BC, Aristotle headed a large-scale research project that set out to describe and sketch the histories of every currently known political system. This constituted a large number of examples of varied attempts at government, successful and otherwise, both in the city states of that area and the grander efforts of the Macedonian empire of Philip and Alexander and rival empires to the east and south. To these examples, Aristotle brought
his considerable talents of nuanced classification and critical evaluation to
examine possible, historical, and extant forms of government.

Broadly described, government might be exercised according to him by
one person, by a few people, or by many people, and in each case such rule
may be exercised properly or improperly. Proper (or ‘right’) rule is under-
taken for the common good while improper rule aims to serve private
interests, whether of the one, the few, or the many themselves. By ‘common
good’ Aristotle did not mean the interests that people happen to share, but
that which is good for their community, since a good community for him
promotes the well-being of all its members by allowing them to exercise their
proper potentials and to lead virtuous and successful lives.

This yields an initial classification of six forms of rule: royalty, where one
person rules in the common interest; tyranny, a ‘deviation’ of royalty, where
one person rules in his private interests; aristocracy or proper rule by the few;
oligarchy, which is the deviant form of aristocracy; proper rule of the many,
called ‘polity’ by Aristotle; and its deviation for which he reserved the term
democracy (Aristotle 1986 [c.320 BC]: bks gamma and delta). An important
wrinkle in this classification is that rule by the many and by the few are not
definitive of democracy and oligarchy (or of their ideal analogues) by
Aristotle, since he regarded these as essentially rule of the poor and rule of
the rich, which in his view are always correlated with the many and the few.
Similarly, just as wealth is unequally distributed, so is virtue or nobility in
such a way that the majority poor will be less noble than the few rich.

Of these six forms of government, Aristotle argued that the best would be
a royalty, where a single, noble ruler performed his proper function, followed
by a properly functioning aristocracy. Aristotle allowed, however, that in the
world of actual politics, such governments are seldom found, and he lists
many ways that when achieved they degenerate into self-serving leadership.
With respect to the typical, deviant forms of government, Aristotle reversed
the ranking he assigned to ideal politics and considered democracy the
‘most tolerable’ of the three deviations of proper rule: at least more people
profit from a democracy’s self-serving rule; some advantages are gained by
the collective experiences of many people; and majority discontent is damp-
ened. Thus the often-quoted view of Winston Churchill that democracy is
the least bad form of government was in fact much earlier expressed by
Aristotle.

Though he makes many references to types of government, it is not easy
to extract unambiguous examples from Aristotle’s discussion in the Politics.
This is partly because his empirical attention to detail alerted him to com-
plexities in the messy world of real statecraft; also, writing as he was in
prodemocratic Athens, but identified with Alexander the Great (whose
teacher he had been), Aristotle was careful about giving unequivocal exam-
pies. When certain generals ruled, Sparta exhibited something approaching
royalty. More in keeping with the pure idea of royalty was the absolute rule
of a king over all matters, much as the head of a household rules over his family (Aristotle: 1285/6 in standardized pagination). Athens, Aristotle suggests, had been a polity from sometime subsequent to the epoch of Solon until the end of the Peloponnesian Wars (431–421 BC) when it became a democracy (1303). Whether he thought Athens an example of the least bad of democracies – namely one where the rule of law is enforced and there is a large middle class which assumes the most active leadership – is unclear.

**Tocqueville**

There can be no doubt how Tocqueville would respond to the exercise. Democracy as he conceived it was rule by the people, and by the 1830s, when he visited the US (where his initial intent to study its penal system was replaced by a general study of political institutions and mores), Tocqueville found it in what he considered pristine form: ‘The people,’ he declared, ‘reign over the American political world as God reigns over the universe’ (Tocqueville 1969 [1835–40]: 60). As to a purely undemocratic society, Tocqueville’s view can also be identified, but less straightforwardly. American democracy is made possible, indeed necessitated, for him by ‘equality of condition,’ that is, by equality in people’s access not just to voting or holding public office but also to economic advantages and culturally, in anti-aristocratic attitudes. Unlike God in relation to the world, the equality Tocqueville’s contemporary Americans enjoyed was not created by them out of nothing, but was the product of a long evolution in Europe, beginning with the extension of offices of the clergy beyond noblemen and the encroachment of the power of royal families by lawyers and moneyed tradesmen. To find an entirely undemocratic situation, then, Tocqueville had to look back seven hundred years, when his native France was ruled by a few families in virtue of their inherited landed property (9–10).

Like Aristotle but unlike most of my students, Tocqueville was able to identify a highly democratic situation and to see many advantages and virtues to democracy while remaining critical of it. While for Aristotle democracy was the best option of an available bad lot of forms of government, Tocqueville regarded the ‘democratic revolutions’ of his time – most notably the French Revolution, which had taken place less than two decades before his birth and which he recalled with the same distaste as nearly everyone who, like Tocqueville himself, was of aristocratic heritage, and the more palatable American Revolution – as the unavoidable outcomes of the history of expanding equality in Europe just referred to.

Tocqueville’s famous study, *Democracy in America*, was written, he explained, ‘under the impulse of a kind of religious dread inspired by contemplation of this irresistible revolution’ (12). The Jacobin aftermath of the French Revolution was the worst example of the culmination of an egalitarian history for Tocqueville, but even the more benign American democracy,
where popular sovereignty meant unbridled majority rule, exhibited an oppressive ‘tyranny of the majority.’ At the same time, Tocqueville found much to admire about American democracy, which he thought gave the country a vitality lacking in the Old World, and he hoped that a Europe doomed to become ever more egalitarian could learn from the American example how best to engender this vitality while avoiding violence and other misfortunes associated with egalitarian revolutions.

Aristotle was prepared to endure democracy only grudgingly and Tocqueville was at best ambivalent about it. Whether this makes their views suspect due to antidemocratic bias or, on the contrary, afforded them an objectivity lacking in democratic partisans is a fine point. However, in different ways each reflects what has come to be called the ‘classical’ viewpoint on democracy. One pillar of this viewpoint is that democracy involves self-government – of the people in Tocqueville’s formulation or of the many in Aristotle’s. The other main pillar of classical theory is that democracy promotes or expresses the common good of whatever public is exercising self-government. This will be the case whether the good of the entire polity is in question or one is considering Aristotle’s deviant form of popular rule, which promotes the interests of the poor.

In these matters Aristotle and Tocqueville were in accord with those of their contemporaries who were unqualified democratic enthusiasts. For example, in his famous funeral oration during the Peloponnesian War, delivered in the century before Aristotle was writing, Pericles extolled Athenian democracy for exhibiting the civic and personal virtues that Aristotle thought would be best served in a royalty or aristocracy (Thucydides 1972 [c.404 BC]: bk 2, ch. 4). Thomas Jefferson exceeded Tocqueville in praise of vigorous democratic participation in the new American federation, which he saw not only as a socially beneficial exercise of self-government but as a check against what Tocqueville called majority tyranny (for example, 1975 [1816]: ch. 7).

**Schumpeter**

With the publication in 1942 of his *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, Joseph Schumpeter – earlier a minister of finance in Austria who had retired from politics to teach economics at Harvard – both traditional pillars of democratic theory were starkly criticized in what has come to be called the ‘revisionist’ or ‘realist’ challenge to the classical interpretation of democracy. If societies generally called democratic are regarded in terms of how they actually function (hence the realist label) it is obvious, Schumpeter insisted, that they are governed not by the people or by a majority taken as a whole but by elected officials along with nonelected political party and bureaucratic attendants. This is clearly the case on a day-to-day and year-to-year basis, when officials usually (and necessarily to avoid the chaos of perpetual
elections or referenda) pursue policies in accord with their own interests or their estimations of what is best done.

As to the public good, Schumpeter maintained that this is nowhere to be found, neither in the motives of those who vote for public officials, each of whom will vote on the basis of private preferences, nor in the outcome of a vote since members of a majority typically have a wide variety of motivations for casting their ballots. The classical view seemed to Schumpeter to mystify the democratic public, whether in the romantic way of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which, on Schumpeter’s interpretation, saw this public as a homogenous entity held together by a shared ‘general will’ differing from the particular wills of individuals, or in a vain hope, such as that of the utilitarian, John Stuart Mill, that particular preferences will naturally gravitate toward or can be rationally persuaded to converge on common and morally worthwhile ends. Schumpeter’s conclusion was that the classical conception should be replaced by one in line with the actual functioning of democracy in the modern world. He thus reduced democracy to a method for selecting public officials and defined this method simply as: ‘that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote’ (Schumpeter 1962 [1942]: 269).

Strictly speaking, any political society in which there are free elections is as democratic as any other on this definition, but Schumpeter thought that democracies could still be ranked according to how well they meet the preconditions for the democratic method to ‘succeed.’ According to him these conditions are: availability of qualified political leaders; assurance that experts and not the public decide matters requiring special knowledge or talents; a well-trained bureaucracy; and a public whose members are tolerant of one another and are prepared to allow politicians a relatively free hand in governing. Despite fear that a form of socialism realizing these conditions could still ‘turn out to be more of a sham than capitalist democracy ever was’ (302), Schumpeter expressed the view that on balance a social-democratic society held the most promise since it could provide a more skilled bureaucracy than a capitalist-dominated society, and the latter was more prone to foster deep frictions within a population, thus making trust in political leaders and tolerance hard to sustain. Though not an ideal example, Schumpeter praised the Labour government of Ramsay Macdonald, elected in the UK in 1924, for approximating the sort of leadership of which he thought social democracy capable (366–7).

Some lessons

Along with the student exercise, this summary throws into relief some aspects of methodologies for approaching democratic theory. Chief among these is the interpenetration in various and not always transparent ways of: normative
questions about the value of democracy; descriptive questions concerning the way societies called democratic actually function or might realistically be anticipated to function; and semantic questions about the meaning of ‘democracy.’ Different orientations toward democratic theory attach themselves to different approaches depending on which of these three dimensions they focus on or take as their point of entry to the field. This ‘triangle’ of orientations complicates efforts to compare and evaluate alternative theories of democracy.

Schumpeter purports to begin with the descriptive task and to draw normative and semantic conclusions from his descriptions. As will be seen in later chapters, democratic theorists are divided between those who champion his approach and draw from it even more stark conclusions about what democracy can accomplish and those who challenge his putative descriptions for masking antidemocratic values, which they maintain are the real motivation of Schumpeterian critiques of classical approaches to democracy.

One example of the difficulty of separating descriptive and normative concerns in Schumpeter’s account is already evident in the summary above. He ranks better and worse forms of democratic rule according to ‘success’ without specifying what this is. Mere success in being democratic is not enough to motivate the distinctions he draws (for instance, between governments that allow freedom of manoeuvre for bureaucrats and those that do not), since any government that must periodically compete for the public vote is as democratic as any other such government. In accord with his

![Diagram of a triangle with labels: Meaning of 'democracy', Value of democracy, Conduct/institutions of democracy.]

*Figure 1*
avowed social-democratic political views, Schumpeter may have had in mind success at alleviating class-based inequalities, or, as a close observer of the doomed Weimar Republic (291), he may have thought of success in terms of political stability. Each alternative supposes some normative view about the proper function of government.

For his part, Aristotle explicitly distinguished among the normative, descriptive, and semantic dimensions of political theories of government and built his theory of democracy around the distinctions. Still, despite care in constructing his classifications, it is not always evident which of these three concerns is playing the lead role. One place this may be seen is in Aristotle’s acknowledged conflation of rule by the many and by the poor in defining ‘democracy.’ This is problematic not just because of his assumption that societies will always be divided between the few rich and the many poor (an assumption challenged by Tocqueville’s account, which saw a levelling in American society), but also because poverty and virtue are negatively correlated for Aristotle. So when he ranks better and worse forms of democracy it is in terms of the prominence of the middle class, that is of those among the ‘many’ who are the least poor and most virtuous. Thus, it might be suspected, Aristotle’s aristocratic values find their way into his concept of democracy.

Though presented as a sociology-like report of a field trip to the US, Tocqueville’s account is overtly motivated by normative concerns. In addition to his conviction that American democracy is one outcome of a worrisome history of growing equality, Tocqueville’s passionate tone when he insists that democracy can never elevate manners or nurture ‘poetry, renown, and glory’ (245) clearly exhibits the aristocratic values he brought to his study. One dimension of Tocqueville’s concerns about a tyranny of the majority hinge upon a fear he shared with Aristotle that democracy lends itself to demagoguery. However, both in this critique and in his review of the positive aspects of democracy, Tocqueville often writes as if the will of the majority is the will of the people, so majority vote is an expression of the popular self-government he saw in America. Schumpeter, for whom there is no such thing as popular sovereignty, regarded this as an unwarranted assumption of all the classical theorists (272). Whether he is right or wrong on this matter, the criticism shows that even theorists as astute as Tocqueville left open questions about the meaning of the term ‘democracy.’

It should be no surprise that reports of fact, expressions of value, and definitions of terms should be mixed together; nor is there anything necessarily misleading or otherwise amiss about this. Political theory generally, as all inquiry that engages vital issues and perhaps daily language itself, exhibits such interpenetration. Arguably, this is central to the dynamism of any such human undertakings. As will be seen in the ensuing discussions, much democratic theory presupposes the interaction of considerations of fact, value, and meaning and involves debates over which sort of focus should take the lead.
For example, champions of Schumpeter’s view prescribe making empirical study of actually existing democracies the leading edge of their theories, while those of Aristotle agree with his starting place, which is to ask about the proper aims of government. At the same time, the interactions in question can create confusions and cross-purpose debate. Students of democratic theories should, accordingly, be alert to these possible distractions.

Another lesson to be learned from the review of these three central theorists is that their efforts are simultaneously time-bound and in a certain sense timeless. The most notorious example of time-boundedness concerns the scope of democratic citizenship. Political participation in Athens, including during the periods Aristotle recognized it as democratic, excluded women, slaves, and from time to time the propertyless. Those remaining were certainly less than a majority (exclusion of women alone ensures this). Similarly, Tocqueville announced that the sovereignty of the people in the US had been adopted ‘in every way the imagination could suggest’ (60), while later acknowledging that this excluded slaves, servants, paupers, people of modest wealth (in most states), and women. Even Schumpeter’s sparse conception of democracy glosses over severe *de jure* and *de facto* voter restrictions and limitation of the ability to compete for the vote with any realistic expectation of success to only some pretenders to political power.

That such exclusions and limitations were commonly accepted in the times of Aristotle, Tocqueville, and Schumpeter does not excuse them from subjecting these things to criticism. Not all of their contemporaries accepted slavery and other persisting restrictions on the power of the franchise, and Aristotle’s mentor, Plato, though no democrat, did not see inherent deficiencies to prevent women from being political leaders. In any case one expects critical thinking from political theorists, especially those as good at it in other matters as these three. However, an appeal to common attitudes of their times helps to explain how they could have accepted such exclusions and limitations without apparently feeling the need to justify the acceptance.

What such historical appeal does not do is justify the theories advanced by previous theorists. From the fact, for instance, that Aristotle and Tocqueville could at least tacitly sanction slavery and exclusion of women from the franchise, alternative conclusions may be drawn. It might be concluded that the theories are basically sound, but need to be brought up to date by expunging from them racist or sexist exclusions. Alternatively, coexistence of a theory of democracy in the mind of its founder with slavery or sexist exclusion could be taken as evidence that the theory is deeply flawed. Appeal to historical circumstances in which theories of democracy are held will not settle this question, though it can help one to interpret texts, for example, by explaining why authors choose the examples they do, labour certain points and not others, sometimes suffer blind spots, contradict themselves, or lapse into vagueness and ambiguity.
One might thus be helped in reading Aristotle by attending to his precarious situation referred to earlier as a champion of Alexander but living in Athens when its democratic powers of government were severely constrained by Macedonian domination of the region. As a member of the Chamber of Deputies during the short-lived liberal monarchy of Louis-Phillipe, Tocqueville anticipated future democratic upheavals, such as the forthcoming republican revolution of 1848, and his study of American democracy may well have been motivated by the aim of convincing fellow conservatives to bow to the inevitable by employing, in the phrase of Stephen Holmes, ‘a democratic cure for a democratic disease’ (1993: 23). One commentator sees Schumpeter as a pessimistic conservative arguing for a thin concept of democracy within a social-democratic framework as a sort of rearguard action (Scheuerman 1999a: ch. 7). Another interpretation sees Schumpeter as a sincere social democrat and as such embroiled in the contests in nearly all European countries between social democrats and communists over the values and politics socialists should embrace and the connected question of how to relate to communism in the Soviet Union.

Such historical inquiry will not be undertaken in this book, in part because its author’s training is not adequate to such a task, but mainly because there are limits to how far a narrowly historicist account can help to understand or evaluate democratic theories. In what ensues, these theories will be taken at face value as attempts to produce viable accounts of the nature and value of democracy and of the best ways to undertake democratic politics in a variety of circumstances, leaving it to others to identify hidden subtexts or motives. Even so, a certain theoretical relativism is unavoidable. This is because democratic theorists undertake their pursuits with theoretical-cum-practical problems – sometimes more grandly called ‘problematics’ – in mind.

A principal theoretical concern for Aristotle was to figure out how government may enhance, preserve, or at least not inhibit virtuous activity. Tocqueville wished to identify essential strengths and weaknesses in democracy as exhibited in America. Schumpeter set himself the task of bringing conceptions of democracy into line with what he took as the only way that democratic government could realistically function in the modern world. It is by reference to such problems that theories are internally evaluated, namely by ascertaining whether or to what extent they achieve the aims their proponents set out to achieve, but this does not preclude questioning a theory’s adequacy with respect to other problems. Chapter 2 reviews main problems for democracy by reference to which both sorts of evaluation of democratic theories can be undertaken.