

# **Democracy as an Essentially Contested Concept**

**Howard A. Doughty**

Professor

Faculty of Applied Arts & Health Sciences

Seneca College

King City, Ontario

Canada L7B 1B3

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### **ABSTRACT**

More than sixty years ago, T. D. Weldon (1953) published an influential book entitled *The Vocabulary of Politics*. In it he affirmed a common belief among philosophers of language that words which could not be connected to objective, measurable objects and rendered the legitimate study of scientific investigation deserved to be dismissed as merely emotive utterances unworthy of serious consideration. They, he said, were either “boo” words that registered displeasure or “hurrah” words that expressed pleasure. Whichever they were, however, they were *meaningless*, since there was no externally observable referent to which an unbiased observer could appeal. They might, of course, fulfill some emotional need or communicate a personal preference; but, they were philosophically useless beyond that. So, for example, my statement that I like chocolate ice cream and your statement that you like Tutti Frutti ice cream may describe our different tastes, but they are useless insofar as determining which flavour is somehow “better.” What goes for ice cream goes equally well for justice, beauty and so on. Weldon argued that normative or evaluative concepts, in the absence of some basis for empirical falsification, were not worth a single philosopher’s breath. This discussion paper invites readers to consider whether there is more to “just semantics” than that. Readers are invited to consider some of the philosophical underpinnings of what our words mean and, indeed, to ponder what meaning might *be*. In fact, it comes close to asking what “meaning” might be. It also implies that it is incumbent upon anyone from patricians, plutocrats, prime ministers and presidents, plebeians, peasants, proletarians and even lumpenproletarians to use care when discussing politics.

**Keywords:** democracy, essentially contested concept, meaning, semantic differential, Gallie

### **Introduction**

Political scientists and others whose job it is to study democracy have a number of questions that they must ask and answer before their hypothesizing, theorizing and philosophizing can begin in earnest. Among other things, they must get comfortable with their basic approach. For the empirically inclined, that means that they must decide what specific aspect of democracy they want to study, from which theoretical perspective and with what methodological techniques. There are ample options. Among the potentially fruitful domains of inquiry are the relationships between democratic governance and economic, geographic, psychological and sociological variables. Social scientists of all sorts are eager to determine how democratic governance is initiated and maintained.

What are the prerequisites of a democratic order? How do democracies function? What can bring them down?

### **Democracy as a Subject of “Scientific Inquiry”**

Researchers who like to putter about with the origins and evolution of democracy want to know how democratic innovations undermined and ultimately replaced authoritarian feudal regimes. This subject must be approached historically. It involves posing questions such as:

- What gave rise to the English Civil War (1640-1649) and the subsequent Glorious Revolution (1688) that set the wheels of modern British constitutional government in motion?
- What were the precursors of dramatic events including the American and the French revolutions?
- What gave rise to the passage of the great electoral reform bills in the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century?
- What prompted the European revolts of 1848, and what caused them to fail?

Others are more interested in the workings of contemporary democracies. Some of the many forms that their inquiries can take involve questions about how democratic governments can be institutionalized, especially in countries with no significant exposure to the far-famed “Westminster Model” and little indigenous experience with democratic controls on the state. Of special interest here are the socio-economic preconditions needed for formal democracies to develop. Preferred relationships to be explored often have to do with cultural traditions including religion and kinship patterns, economic development, education levels, efficient and effective transportation and communications infrastructure, and the like.

So it was that, in the mid-1960s, when I was trying to relate democratic aspirations to problems of economic development in East Africa and, later, in Latin America, there was no lack of experts eager to tell me that democracy was a by-product of “modernization” (Apter, 1965; Organski, 1965; Rostow, 1960). It was also hinted that, despite (or perhaps because of) a colonial background in which indigenous peoples had become aware of the rites and rituals of Western governance, there was a perceived tendency among some former colonies to abandon the rule of law, to avoid free elections, to criminalize dissent and to ban competitive political parties. Such trends, I was assured, could be overcome, but only with Western guidance and intermittent intervention—cultural, economic or military.

Obstacles as well as enablers of democratic development were high on the list of approved research agendas and were often recipients of considerable *largesse* in terms of government funding. Accounting for the rising number of one-party states and for the replacement of colonial administrations with tyrannical and corrupt regimes posed serious questions for those who imagined an easy transfer of Western political values to the new states. Of course, the degree to which Western governments created, aided and abetted such tyranny and corruption was sometimes embarrassing; however, it was explained and justified by the official belief that making common cause with dictators might not advance democracy, but was necessary in order to stop the alleged world-wide communist conspiracy that would end all hope for democratic governance.

The political need to entertain “strange bedfellows” was used to rationalize opportunistic alliances with despotic leaders from the Shah of Iran, to Congolese President Mobutu and any number of Latin American dictators from Cuba’s President Trujillo and Haiti’s Duvalier family *père et fils* to Chile’s General Pinochet and Nicaragua’s Anastasio Somoza. Such stop-gap coalitions of convenience were deemed better than allowing developing nations to succumb to some sort of socialist or nationalist ideology, thus disturbing Cold War geopolitics. Their consequences for brutality and poverty, however, were seldom discussed in polite circles.

So, a steady flow of arms to “friendly” despots, elaborate training camps for repressive armies and state police as well as clandestine support for paramilitary “death squads” became a necessity of “strategic advantage.” It was bolstered by an increasing interest in “counter-insurgency” against those who were discontented with the transformation of colonialism into neocolonialism.

Such interest became a preoccupation of intellectuals whose academic careers were closely intertwined with Western military, diplomatic and economic strategists. Counter-insurgency, of course, has been a remarkably unsuccessful strategy, whether speaking of Algeria or Vietnam under the French, Vietnam or Afghanistan under the USA or Afghanistan under the USSR. As military historian Martin van Creveld (2008: 268) baldly put it:

The first, and absolutely indispensable, thing to do is throw overboard 99 percent of the literature on counterinsurgency, counter-guerrilla, counterterrorism, and the like.

The extent and intensity of the “blowback” that inevitably followed efforts to subdue internal opposition by force is now common knowledge (Johnson 2004a, 2004b, 2008, 2010); nevertheless, the extent to which even (or especially) misplaced enthusiasm undermines anything akin to independent academic thinking has also long been known and, if a reminder is necessary, the continuing connection between government policy, military engagement and corporate control was made abundantly clear when, in 2013, US Senator Tom Coburn (Republican- Oklahoma) succeeded in temporarily cutting off federal funds for research into any political science professor not pursuing a project that contributed either to US economic expansion or to national security (Mole, 2013).

Other options included connecting democracy to a variety of psychological factors. In the wake of World War II, largely as a result of some disappointing discoveries about what passes for human nature, eager researchers tried to connect democracy (and tyranny) to particular and possibly innate behavioural predispositions and habits of mind. Of special interest was a construct called the “authoritarian personality” (Adorno et al., 1950) which, it was said, made people susceptible to harsh ideologies and inclined to defer easily to power because of a desire to be led by strong (almost Freudian) paternal leaders. Democracy, then, could break out wherever these personalities were somehow absent or at least repressed. At the root of such approaches seemed to be the notion that democracy required a “mature” polity and that, unfortunately, such maturity was to be found mainly in the Anglo-American liberal democracies and in continental (though mainly Northern) Europe.

Still others wanted to know whether democracy was even feasible. Depending, as many people assumed that it did, upon a mature, well-informed, empathetic and rational electorate, fully functioning democratic governance was made to seem no better than a distant hope for underdeveloped regions and, in fact, something of an illusion even in advanced, putatively democratic states. So-called realists argued that most people—even or maybe especially—in advanced industrial societies had too much on their minds to become politically active. Careers, families, shopping, vacations, professional sports enthusiasms and nightly “quality time” in front of television sets in suburban subdivisions all involved the privileging of private lives ... even before the current infatuation with “social media” (which may not be “social” at all). What the ancient Greeks had called *oikos* (the household and its self-regarding inhabitants) had triumphed over the *politikoi* (public-spirited citizens). Political commitments such as joining political parties, attending debates and keeping informed about civic issues large and small were deemed a burden—an intrusion into our precious private space.

### **The Rise of Democratic Revisionism**

Following the likes of Joseph A. Schumpeter (1943), several generations of scholars have provided apologias for elite control over an apolitical, apathetic, alienated and disaffected citizenry (Bell, 1960; Berelson, 1956; Dahl, 1956; Lipset, 1960; Mayo, 1960; Milbrath, 1965; Morris-Jones, 1954; Plamenatz, 1958). The democratic ideal was reduced to something of a delusion. Democratic revisionists offered a minimalist version of democracy that could attain some measure of representative and responsible government without testing too greatly the imaginations and energies of the electorate. For those who were sceptical of participatory democracy or what they called “classical” democratic theory, an engaged citizenry was superfluous and sometimes dangerous.

By their lights, all that a satisfactory democracy required of governments was reduced taxes, improved services and the entertainment of an election campaign every few years. In these contests, of course, more attention is typically paid to the personalities of political leaders than to the complexities of public issues. Indeed, when pressed, most

voters display a serious lack of understanding not only of complicated policy decisions, but also of the platforms of the parties they endorse or reject. Mostly, interest is directed toward the image, brand and marketability of the candidates and especially of party leaders who are expected to display “charisma” and, of course, a cheerful smile. An affable but confident and, in the best case, inspirational leader of a mainstream party is almost guaranteed a victory.

As the excellent educator and much missed media critic Neil Postman (1985: 3) put it:

Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have become transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much public notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves.

Postman, of course, was simply bringing to bear the insights of Max Weber (1864-1920) almost a century before, on modern life. Weber, after all, had anticipated the end of the twentieth century just as he had witnessed the end of the nineteenth, which was his own. He fearlessly pointed to a future in which the prospects of democracy might be dubious, no matter how various regimes chose to advertise themselves.

Considering the fact that he has been elevated to the position of the secular exemplar of “value-free” social science, it is remarkable that Weber (1958: 182) spoke as passionately as this about the “iron cage” in which future generations would live:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development, entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For at the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.

Throughout the late 1950s, especially into the 1960s and even into the 1970s, defenders of democracy were available in numbers and resolutely criticized the “new realists” on both normative and methodological grounds. Sweeping, sometimes hyperbolic and near-libelous attacks in both directions were common in one of the most authentically exciting eras in American political science—one in which I was privileged to be a close observer of a vitality seldom witnessed before or since (Duncan and Lukes, 1963; Davis, 1964; Bay, 1965; Petras, 1965). In just one fervent year, Henry Kariel (1966) revealed the “irrelevance of pluralist analysis”, Jack L. Walker (1966) explained the ideological implications of a theory of democracy that certified elite interests and justified elite control of government and politics, Maure L. Goldschmidt (1966)

composed a telling diagnosis of political science in thrall to a degraded version of democracy and Peter Bachrach (1967) elaborated the practical consequences of yielding ground to the rulers and abandoning the ruled.

### **Democracy as a Subject of “Philosophical” Reflection**

Of course, conducting public quarrels over how best to frame democratic questions and research was not all that was to be found in professional political science journals a scant half-century ago, nor were meticulous and methodical statistical accounts of political influence that aimed at dissecting public moods and political campaigns. Sometimes serious philosophers are attracted to politics and government as well. Their interest is less in what happens than in how to think properly about it.

An enduring theme in philosophy is the line that divides people who think that ideas are the products of material circumstances from those who believe that ideas are more *real* than the grubby, inconsistent and seemingly contingent events in the so-called “real world.”

The first group denies that ideas have an independent existence apart from the sensory equipment shared by human beings and the social conditions that give rise to various concepts, explanations, rationalizations, and so on. They are inclined to think that our lives are determined either by our location in an evolving culture (“nurture”) or some set of instinctive drives or genetic programming (“nature”). In any case, we are the product of circumstance.

The second insist that ideas constitute ultimate reality and transcend mucky, imperfect day-to-day reality. They believe that words such as “freedom” and “justice” refer to real ideals and that people can be persuaded to fight and die to achieve them. They are inclined to think that history is created by “great men” in pursuit of great ideas and great accomplishments—proud manifestations of virtue and prime subjects of the adoration of Miss Jean Brodie.

So, for example, historians are divided over whether the beheading of King Charles I or Louis XVI or the bravery of freedom-loving or slavery-hating Americans were the result of political principles articulated by leaders such as Cromwell, inspired by philosophers such as Rousseau or made necessary because of the passionate beliefs of Tom Paine and Thomas Jefferson or John Brown and Abraham Lincoln on the one hand; or such whether overarching social and economic shifts from feudalism to mercantilism, mercantilism to commercial capitalism and an agriculturally based economy to one built on commerce and industry. Who really brought racial equality to Georgia? Martin Luther King Jr. or Ted Turner? (Grant, 1966).

Those who argue that ideas change history and define current events are commonly called “idealists, though not necessarily in the optimistic sense of thinking well of one’s neighbours and being committed to making a better world, but in the sense

of thinking that ideas determine actions. Those who opt for the notion that an evolving culture (nurture) or, perhaps worse, that innate biological drives and instincts or some sort of “hard-wired” genetic programming (nature) determine our attitudes and beliefs are frequently called “materialists.”

Idealism is usually held to be the invention of Plato (427 BC-327 BC), though it has more modern advocates including George Berkeley (1685-1753), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831). Idealism resides in those who speak of “true” beauty and justice. Idealists try to change our minds—sometimes through logical argument and sometimes by appealing to moral precepts. Idealist proponents of democracy tend to argue that democracy is good because it reveals, expresses and promotes our better nature, or that it is at least less likely than various forms of hierarchical, authoritarian power structures, whether based on wealth, religion or raw power to curtail our liberties and impose alien values and ultimately to enslave us.

Materialism is associated with Democritus (460 BC-370 BC), Epicurus (341 BC-270 BC) and Lucretius (99 BC-55 BC) as well as Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) who had a significant influence on Karl Marx (1818-1883). Materialists are inclined to look for the latent causes, the hidden realities and the social and economic interests produce fancy principles. Materialists want to know what’s *really* behind the pretty speeches. It is fashionable to call materialists “cynics” in a derogatory way, but it is also increasingly popular to share their skepticism.

We should, I think, care about such matters. They are not merely “academic.” They are insinuated not only into our speech, but also into our actions. They frame our beliefs and influence our behaviour. To quote John Maynard Keynes (1964: 383) just slightly out of context:

... the ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back. I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated, compared with the general encroachment of ideas.

And to quote Karl Marx (1852: 5), pretty much true to the context:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.

The pertinent effect of taking a stand, whether explicitly, tacitly or quite unwittingly and unconsciously is tremendous. It outlines our entire perspective on how the world works.

## **Democracy as a Political Cause**

I interpret Marx to be saying that circumstances largely set out the substance of our disagreements and the limits of our imagination and our language. They construct the borders of permissible political action and they establish the possibilities of political thought. They circumscribe the borders of our beliefs and behaviours and force us to live within the domain of thinkable and the doable. In the extreme, they provide the parameters of what is thought possible in theory and practice and they explain excesses as treason and insanity.

At the same time, men (and *women*) do make their own history. We are agents of stability or of change, all the while working within the cultural boundaries of our particular, contingent and accidental existence. Accordingly, while democracy may be described as a set of political institutions and arrangements and as a set of practices in which the ruled get to exercise some control over their rulers and also give their symbolic consent to the rules that legitimately constrain them, democracy is also a practical process and a normative precept. It can be found in the efforts to undermine patrician authority and to assert plebian rights. It is most often applied to forms of government, but it can also be more widely applied to informal groups including families in which traditional paternalism is replaced by collective decision making, religious institutions in which privileged hierarchies are transformed into faith communities in which “every man is his own priest, and to other sorts of organizations such as schools and workplaces (though not yet armies, prisons and psychiatric facilities).

For those who seek democracy, whether in government or in diverse social settings, questions of tactics necessarily arise. Absolute monarchies and societies in which an identifiable ruling class exercises almost total control over the public and private lives of the people are not known for surrendering their power without a fight. Even when certain freedoms are given, they are provided as privileges and not as rights. They can therefore be rescinded by the powerful, who have seldom yielded their authority willingly or easily.

Democratization therefore normally requires contestation. It implies sometimes open, sometimes hidden, and possibly violent conflict. It opens up the traditional “means/ends” debate in which democrats must ask themselves whether their own sort of authoritarianism (Lenin’s “vanguard of the proletariat,” for instance) or illegal methods (“terrorism,” for example), can be utilized without necessarily sacrificing the purity or even the possibility of the goal.

Within the limits of our laws, mores and imaginations, however, we inhabit life-worlds in which thought and language matter. Inquiry into language and meaning can isolate “causal factors” for determining behaviour because mental constructs *do no less than* shape our attitudes and actions, albeit within an *ultimately determinative* material

frame. As Gore Vidal (1984: 6) plainly put it in his interpretation of Abraham Lincoln “Our words, after all, define us.”

### **Essentially Contested Concepts**

At about the same time that Anglo-American political scientists were disputing how much citizenship participation was desirable and how much was possible in smoothly functioning liberal democracies that followed Locke’s dictum that the chief end of civil society was the protection of private property (Locke, 1690: Chapter 9, Section 124), a large number of influential (mainly British) philosophers associated with T. D. Weldon were expounding a theory of language and elucidating the implications of an analytical approach to ordinary language. They were not much impressed with abstractions, generalizations and especially normative concepts. Deeply influenced by empiricism and the remaining echoes of naïve positivism, they were inclined to attempt the reduction of language to its elementary, observable parts. They were not willing to give support to terms that could not be “operationalized” and tested in the real world. They held that concepts that carried an ambiguous relationship to the external world were “meaningless,” since the only acceptable meaning was contained in words that were uncontaminated by feelings, perceptions, likes and dislikes.

Almost sixty years ago, W. B. Gallie entered this highly controversial domain and popularized the notion of “an essentially contested concept.” In his seminal paper on the topic (Gallie, 1956), he explained that many disputes cannot be resolved by argument alone because people mean different things when using the same word. Rejecting the superannuated positivism of those in thrall to linguistic analysis, Gallie took steps to redeem normative concepts, not as transcendent, absolute, Platonic “forms,” but as endlessly negotiable but nonetheless legitimate, necessary and distinctly human thought and life.

W. B. Gallie’s preferred example was art. Normally, we will have no trouble agreeing that some paint applied to a canvass is a “painting,” but we may come to blows about whether any particular painting is a “work of art.” Realists and abstract expressionists may regard one another with bewilderment or incredulity, revulsion or contempt because they simply do not agree about the nature of their chosen vocation. J. J. Audubon wanted to make pictures of birds that looked as much like natural birds as possible. Jean-François Millet’s *The Gleaners* (1857) or Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot’s *Young Girl Reading* that were fundamentally different from Jackson Pollack’s “drip paintings” or Willem de Kooning’s *Women* paintings I through VI in which no effort was made to faithfully portray real people or coherent visible objects, but rather to express the subjectivity of the artist. With such divergence in intention and execution, agreement about whether a particular painting could be defined as art, much less evaluated “great art” was elusive if not inconceivable. W. B. Gallie did not offer an escape from such conundrums, but he did point to a way to deal with them judiciously.

In Gallie's view, essentially contested concepts were appraisive, internally complex and at least initially ambiguous; or, as Gray (1977: 337) put it, "radically confused." Examples include art, religion, science, democracy, and social justice. Essentially contested concepts are those about which people argue because important consequences flow from the result of disputes over which among two or several definitions may become commonly accepted. By refusing to abandon such innately controversial concepts, Gallie set the stage for the project of clarification without the necessity of evisceration. It would likely be impossible to fix upon an immutable Platonic archetype of non-corporeal substances, but that need not terminate political discussion. And, if the twentieth century taught us anything, it was surely that, *pace* Daniel Bell, ongoing political discussion was crucial to the survival of modern civilization, if not to our entire species.

### **Re-building Western Democracies**

In the aftermath of World War II, the chief liberal democracies paid close attention to the concept of democracy. The toxic alternatives in the form of right-wing and left-wing totalitarianism were more than cautionary tales. It would not, some of the more sober commentators acknowledged, have taken much for the major conflagration of the twentieth century to have produced entirely different results. The war, it has been increasingly admitted, was not won on the western front, but in the horrific encounter of Nazi and Soviet armies and the tens of millions of corpses that lay toward the east—many of them civilians either killed or starved to death in military actions or exterminated in atrocities of which the Holocaust is the largest and most well-known, but not the only example.

In the Anglo-American presidential and parliamentary systems, it was plainly time to take stock. Not only was it deemed important to rebuild Western Europe on lines roughly similar to those of the United States, the United Kingdom and the British Commonwealth, but there were already stirrings of anti-colonialism in Asia and Africa that would pose a new challenge and, of course, there was the emergence of "communist" China to take into account. Moreover, the leaders of the "free world" were compelled to do some serious reexamination of their own societies to assess the problems and prospects for vigorous democratic governance once the war against the Fascists and the Nazis had been ostensibly won and the Cold War against Communism was getting underway.

A dominant theme in the period of roughly 1950 to 1970 was the importance of "ideology." Ideology was any set of political ideas that challenged liberal democracy; liberal democracy was considered immune from the accusation of "false consciousness." Within acceptable debates about liberal democracy, it was commonly held that there were two approaches to understanding democracy that were most often described as the classical and the realist models.

Classical democracy was considered to adequately described as a blending of philosophical works from John Locke to John Stuart Mill, with appropriate references to some of the more articulate American revolutionaries, the Utilitarians, a few of more-or-less domesticated social democrats and, occasionally a soupçon of the milder elements of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It was, in general, a legacy of the European Enlightenment, sifted through an English-speaking sieve and linked directly to the accustomed institutional process of representative government.

Certain basic principles were agreed to be necessary for the construction and maintenance of a liberal democracy. It depended above all on the Rule of Law, but close behind were other basic essentials. For example, there was the principle that government required the consent of the governed which, in turn required regular, free and fair elections with a universal franchise. In addition, there was the endorsement of majority rule, but also the protection of minority rights and the acceptance of an inventory of recognized civil liberties. The precise form of such governments was considered flexible. Written and unwritten constitutions, presidential or parliamentary governments, unitary or federal states were all allowed. As well, legal systems could embrace the Common Law or a Civil Code. Judges could be appointed or elected and relations among the executive, legislative and judicial branches could vary. Finally, the catalogue of guarantees rights, freedoms and compensatory obligations was elastic. In the end, the working definition of a democracy seemed close to the colloquial expression of imprecision made by US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in 1964 (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*), when he was reduced to saying that the threshold test for obscenity boiled down to this: “[I] could never succeed in intelligibly [defining it]. But I know it when I see it” (Gewirtz, 1996: 1023). Such a nonchalant embrace of the irrational may suffice in some circles, especially on such topics as pornography (hard or soft-core), but it can lead to problems when more serious matters are at stake. I respectfully submit that democracy is one of those matters.

Apart from the question of what institutional and procedural components are essential to the definition of democracy, there were also questions of the socio-economic preconditions that may be required to establish a functioning democratic state. In addition political scientists, political sociologists, political theorists and political philosophers also concerned themselves with psycho-sociological issues. Taken together, they often boiled down to these:

- What is the proper role of the citizen in what was coming to be known as a “mass society”?
- Are people capable of exercising their franchise as informed and rational political actors?
- How much democracy is enough and how much is too much?

Academics, politicians, public intellectuals and media pundits all debated the topic. Their positions could, for the sake of convenience, be allocated to the two basic categories of classical democrats and realists.

The classical democrats were said to be optimistic, bordering on dangerous utopianism. People, we were assured, had quite enough to do earning a living, raising their children, praying to their deities, enjoying their social diversions and entertainments and, from time to time, enduring and recovering from personal tragedies and triumphs. Besides, to be completely honest, many people lacked the intelligence and the interest to concern themselves with politics at all. So-called classical (soon to be re-labeled as “participatory” democrats, insisted that in the absence of an attentive and involved public, government would be effectively controlled by a self-serving power elite that would assist nefarious corporations in exploiting the public and in introducing policies that might improve the conditions of the rich and infamous, but lead to social and economic degradation.

The realists, on the other hand, were said to be pessimistic, bordering misanthropy. People, we were equally assured, needed to become more involved in the political process, not only because their interests would be better served, but also because there were intrinsic satisfactions to be achieved by extricating ourselves from the idiocy of suburban life, restoring a sense of public space and discourse, and extricating ourselves from the limitations of the consumer-entertainment boundaries of an increasingly alienated existence. The realists, their critics averred, were nothing less and nothing more than apologists for a dominating minority that would ultimately return the middle and working classes to a state of intellectually indigent serfdom.

### **Exploring the Semantics of Democracy**

It was with this in mind that I have undertaken explorations of language for over forty years. Whether seeking a means to expose racial, ethnic, religious, or gender prejudice, I have found the utilization of certain psychological methods to be helpful in exploring “semantic space” and translating preconscious understanding of multifaceted normative language into mathematical representations of competing meanings. These can then be restored to ordinary language, but with the distinctions among competitive meanings clearly stated, so that the basis of difference can be explicated and the contest among subjective interpretations described and explained (Doughty, 1979, 2011; Doughty & King 1986, 1993, 1999).

While fully acknowledging the social construction of reality and the concepts and words we generate to represent it, I want to deal here with the intellectual problem posed when any disputed concept is made the subject of an argument. I am prompted to do this because I have heard far too many discussions that have been irresolvable because the contestants have wholly misunderstood or fundamentally disagreed on the matter of primary definitions. In short, they didn’t know precisely what they were talking about

and they certainly had no idea what their opponent had in mind. I want, in short, to load some empirical flesh on Gallie's theoretical bones.

The methodology and subsequent interpretation using factor analytical techniques is likely only of interest to those besotted with statistical measurements and need not occupy us here. Suffice to say that, when using semantic differential (Snider and Osgood, 1969) and Q-Sort techniques (Stephenson, 1988) and related devices, I was able to elicit from politicians, public servants and citizen activists a kind of topographic map of competing understandings of democracy as it existed, often inchoate and ill-formed, in the minds of people directly or indirectly involved in the political process. Few were able to articulate precisely which components of democratic theory were essential, important, tangential or irrelevant to their particular understanding of the concept. Fewer were able to trace their notions to some specific political philosopher or philosophical tradition. Yet, what remarkably emerged were four coherent patterns of perception that could without excessive stress, be cobbled together into cogent and defensible views.

These bundles of opinion revealed patterns of thought that expressed the following dominant concerns. I applied to following labels:

- Procedural democrats, who were most concerned with the “rules of the game,” who placed great store in concepts of fairness and in principles of due process and who were convinced that democracy meant adherence to parliamentary procedure, free elections and a strong prohibition of corruption in any form;
- Market democrats, who were firmly committed to neoliberal precepts and to the assessment of government in terms of its ability to enable economic growth, reduce taxation, limit government to essential services and speak of “taxpayers” rather than citizens;
- Values democrats, who saw government as an authoritative regulator of illegal and illicit behaviour, a dispenser of traditional moral teachings and a regulator of aberrant social behaviour, disorderly conduct and permissiveness in schools and society;
- Participatory democrats who normally brought with them a populist or a social justice agenda and thought in terms of government as the agent of the people as opposed to the instrument of the already wealthy and powerful.

None of this should be surprising, for such recognizable sets of opinions are familiar enough. What matters here is that each collection of internally consistent preoccupations, attitudes and beliefs betokened different cognitive and affective orientations toward democracy and distinctive, competing versions of what counted and what did not count as democratic behaviour.

To cite two simple and obvious examples:

- *procedural democrats*, when confronted with an instance of allegedly criminal behaviour would care more about whether a defendant got a fair trial than about whether a morally correct verdict was rendered; in the alternative, *values democrats* would want to see “justice” done in the form of a severe punishment especially if the crime was one that was especially morally offensive; likewise,
- *market democrats* would judge a government budget according to monetary criteria including debt reduction and administrative efficiencies, whereas *participatory democrats* (especially of the “progressive” sort—as most are) would look first to whether social programs that benefited the poor, the working and the fragile middle class with much less regard for whether such measures required assuming more public debt.

At stake are more than opinions about particular policy alternatives; instead, we are dealing with matters of what (if anything) democracy fundamentally *is* and what it is *for*. Definitions matter. Empirical research of the sort ever so briefly discussed here, can assist in identifying competing definitions. It remains to discover how to think about possible clarifications, if not immediate resolutions.

Exploration of the manner in which definitions are put together and inquiry into the policy preferences, the embedded interests and the fundamental philosophical assumptions that define our definitions (so to speak) are critical first steps if the *unnecessary*, time-consuming and exhausting squabbles that misdirect the energies of people otherwise acting in good faith are to be set aside and our energies are to be put to better use.

Getting to the point where we can reveal and reflect upon the constituents of our key terms will take no small amount of honesty and insight. Having witnessed, however, more ineffectual and often irritating chatter that rarely grasps, much less resolves conflict, it is apparent to me that a great deal of our talk is wasted because we not only do not know what we are talking about, but also that we are almost preternaturally incapable of hearing what others are saying to us.

### **Re-examining Fundamentals**

Of the several basic constituents of democratic governance upon which most people agree is the principle of majority rule. What openness to re-examination of our thoughts in all their complexity and occasional self-contradiction allows is a reconsideration of what such a principle entails. We are already aware of the fact that the institutions of democratic government treat majority rule with some scepticism. In the United States Senate, for instance, a vote of 60% is required to impose cloture and 67% is needed to ratify an international treaty. In Canada, the somewhat unclear and currently

disputed *Clarity Act* gives the federal government the right to decide what constitutes a “clear majority” in the case of a provincial secession referendum.

What about the idea itself? The common practice of electing representatives by a majority of voters or a plurality in elections contested by more than two candidates is widely recognized. At the same time, concerns are expressed that wealth and power provide a minority of citizens to exercise undue influence over government by circumventing the electoral process through lobbying or by distorting votes because of

political advertising that less prosperous voters cannot afford. An even more basic concern was raised by Kenneth A. McGill (1970: 88).

The fact that majority rule has always been thought to be an important part of democracy does not mean that it has even been possible for the majority to rule in the way called for by the theory ... At best, majority rule is no more than a convenient way to settle the opinion of the community; it is not the essential characteristic of democracy or rule by the people. McGill points out that “majority rule” takes place in a context (an election) which is both far removed from the serious decision making processes of government. It also involves making choices among political parties whose function is not to represent citizen interests but to aggregate them in the “big tents” which permit parties to appear to represent the largest number of people, usually by manipulating the electorate with vacuous slogans and attractive personalities.

McGill continues (1970: 89):

Since the principle of majority rule has been abstracted from the situation where a community of interests exists and real discussion takes place, it has ceased to play the important role which was established for it in traditional democratic theory. In fact, as an abstract principle, majority rule does not seem to be essential for democracy. Rather, what is essential is that the crucial decisions which are made in a social situation are controlled by the members who actually live and work in that organization. The principle of majority rule can have nothing at all to do with democracy and can even serve as a cover for a decision-making process that is not democratic.

It should be clear that McGill is not talking about a situation in which a mere adjustment in procedure, however dramatic, would solve the problem. If Canadians, for example, were to follow the advice offered by Liz Couture elsewhere in this issue, they could escape the peculiarity of artificial majorities in which a prime minister can hold almost total power with the support of less than 40% of the voting public.

Megill is suggesting something far more radical—a reinterpretation of democracy in which power is significantly decentralized and decisions are made much more directly by the people directly affected by the results. It is not my place to offer comment here on proposals such as these. It is, however, abundantly clear that asymmetrical power relationships that put the narrow interests of massive private corporations ahead of the public interests of the citizens as a whole and the a combination of voter suppression and voter apathy combine to raise serious questions about the efficacy of contemporary democratic arrangements. Some *serious* rethinking may be in order so that the essentially contested concept of democracy can be restored in theory and in practice.

## Coda

On June 5, 1989, I was editing a science journal entitled *Bridges: Explorations in Science, Technology and Society*. Shortly after 9:00 am, Peter Spratt (1936-1995)—sole owner and publisher—came into my office and asked me to gather the staff in the Board Room, including in the mix the art and layout designer, my administrative assistant, the financial officer who paid the printers, the shipper and any full-time employee with even a tangential relationship to the publication. Peter then recalled the week-end events in Tiananmen Square and said he would like to put a message in the next issue of *Bridges* openly declaring our support for the advocates of democracy who so cruelly perished in what has been called the “Tiananmen Massacre.”

By all legal accounts, Peter had the right to tell all of us what to put or not to put in *Bridges*. I was the editor, but every article in each issue was vetted personally vetted by him (as I recall, none were ever rejected ... at least not after a most often convivial conversation). Such are the privileges of ownership.

In this case, however, Peter was, for the first and only time, declaring a political interest. It’s not that Peter imagined that anyone apart, perhaps, from a few of our 25,000 subscribers, gave a hoot what *Bridges* thought about the momentous events a half-a-world away. One way or another, it was obvious that Deng Xiaoping and others were destined to be unimpressed. What mattered to Peter was whether *we* were “good with it.” The community that produced *Bridges*—regardless of status, salary, seniority and so on—*mattered*. Peter could be, on occasion, what all bosses are; but, on a matter such as this, he was a “democrat” and was unwilling to implicate people, even indirectly, in a political position with which they were personally uncomfortable. He made it clear that nothing less than an uncoerced consensus would do. If *anyone* had objected, he would have found another way to express his views—no hard feelings.

That small conversation in a mainly industrial building on Lakeshore Boulevard West in Toronto is of no consequence to anyone who wasn’t there at the time; it does, however, contain a small symbolic seed of democracy that may resonate, and that seed might or might not lead to much; to me, however, it fits in nicely with a speech made in 1932 to the United States Federal Bar Association by Judge Billings Learned Hand (1977), said by many to be the finest Supreme Court judge that America never had:

... And so when I hear so much impatient and irritable complaint, so much readiness to replace what we have by guardians for us all, those supermen evoked from somewhere from the clouds, whom none have seen and none are ready to name, I lapse into a dream, as it were. I see children playing on the grass; their voices are shrill and discordant as children's are; they are restive and quarrelsome; they cannot agree to any common plan; their play annoys them; it goes so poorly. And one says, let us make Jack the master; Jack knows all about it; Jack will tell us what each is to do and we shall all agree. But Jack is like all the rest; Helen is discontented with her part and Henry with his, and soon they fall again into their old state. No, the children must learn to play by themselves; there is no Jack the master. And in the end slowly and with infinite disappointment they do learn a little; they learn to forbear, to reckon with one another, accept a little where they wanted much, to live and let live, to yield when they must yield; perhaps, we may hope, not to take all they can. But the condition is that they shall be willing at least to listen to one another, to get the habit of pooling their wishes. Somehow or other they must do this, if the play is to go on; maybe it will not, but there is no Jack, in or out of the box, who can come and straighten out the game.

Peter Spratt's singular, spontaneous and selfless decision was to seek the approval for what he, at least, thought was a controversial decision. It wasn't that anyone supported the massacre, but that some might have thought that the formal endorsement of *any* political opinion was inappropriate in a "science" journal, especially one directed mainly to elementary, middle and secondary school teachers. Peter spoke on that occasion to the communitarian version of democracy and the recognition that, at some point, even the most dispassionate and allegedly objective among us have a responsibility to take a stand.

Learned Hand (1872-1961) worried less about the power invested in traditional authorities, than about what might be won by demagogues and illusionists. His idea of democracy eschewed the primacy of leadership of any kind.

On June 5, 1989, I was glad to see that P. J. Spratt and Learned hand agreed.

**About the author:**

**Howard A. Doughty** teaches Political Economy at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at [athoward\\_doughty@post.com](mailto:athoward_doughty@post.com).

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