Sceptical Democracy[1]

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Two extreme philosophical positions pose a constant threat to democracy. Those who believe in the certainty of their beliefs (totalitarianism) and those who deny the existence of any truth (nihilism and post-modernity) uphold these anti-democratic positions. Squeezed between these two polarities we find liberal democracy. One of the distinctive properties of liberal democracy is its endorsement of a political definition of scepticism. The aim of this article is to explore the relationship between liberal democracy and scepticism.

Introduction

This article explores the relationship between liberal democracy and scepticism. In the first part, I argue that the threat to democracy comes from two opposing extremes: from those who believe in the certainty of their beliefs (totalitarianism), and those who deny the existence of any truth (nihilism and post-modernity). Between these two polarities we find democracy. In the second part I argue that if democracy has managed to occupy this precarious space, it is due to a concept that is pivotal to a correct understanding of liberal democracy: scepticism. It is regrettable that for many sympathisers of liberal democracy, scepticism is a dirty word. The aim of this article is to suggest that the rehabilitation of scepticism is long overdue. If democracy is going to defend itself from anti-democratic threats, it is imperative for democratic theory to embrace a political definition of scepticism.

Threats to Democracy

Democracy is under threat from two opposing extreme world-views. On one side, anti-democratic thought is entertained by those who attack the spiritual decay of democracy for its inability to ground society on infallible foundations. At the other extreme, democracy is dismissed for being at best a culturally relative notion, and at worst an instrument of Western cultural imperialism.

The arrogance of wanting to replace reasonable doubt with certainty finds resonance in two forms of anti-democratic thought: totalitarianism and religious fundamentalism. Meaning 'complete' or 'absolute', totalitarianism refers to a form of political rule that leaves no room for doubt or plurality of thinking. In particular, totalitarianism embraces certainty in two separate but related spheres: first, in its vision of a brave new world, the creation of which warrants the destruction of existing society and unlimited human sacrifice. Secondly, in its blind faith in autocratic rule, where the ruler is not accountable to anyone else.[2]

Like totalitarianism, religious fundamentalism (fanaticism) is also grounded on pillars of certainty. Here certainty takes the form of knowledge of truth as revealed

by a sacred text. Plurality of thinking is denied, and doubt is seen as a weakness, if not a heresy, which must be uprooted by deeper immersion into dogmatic reading of 'the text'. Fundamentalism is widespread, present in most, if not all, recognised religions. One finds Protestant fundamentalists in the United States demanding equal time be given to the teaching of 'creation science' alongside the theory of evolution; Muslim fundamentalists pronouncing a death sentence on the author Salman Rushdie, including translators of his book *The Satanic Verses*;[3] and Catholic fundamentalists who believe that Catholicism is the only true, revealed religion.

Apart from the arrogance of believing that one's views are correct beyond doubt, anti-democratic thought also finds fertile ground in those who have nostalgia for certainty. This is the position associated with Alasdair MacIntyre's (1981) influential critique of what he calls the Enlightenment project. MacIntyre tells us that modern morality is in disarray, and the root of the problem lies in the attempt by Enlightenment thinkers to free individual moral agents from hierarchy and teleology. MacIntyre advocates a return to a pre-Enlightenment era, where theology informs our conception of human nature in general, and our *telos* in particular. In Christian theology and Aristotle's account of the virtues MacIntyre has rediscovered the certainty in moral theory that modern society has lost. This is what MacIntyre calls 'man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-*telos*'.
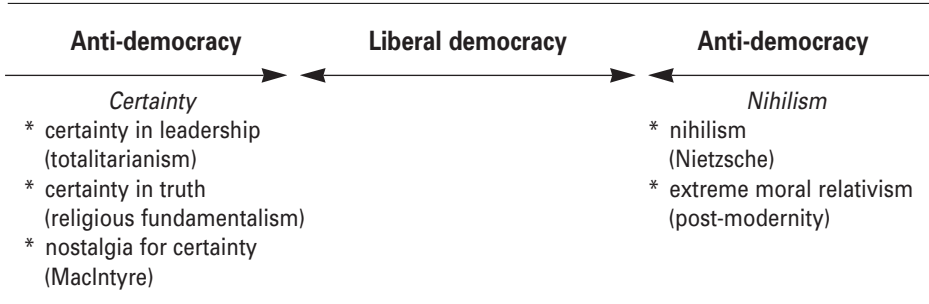
Certainty is only one threat to democracy. Its antithesis is equally menacing. Nihilism, cynicism and relativism are as cancerous to democracy as the arrogance or nostalgia for certainty. By nihilism I am referring to the negation of justification for values in general, and moral values in particular. Because of his dismissive attitude towards constructive, universal, post-Enlightenment political morality, Nietzsche is perhaps the outstanding representative of nihilism in the twentieth century.[4] The nihilistic posture finds resonance in the anti-foundationalism characteristic of post-modernism. Post-modernists oppose Enlightenment values, truth-claims, and most of all the attempt to ground morality on universal and rational foundations. For example, Jean-François Lyotard appeals to Wittgenstein's theory of language games to defend the thesis that scientific knowledge is a kind of discourse, that even our modern concerns with truth and social justice are simply the result of language games, and that language games 'do not carry within themselves their own legitimation' (1984, p. 10).

In terms of the threat posed to democracy, there is no substantive difference between totalitarianism and post-modernity. All true believers in democracy should be concerned about the destructive nature of nihilism and other extreme forms of moral relativism at least as much as by the arrogance of certainty and total resolution.

Democracy is constantly under a double threat, as Figure 1 shows.

Liberal democracy has managed to carve a space for itself between two undemocratic forces. What makes democracy special? Or, to be more precise: what is the distinctive characteristic of democracy that makes it different, and better, compared to undemocratic forces?

A direct comparison between democracy and its two main threats, as depicted in Figure 1, points to an epistemological cleavage. It would appear that what makes liberal democracy different from its adversaries is the way it relates to knowledge

Figure 1: Liberal democracy between anti-democratic threats

Anti-democracy	Liberal democracy	Anti-democracy
Certainty		*Nihilism*
* certainty in leadership (totalitarianism)		* nihilism (Nietzsche)
* certainty in truth (religious fundamentalism)		* extreme moral relativism (post-modernity)
* nostalgia for certainty (MacIntyre)		

and truth. Liberal democracy does not claim to have access to certainty of knowledge, nor does it deny truth *tout court*. The space of liberal democracy is to be found between these two extreme epistemological positions. The epistemological dimension of liberal democracy is, I believe, captured by the notion of scepticism.

Democracy and Scepticism

Perhaps the biggest threat to democracy lies within democracy itself. Apart from a few notable exceptions,[5] definitions of democracy tend to be nebulous and approximate. This is not surprising, considering the complexity of the concept and its multivariate character. It is not my intention here to formulate an original, comprehensive definition of this concept.[6] The more modest goal of this short article is to explore one distinctive attribute of liberal democracy that both characterises and distinguishes it from the anti-democratic forces of unreasonable certainty and relativist nihilism. This one democratic trait, often neglected if not altogether denied, is 'scepticism'.

Like democracy, scepticism is a term prone to misunderstanding. This is not altogether surprising, considering the long history of scepticism in Western culture, from Pyrrho of Ellis in the first century BC to the present. In this paper, I will endorse the following general lines regarding the concept of scepticism. First of all, scepticism does not necessarily imply a denial of truth, although this is the way some contemporary political theorists still define the term.[7] Contrary to what is generally believed, scepticism need not necessarily be a claim about something. To be more precise, scepticism does *not* claim that we do not know anything, or that we cannot know anything, or that truth does not exist. According to a more moderate conception, scepticism does not provide answers but only raises questions. As Grayling (1991, p. 24) reminds us, 'the most troublesome scepticism claims nothing: it merely challenges us to provide justifications. The sceptical arguments are designed to show why a defence of justification is needed, not to prove a negative thesis.' Scepticism simply means retaining a degree of uncertainty, or rejecting certainty as ill founded.

Brian Barry has recently suggested the following definition of scepticism: 'No conception of the good can justifiably be held with a degree of certainty that warrants its imposition on those who reject it' (1995, p. 169). Barry's definition is particularly adequate for the idea of liberal democracy, and in what follows I will

attempt both to defend it from possible criticism and endorse it for a correct understanding of liberal democracy.

It is important to emphasise that Barry's definition of scepticism does not pretend to capture a general epistemological position. Nor does it point to the absence of moral beliefs in general. Instead Barry's definition of scepticism is strictly 'political', which makes its focus very narrow and specific. Barry is interested in working out the political implications of scepticism. For lack of a better term, I suggest calling this 'political scepticism'.[8] As a political concept, scepticism is not simply alerting us to the illegitimacy of certainty, but more specifically to the illegitimacy of using political institutions to impose one's views on others.

It may be argued that political scepticism, as defined above, is analogous to the concept of fallibilism. Fallibilism is the philosophical doctrine that maintains that knowledge-claims can never be held as true beyond doubt. The fact that any knowledge-claim may turn out to be false suggests that all claims only have some probability of being true. This is, of course, the position defended by J.S. Mill in chapter 2 of *On Liberty*: 'if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility' (1989, p. 53) While it is true that there is some overlap between political scepticism and fallibilism, these two terms are distinct enough not to be interchangeable. Political scepticism differs from fallibilism on two issues. First, fallibilism is concerned with knowledge-claims, or 'opinions' as J.S. Mill calls them, whereas political scepticism is concerned with the validity of outcomes of the political process. Secondly, whereas fallibilism is questioning the epistemological legitimacy of our knowledge-claims or opinions, political scepticism is concerned with the political legitimacy of imposing outcomes arising from the political process on those who disagree with them. Paradoxically, Karl Popper is perhaps the clearest advocate of what I have called political scepticism, even though he has done more than most this century to defend the thesis of fallibilism: 'decisions arrived at democratically, and even the powers conveyed upon a government by a democratic vote, may be wrong. It is hard, if not impossible, to construct a constitution that safe-guards against mistakes. This is one of the strongest reasons for founding the idea of democracy upon the practical principle of avoiding tyranny, rather than upon a divine, or a morally legitimate, right of the people to rule' (1988, pp. 25–26).

The term 'imposition' plays a determining role in our definition of political scepticism, and therefore needs to be carefully defined. The generic meaning of imposition is forced compliance, although it is crucial to distinguish between different types of force. Force can be legitimate or illegitimate, reasonable or un-reasonable. Democratic rule is not logically opposed to force, but only on condition that this is both legitimate and reasonable. Critics of liberal democracy often fail to distinguish between different types of force. It is becoming fashionable to object to the democratic 'imposition' of liberal views on those who are unpersuaded by the superiority of liberal virtues. This inopportune objection is often made by post-modernists, who despair for the condition of man in the post-Enlightenment world, trapped in the net of all-encompassing but mostly invisible power structures, and by naive supporters of the multicultural party, who see liberalism as a threat to cultural identity.[9] Both post-modernist and multiculturalists make a gross

misuse of the term in question. According to political scepticism and liberal democracy, the term 'imposition' raises important questions of an institutional nature. Enforcing the outcomes of democratic decision procedures is legitimate as long as there are adequate procedures in place that allow for adequate deliberation and revision. Such decisions are not a permanent state of affairs.

Of course, it cannot be denied that all laws are an imposition on one's freedom, as libertarians never grow tired of reminding us. Per se this is not problematic. From a democratic point of view what matters is that the rule of law is not arbitrary. Furthermore, under a liberal democracy there is an acknowledgement that the rule of law is at best an imperfect procedure,[10] which is why the outcomes of a democratic decision procedure are always open to redress at any time.

It is this conception of political scepticism, whereby no conception of the good can justifiably be held with a degree of certainty that warrants its imposition on those who reject it, which makes democracy special. It also helps us to understand why, in no uncertain terms, democracy is under constant threat. The rest of this article will flesh out the concept of sceptical democracy.

Scepticism and Indeterminacy

Scepticism is defined in terms of the illegitimacy of certainty, and political scepticism as the illegitimate imposition of one's views on others. In what follows I suggest that the illegitimacies of certainty and of imposing one's views on others are distinctive attributes of liberal democracy.

Arguably the most distinctive feature of a democratic decision-making process is that the outcome of this process is both indeterminate and provisional. Political scepticism upholds both the indeterminate and the provisional nature of the democratic process. A democratic decision-making process always produces indeterminate outcomes. Adam Przeworski makes the compelling argument that the essential feature of democracy as a form of political organisation is 'referential uncertainty'. The key word here is uncertainty. In a democracy, outcomes of the political process are to some extent indeterminate – that is to say, everyone must subject their interests to competition and therefore uncertainty. In the words of Przeworski, 'Democratization is a process of subjecting all interests to competition, of institutionalizing uncertainty' (1993, p. 63). That democracy is about institutionalising uncertainty is a powerful idea. It is not so much that one is uncertain about the value of one's interests, but simply that one is uncertain whether one's interests will triumph at the end of the democratic process.

Apart from being indeterminate, the democratic process must also produce outcomes that are provisional. This view is fully endorsed by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson in their theory of deliberative democracy: '[In democratic government] the resolution of many disagreements will be provisional, ever subject to new moral challenges and always open to fresh settlements' (1996, p. 50). Similarly, Michael Walzer argues that 'In democratic politics, all destinations are temporary. No citizen can ever claim to have persuaded his fellows once and for all' (1983, p. 310).

Political scepticism goes a long way towards justifying the requirements that the outcome of a democratic procedure be both indeterminate (the illegitimacy of

certainty) and provisional (the illegitimacy of imposing one's views on others). For evidence of this we need to look no further than the literature on ways to expand political participation, a position which is fully endorsed by both liberal democracy and political scepticism. Democratic theory tells us that one of the reasons why it is important to expand political participation is because it enhances competition between interests and therefore increases the uncertainty over outcomes of the political process.

Thus Benjamin Barber (1984) famously scolds the relentless quest for certainty that he believes has characterised liberal political philosophy, presenting as an alternative the idea of 'strong democracy'. By this he means a distinctive modern form of participatory democracy where the emphasis switches away from the 'prepolitical realm of the immutable' towards the idea of a self-governing community of citizens, where conflict is resolved in the absence of an independent ground. Similarly, Aryeh Botwinick argues that endorsing scepticism goes a long way towards justifying the expansion of political participation:

> 'If skepticism in some of its different guises states that none of us is in a position to affirm the rational superiority of its views and values over those of his fellows, then the appropriate political response is to have as many members of society as possible participate in the numerous collective decisions affecting our lives. Skepticism delegitimizes the formation of any permanent hierarchies in society and provides a continually renewing impetus for the expansion of political participation'. (1990, p. 7)

The conception of political scepticism I am defending in this paper is radically different from Botwinick's. Whereas Botwinick argues for (epistemic) extreme scepticism and relativism, going as far as embracing certain aspects of Lyotard's post-modernism and defending democratic participation on non-pragmatist grounds, I am only concerned with *political* scepticism, a position which is radically opposed to post-modernity and which endorses the institution of political participation on pragmatic grounds. Notwithstanding my differences with Botwinick, the affinity between political scepticism and the expansion of political participation is a powerful idea, which is crucial to the way we think about democratic procedures.

Conclusion

By suggesting that democracy lives in the precarious space between two threatening extremes world-views, totalitarianism (certainty of beliefs) and nihilism (extreme relativism), I have argued for the need to conceptualise democracy in terms of scepticism. The rehabilitation of scepticism is long overdue. Democratic theory should be seen as endorsing a political form of scepticism, which condemns the illegitimate imposition of one's views on others.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Geraint Parry and Michael Saward for written comments on an earlier version of this paper. The usual disclaimers apply.

2 See Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1966; Friedrich, Curtis and Barber, 1969; Shapiro, 1972; and Taylor, 1993.

3 See Jones, 1990 and the debate on 'Islam and Liberal Democracy' in *Journal of Democracy* 7(2) (1996).

4 For an uncompromising critique of Nietzsche, see Nussbaum, 1997. For a valiant attempt to defend Nietzsche, see Hatab, 1995.

5 See Dahl, 1989, Beetham, 1994 and Saward, 1996.

6 I fully agree with Beitz, 1989, 17n., that the perennial dispute about the definition of democracy is largely fruitless.

7 Dworkin (1983, p. 47) claims that scepticism 'argues that beliefs about how people should live are merely "subjective" and have no "objective" validity'. See also Dworkin 1985, 1986 and 1996 and his entry on 'Moral Scepticism' in Honderich, 1995.

8 My understanding of 'political scepticism' is different from Oakeshott's (1996). See also Lom, forthcoming.

9 For a defence of impartiality in dealing with cultural diversity, see Jones, 1998.

10 On imperfect procedures and the legal system, see Rawls, 1972, pp. 83–90. Acknowledging the imperfect nature of legal procedures is an endorsement of political scepticism. It is also one possible argument for the undemocratic nature of the death penalty as a form of punishment.

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