

## **An Historiographical Approach to Democratization**

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Martin BAESLER

Faculty of History, University of Cambridge; Department of Political Science, University of Freiburg;  
Email: martin.baesler@politik.uni-freiburg.de, mkfb2@cam.ac.uk

### **Abstract:**

Contemporary theoretical examinations of the processes of democratization have a common feature. They view the transformation of regimes and the implementation of democracy from the perspective of institutionalization. Moreover, they evaluate the success of democratization according to minimalistic definitions of democracy. These theories manifest in a disregard for the historical dimension of a development in the meaning of democracy, and its relation to local and contemporary circumstances. As a consequence, these theories shed little light on the origins and vicissitudes of democratization in the different regions of the world. In this paper, I argue that the contextualizing historiographic method of the Cambridge School, and in particular the work of John Dunn, offer a valuable means to a critical reflection of democratization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the search for an understanding of the processes of democratization, several studies have emerged in the last two decades questioning the causes and effects of regime changes towards democracy. It is a very common characteristic of these theories that they base their scientific schemes on the normative assumption that the implementation of democracy follows a certain historical agenda or concept of democracy. Democratic transformation thus appears to be a continual process of social development resulting from normatively deduced varieties of democratic institutions. Amidst a plurality of approaches dealing with the processes of institutionalizing a pre-given understanding of a pro-democratic stance, a critical approach to a contextual understanding of the emergence of democracy is rarely considered. One of the main representatives of this approach is John Dunn, founder of what is now known as the Cambridge School. In his writings, John Dunn leaves room for an understanding of democratization which differs principally from other approaches through the scrutinizing examination and deeply reflected discussion of democracy. As a result, he offers a multifaceted method of critical examination on the paradox that “today, in politics, democracy is the name for what we cannot have, yet cannot cease to want”.<sup>1</sup> He addresses the idealization of the concept of democracy by providing a fundamentally historical perspective. As a result, he draws the conclusion that present-day democratization cannot in part be understood without considering the hegemonic power of the Western world. He thereby criticizes the commonly shared assumption that democracy is to be seen as a universal value in its own right, since this view disregards power-relations in the light of which its implementation and sustenance is promoted or rather enforced. His considerations call to attention that the transitions to democracy are not just a recent phenomenon, but instead must necessarily be studied in their present-day predominance as a result of their 200 year long legacy. In this analysis, the word democracy has to be clearly distinguished from its ideological underpinning, as well as from forms of government that are named democratic but make little attempt to promote democratic values. Dunn states “Most writers who approach the subject today tend to think of democracy as a definite set of political institutions, which rest on a clear and compelling set of principles, and yield reliably encouraging practical consequences. None of these presumptions is well founded, and their combination is dangerously misleading.”<sup>2</sup> In his book *Setting the People Free* Dunn offers a knowledgeable and insightful alternative to the current democratic theories by stressing the importance of supplanting the moral imperative of democracy with a primarily political-historical understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Dunn, “Democratic Theory”, J. Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> J. Dunn Getting Democracy into Focus, [http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-opening/focus\\_2944.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-opening/focus_2944.jsp), 19.10. 2005, (20.08.2010).

As a result, and in this paper, I will outline the main features of John Dunn's democratic theory, in order to demonstrate the value of his approach to the study and understanding of democratization. In the first part, I will present a brief overview of current interpretations of democratization. Whereupon, I will deal with John Dunn's critical reply to the current developments in democratic theory. Thereafter, I will outline his method of historiography in order to then introduce his critical assumptions of the success of democratization, in contrast to and as a reflection on common assertions of democracy.

## 2. THE QUEST FOR AN UNDERSTANDING OF DEMOCRATIZATION

The theories of the third wave of democratization were driven by an immensely euphoric belief in the forthcoming success of democracy on a global scale. Theorists of this period assumed democracy the best form of political organization, which would doubtlessly spread its wings across the globe. As a theoretical basis for their assumption and comparative analysis of this process they referred to the minimalist definitions of democracy, as put forward in the theories of Schumpeter, Dahl or Przeworski. These political theorists reduced democracy to "the question of free and general electoral competition, vertical accountability and the fact that the most powerful political and social actors played the political game according to democratically institutionalized rules."<sup>3</sup> This framework of analysis facilitated a fairly generalized comparison of the processes of democratization in very different regions of the world. It also somehow mirrored the expectations that the process of democratic change is predictable and planable, as argued by Di Palma in his work *To Craft Democracies*.<sup>4</sup> The analytical as well as political advantage of the concept of *electoral democracy* soon became a disadvantage when the methodic undertone raised its voice seeking a better understanding of the prerequisites of a successful and lasting functionality of democracy. Moreover, it hampered the more general inquisitiveness concerning the question of whether the transition to a democratic regime was in fact an adequate solution towards striving for a free and well-ordered society.

After the revolutionary changes in the run of 1989 the theories had to deal with variants of success as well as with those countries where democratization had failed or shown the barely distinguishable visage of a hybrid regime. Due to these developments the focus shifted to the dependency between democratization and other concepts, most notably those of nation state, rule of law, human rights or that of globalization. The typology of democratic development was especially complicated in the face of illiberal democracies.<sup>5</sup> Carothers noted that the initial euphoria over democratic development had lost much of its scientific appeal: "What is often thought of as an uneasy precarious middle ground between full-fledged democracy and outright dictatorship is actually the most common political condition today of the countries in the

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<sup>3</sup> W. Merkel and A. Croissant, "Good and Defective Democracies", *Democratization*, Vol.11, No.5, December 2004, pp.199–213, p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> G. Di Palma, *To Craft Democracies*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. F. Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997, pp. 22-43.

developing world and the post-communist world.”<sup>6</sup> His criticism of democratic pragmatism contains a demand for a paradigmatic change. Yet in his proposal for that change he does not elaborate on the need for reflection about the intellectual origins of the necessity to promote democratic practices and institutions. Not to mention the question of what we actually mean when we talk about democratic practices. Nevertheless, it became clearer that the historical inevitability of democratization had to be put into perspective. Democracy’s cultural triumph had to be contextualized, as was prominently elaborated by Huntington in his seminal work *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. In another respect, the close interconnection between democracy, the capitalist market system and civil society was put into question with regard to the increase in the complexity of economic and political structures on the global scene.<sup>7</sup>

### *The Historical Turn*

In light of this skepticism a new theoretical attempt was put forward by Sen who pointed out that we must pay greater attention to the roots of democracy in different cultures. In his work *Democracy and its Global Roots* he points out that the concept of democracy has to be examined in specific cultural contexts: “There are, in fact, many manifestations of a firm commitment to public communication and associative reasoning that can be found in different places and times across the world.”<sup>8</sup> Sen made clear that the diverse manifestations of *public reasoning* in the background and foreground of every culture could be seen as a prerequisite for the dynamic of democratization: “This global heritage is ground enough to question the frequently reiterated view that democracy is therefore just a form of Westernization. The recognition of this history has direct relevance in contemporary politics in pointing to the global legacy of protesting and promoting social deliberation and pluralist interactions, which cannot be any less important today than they were in the past when they were championed.”<sup>9</sup>

The latest attempts at comparatistic studies concentrate on the historical dimensions and domestic effects of the institutionalization of democracy, as demonstrated in the theories of Capoccia und Ziblatt. Both authors call attention to the *historical turn* in democratization studies: “The collective ‘return to history’ reflects a growing appreciation among political scientists of the conclusions that can be drawn from the history of democratization, and of the constraints imposed by history on the prospects of democratization.”<sup>10</sup> It is the aim of this

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<sup>6</sup> T. Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2002, pp. 5-21, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. B. Gilley, “Democratic Triumph, Scholarly Pessimism”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 21, No. 1, January 2010, pp. 160-167.

<sup>8</sup> A. Sen, “Democracy and its Global Roots: Democratization is not the same as Westernization”, *The New Republic*, October 6, 2003, pp. 29-35, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> G. Capoccia and D. Ziblatt, “The Historical Turn in Democratization Studies: A New Research Agenda for Europe and Beyond”, *Comparative Political Studies*, August/September 2010, vol. 43, 8-9: pp. 931-968. p. 932.

historical method to unveil the *democratic wave* approach, which only considered the development of democracy episodically. Instead, democratization should in future be studied as “the result of intense domestic conflicts along different lines of cleavage, and was shaped by transnational impulses, intellectual exchanges, and momentous events that had an impact that traveled across national boundaries in a fashion that we often myopically imagine is distinctive to our own age.”<sup>11</sup> A further attempt to add to a historical reflection on democratization was Keane’s book *The Life and Death of Democracy*. His extensive study strives for a new categorization of the state of democratic affairs and culminates in the characterization of the contemporary form of democracy as a *monitory democracy*.<sup>12</sup>

John Dunn argues that Keane’s attempt to ascribe the origins of the word, the idea, as well as form of government to the concept of monitory democracy does not succeed in offering a coherent conceptional basis for the understanding of the political conditions we are facing.<sup>13</sup>

### 3. CRITIQUE OF THE CURRENT THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO DEMOCRACY

The term democracy is used multifariously. On the one hand, it designates a concept that has gained tremendous importance, following Tocqueville’s first coining of it as a way of life that most effectively assimilates the social, political and economic landscapes. The term also includes the various manners of political participation, of which universal suffrage is the most significant. On the other hand, it is closely connected with the understanding of democracy as a system of representation that comprises an intricate network of institutions, which according to Tilly is based on the attempt to enact a „broad, equal, protected, binding consultation of citizens with respect to state actions“<sup>14</sup>. The institutional setting is to act as a safeguard for legal principles, for political and private liberties as well as for political participation and competition. Finally, the term is used by all those critics of the social and political conditions who refer to a belief in an ideal democracy as a counterargument to the actual form of democratic regime which they consider to be a façade for all sorts of non-democratic practices. Dunn résumés that the term has “the air of a shared verbal talisman rather than of a real

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<sup>11</sup> G. Cappocia u. D. Zibblatt, *Ibid.*, p. 966.

<sup>12</sup> J. Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, London: Simon & Schuster 2009. „By putting things into a longer historical perspective, and by using different definitions and a more nuanced framework of interpretation, it proposes that present-day trends are quite different from, more contradictory and certainly much more interesting than has been supposed by far-fetched – and short-sighted – reports of the Freedom House bind.” p. xxv.

<sup>13</sup> J. Dunn, “Democracy and its Discontents: Review ‘The Life and Death of Democracy’”, *The National Interest*, March/April 2010. <http://nationalinterest.org/bookreview/democracy-its-discontents-3385> (20.08.2010) “Monitory democracy [...] offers no coherent basis on which to assign entitlement or competence to judge, no way of rendering its judges or judgments accountable, and no systematic means to align judgment with the control of consequences in the world.”

<sup>14</sup> Ch. Tilly, *Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008, p. 34.

agreement in practical judgement on any concrete topic.”<sup>15</sup> The use of the term democracy as a melting pot for so many different meanings and nuances can not only be seen in the daily conversations of ordinary citizens but also and to a similarly confusing degree in the scientific community, contrary to their own self-imposed obligation to maintain a clear definitional line. Dunn observes that “at present democracy features in the political speech and understanding of the world’s populations in a deeply equivocal way, and spreads profound political confusion across the world simply by doing so.”<sup>16</sup>

In order to carve a way out of this mold Dunn proposes, as a first step, the need to simply understand what democracy signifies: “There is always in practice a great deal to be said against democracy. To understand its passage through history and across the world, you need to start off by trying to understand what it is. Then you need to learn even more history [...] and try to puzzle quite what it means.”<sup>17</sup> It is rather counterproductive for the understanding of our current situation if political analysis starts off with typologizing the political arrangements without taking into consideration what it actually is that these typologies are to explain.

### *Understanding Democracy*

According to Dunn, the missing differentiation of democracy as an idea and as a state form leads to the paradoxical situation that we share a huge confidence in the workings of our present-day democratic institutional settings although we do not quite understand what the practical implications of the democratic values for the working of these institutions actually are. To put it differently: “One important fact about this strange form of life we now share is that almost no one within it tries to take in the fate of democracy in both these two key senses anywhere at all. But the sharp bifurcation of attention for the vast majority of us between these two domains [...] prompts us to a preoccupation with the ethical and the desirable from any sustained attempt to grasp what is happening in the world and why it is happening [...] But it makes virtually no demand that these two should meet, and at least confront one another.”<sup>18</sup> The arena where the confrontation of these two components first took place was the antique polis of Athens. It is therefore crucial to go back to the Athenian democracy in order to shed light on the link between the idea and the form of state. Although this approach is only to be found among a few scarce social scientists the importance of this recourse is unquestionable. Dunn scrutinizingly states: “Today, at least for the present, things look very different. We may well doubt that they really are quite so different.”<sup>19</sup> From Athens the democratic voice started

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<sup>15</sup> J. Dunn (ed.), *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey 508 BC to AD 1993*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993, p. 239.

<sup>16</sup> J. Dunn, “Tracking Democracy”, in: *Political Theory*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2010, pp. 106-110, p. 109

<sup>17</sup> J. Dunn, “Democracy: Review Charles Tilly ,Democracy””, in: *European Journal of Sociology*, No. 49, 2008, pp. 487-491, p. 491.

<sup>18</sup> J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy*, London: Atlantik Books 2005, p. 173.

<sup>19</sup> J. Dunn, *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey*, p. 240.

to echo through the passages of history and carried the hope “that human life in the settings in which it takes place may come to be more a matter of committed personal choice and less a matter of enforced compliance with impersonal and external (and unwelcome) demands.”<sup>20</sup> As a derivative of this hope the following feature of democratization is to be acknowledged: “What is distinctive to democratic success is internal, political and cultural, not external, economic or military.”<sup>21</sup>

If we preponderantly wish the huge void which contemporary generations of democrats feel when they put that hope in relation to established modern democratic regimes to have any meaning for the understanding of our political way of life we must find a new route to looking at what causes us to perceive that void. Only when we begin to think about the interaction of ideas and practices will we be able to gain a grasp of the cacophony which surrounds us and which conceals, beneath the surface, unwanted relations of dependence and subjection. In this regard, the history of political thought offers a key to the overcoming of the cognitive myopia and helps us to understand what has happened in the social transformations which we are part of.

#### 4. HISTORIOGRAPHY

In order to clear the cloud of confusion with regard to the meaning of democracy and the political condition of the world in which we live “we need bolder, clearer, imaginatively more searching, and humanely more engaging insight than any now offered by modern social sciences or the corrupt practices of professional politicians or bureaucrats.”<sup>22</sup> During the 1960s this intellectual need brought John Dunn together with Quentin Skinner and John Pocock to develop a historiographic approach which soon after became known as the Cambridge School.<sup>23</sup> By considering canonical texts of political thinking, not as abstract theoretical systems, but as a testimony of previous political agency great care was given to the guiding stipulation that this new approach “takes the historical character of the texts as fundamental and understands these, in the last instance, as highly complex human actions.”<sup>24</sup> In his article, *The Identity of the History of Ideas*, which was published in 1968, Dunn explains that the goal of his method is to demonstrate “that thinking is an effortful activity on the part of human beings, not simply a unitary performance [...] Once talking and thinking are considered seriously as social activities, it will be apparent that intellectual discussions will only be fully understood if they

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>21</sup> J. Dunn, “How Democracies Succeed”, in: *Economy and Society*, No 25 1996, pp. 511-528, p. 525.

<sup>22</sup> J. Dunn, “The History of Political Theory”, in: J. Dunn (ed.), *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1996, pp. 11-38, p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. E. Hellmuth u. C. v. Ehrenstein, “Intellectual History made in Britain: Die Cambridge School und ihre Kritiker“, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, No. 27, 2001, pp. 149-172.

<sup>24</sup> J. Dunn, “The History of Political Theory”, p. 19.

are seen as complicated instances of these social activities.”<sup>25</sup> The works of the history of political thinking were not created in a vacuum and therefore it is necessary to ask what reasons the author had to put his theory forward.<sup>26</sup> The overall advantage of the historiographic method is accordingly the “clarification and assessment of political goals and in the appraisal of political action.”<sup>27</sup> The study of the history of political thinking differs from other areas of social science. Its main emphasis is to address the “vagaries of human interest”<sup>28</sup>. There was no doubt that the dedication to an active reflection of the history of political thinking would entail a new understanding of the foundation for contemporary politics as well. Dunn notes: “The scandal is that our contemporary comprehension of politics, unlike our contemporary comprehension of physics or biology or chemistry, should still be so deeply mired in history as such: not that the history of political theory should differ appreciably from physics, but that political theory itself should still remain such an intractably and intensely historical subject.”<sup>29</sup> Especially in the light of the increasing role of politics in the shaping of modern societies the historical method does not only promote a critical perspective but also offers a path to assessing future scenarios. Dunn assumes: “Politics has never been so important before in human history. But it cannot be said that the human understanding of politics has grown commensurately with its devastating importance.”<sup>30</sup>

### *The Historiographical Method*

The contextualising method of the historiographic approach of interpretation consists of the analysis of the causalities of paradigmatic change in political discourse. It is assumed that these paradigmatic changes take place during periods of revolution. In appreciation of these phases of upheaval the special “cognitive force”<sup>31</sup> of a historical text can then be uncovered. Since the authors of political texts are seen as social actors who developed their thinking in a context of political discourse which nurtured their theory it is possible to study the reciprocal influence of the set of conventional political vocabulary and the author’s attempt to change that vocabulary. It is the central paradigm in historiographic thinking that language does not only serve to expand knowledge but that it is also used to legitimize the prevailing discourse for the legitimization of systems of domination or government. Every new political vocabulary has

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<sup>25</sup> J. Dunn, “The Identity of the History of Ideas”, in: *Philosophy*, Vol XLIII, No. 164, April 1968, pp. 85-104, p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. D. Bell, *The Cambridge School and World Politics: Critical Theory, History and Conceptual Change*, in: First Press, 2001, <http://www.theglobalsite.ac.uk/press/103bell.htm>, (25.08.2010),

<sup>27</sup> J. Dunn, “The History of Political Theory”, p. 13. Dunn notes critically: “It has been in these two respects that the expectations of its obsolescence held by postwar American social scientists and British analytical philosophers have proved most obvious astray.”

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12-13.

<sup>31</sup> J. Dunn, “The History of Political Theory”, p. 27.



therefore an impact on the social reality and understanding thereof. The methodical starting point is the presumption that every society has command over a limited and frequently used vocabulary, which is derived from a process of conceptualization within different areas of the political arena. Social and political revolutions present a new dynamic to these processes of conceptualization and trigger this paradigmatic change. During these paradigmatic changes there appears a disruption between the meaning of the conventional vocabulary to understand the political conditions and the political reality itself. As a consequence, the political vocabulary does not sufficiently and adequately represent political reality and discontinuities become obvious. The analyzing of these ruptures in political language is thus the major goal of the Cambridge School. It is also acknowledged that during times of political continuity the language of political authors and his or her possibility to cognize the political developments are restricted to the existing vocabulary. To sum up, language functions as a connecting means between political praxis and political thinking. The close and careful study of language is therefore of utmost importance. Difficulties arise from hasty conclusions, as Bell notes: “knowledge of the social context in which an author wrote a work is not the same as understanding the meaning of the work, for it cannot account for the intention of the author.”<sup>32</sup>

The broader theoretical underpinning for the historiographic analysis is based on the definition of the political as “a space of human action, always conducted under very severe constraints and on the basis of restricted information, by creatures of limited skill and practical wisdom.”<sup>33</sup> Dunn points out that the limitation of political agency has to be carefully considered in these forms of study, which will help us to understand the intricacy of the subject matter of social science. He notes: “It is the constitutive role of human agency in politics as a subject matter which renders it so radically exposed to the vicissitudes of human beliefs and of the ideas which organize and articulate those beliefs.”<sup>34</sup>

## 5. SETTING THE PEOPLE FREE – THE PATH OF DEMOCRACY

Departing from the historiographic method as a means to understanding politics, Dunn begins his study of democracy with two distinctively important questions. The first one is: “Why should it be the case, for example, that an ancient Greek noun, which did not even linguistically imply merit, or dependability, or even good intentions, within rule, and which for most of its history as a word signified a peculiarly discredited and unfeasible form of rule [...], has become so recently the anodyne label for legitimate political authority across most of our polyglot globe?” The second one resounds: “Why should the regime form with which that term is now somewhat speciously associated, the modern representative republic, founded on popular sovereignty expressed through universal adult suffrage [...] quite suddenly have won

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<sup>32</sup> D. Bell, *The Cambridge School and World Politics*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> J. Dunn, “The History of Political Theory”, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> J. Dunn, “The History of Political Theory”, p. 13.

the global struggle for wealth and power so handsomely and with such apparent decisiveness?”<sup>35</sup> The development of democracy has to be seen in the tension between what was understood at certain times by the term democracy, its ideological contents and the political institutions which were influenced by the language.

In Athens democracy was the name for a clearly distinguishable form of political regime which took equality to be at the centre of political activity. Dunn notes, concerning this feature of democracy in ancient Greece, “democracies were states which took the political component of citizen equality rather seriously”.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, modern states are limited to only symbolically appreciating the goal of equality: “Modern state structures concentrate power to a degree which no ancient state could have begun to emulate and to a degree that fifth and fourth century BC Athenians, for example, would have considered a complete negation of democracy.”<sup>37</sup>

The glance back to the Athenian democracy is not in its appreciation “as a haven to which it would be seemly or reasonable to yearn to return [...], but as a series of structures through which to think about politics by a controlled contrast with the circumstances of today.”<sup>38</sup> With this line of thought Dunn follows Moses Finley. Finley considers the study of Athenian democracy to uncover important conceptual features for the understanding of the modern form of government und political life. In *Democracy Ancient and Modern* he therefore concludes: “We must consider not only why the classical theory of democracy appears to be in contradiction with the observed practice, but also why the many different responses to this observation, though mutually incompatible, all share the belief that democracy is the best form of political organization.”<sup>39</sup>

Dunn follows this interpretation and outlines the historical steps of the development of democracy from Athens until today in his book *Setting the People Free*. The book encourages a critical reflection of current and very familiar political terminology, which most of its readers are doubtlessly fond of. It is uncompromisingly clear about its refusal to offer a positive outlook on our democratic self-conception. Cannon pointedly remarks that it is a “sobering book at a sobering time”<sup>40</sup>. This is especially so as Dunn demonstrates that democracy is no longer defined as the participation of the citizens in ruling, and not even in the processes of deliberation in accordance with the attic idea of *isegoria*, but as a system in which citizens are

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<sup>35</sup> J. Dunn, “The Aftermath of Communism and the Vicissitudes of Public Trust”, in: *Proceedings of the British Academy*, No. 123, 2004, pp. 195-209, p. 203.

<sup>36</sup> J. Dunn, “Democratic Theory”, J. Dunn, *Western Political Theory in the Face of the Future*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> J. Dunn, “Tracking Democracy”, p. 108.

<sup>39</sup> M. Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, London: Chatto and Windus 1973, p. 10-11.

<sup>40</sup> J. Cannon, “Review, Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy”, *English Historical Review*, CXXII (497), 2007, pp. 804-805, p. 805.

not only far from ruling themselves but even more adjusted to the continuing demands to keep the order of egoism in a functioning condition.<sup>41</sup> Why has that change happened? And what are the consequences of that change for our understanding of politics today?

### *The Phases of Democracy*

Dunn subdivides the development of this meaning into three major phases.<sup>42</sup> The first phase began in ancient Greece and reaches up to the Middle Ages. It is characteristic for this period of intellectual tradition that the term democracy was given a negative connotation, which referred back to the political theory of Aristotle. The use of the term in the texts of the middle age is for the most part hesitant. The change to this use happened for the first time in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: "Perhaps by the time of English Civil War, and certainly by the time that it became available for recollection in anything but tranquility, the potential of this pejorative analytical term to pick out potent sources of allegiance was at last in clear view. From then on, its rise to world mastery, at least at a verbal level, was just to be a matter of time."<sup>43</sup>

The second phase takes shape in the 18th century when a number of authors paid more and more attention to the word and attached certain ideas to it relating to how the revolutions on the American as well as European continent were to be understood. It was during these times that revolutionary values were incorporated into and described by the term. Dunn notes: "Anyone who chose to do so placed themselves far beyond the borders of political life, at the outer fringes of the intellectual lives of virtually all their contemporaries."<sup>44</sup> In the United States of America the term began to dominate the political discourse and consequently shaped the social development fundamentally: "It faced no surviving rivals and was seldom under much pressure to reflect on its own nature, let alone defend itself against a real challenge to its ascendancy."<sup>45</sup> Henceforth, any publicly presented partisanship against the acknowledged set of meanings of the term equated to nothing short of the position of a maverick. The situation on the European continent was rather different. In Europe the term democracy had different meanings, including a highly provocative and powerful one introduced by Robespierre, "It was Robespierre above all who brought democracy back to life as a focus of political allegiance: no longer merely an

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free*, p. 160.

<sup>42</sup> The phases are to be interpreted as elements of a "single historical sequence: one which has a clear beginning, and which, for all its proliferating subsequent variety, ought in principle to be intelligible as a historically natural outcome, across time and space, of that singularly concrete and distinctive commencement." J. Dunn, "Democracy: The Politics of Making, defending and exemplifying community: Europe 1992", J. Dunn: *The History of Political Theory*, p. 178.

<sup>43</sup> J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free*, p. 60.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

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elusive or blatantly implausible form of government, but a glowing and perhaps in the long run all but irresistible pole of attraction and source of power.”<sup>46</sup>

During the phase that followed these revolutionary periods the two most influential meanings began to emerge, namely as the *order of egoism* and the *order of equality*: “One reason why democracy remained such a fiercely divisive political category in Europe for the next fifty years was that Buonarroti’s conception of what it meant continued to strike a deeper chord than the different view worked out in practice at the same time in the United States. In America, once the Constitution was firmly in place, democracy soon became the undisputed political framework and expression of the order of egoism.”<sup>47</sup> Dunn argues that during that phase the word democracy was attached to a meaning of a form of government as well as that of a political value. The attribution of very different meanings developed into a battleground for ideological rivalries between partisans of the order of egoism and those of the order of equality, lasting well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the same period, the term’s connotations relating to very distinct forms of government emerged: “Democracy has altered its meaning so sharply since Babeuf because it has passed definitively from the hands of the Equals to those of the political leaders of the order of egoism. These leaders apply it (with the active consent of most of us) to the form of government which selects them and enables them to rule.”<sup>48</sup> On the side of the proponents of equality democracy defined a set of governmental institutions which were responsible for achieving the goal of equality. In the course of history it was the form of regime of the order of egoism which eventually obtained a more dominant force in that battle: “American statecraft became, very slowly, a little more fastidious; wealthier and better-educated populations in many different countries took sharper exception to authoritarian rule [...] or the economic cycle turned sharply against it. Under this American provenance democracy was presented and welcomed as a well-established recipe both for nurturing the order of egoism and combining its flourishing with some real protection for the civil rights of most of the population.”<sup>49</sup> The self-given image of the western regime form, and with it the meaning of the term, transmuted once again when democracy was used as a justification for warlike invasions in the fight against terrorism.

### *A Tug of War*

By means of the demonstration of these phases Dunn succeeds in narrowing down the paradoxes in our current understanding of the term. He concludes: “The key to the form of life as a whole is thus an endless tug of war between two instructive but very different senses of democracy. In that struggle, the second sense, democracy as a political value, constantly subverts the legitimacy of democracy as an already existing form of government. But the first,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 125-126.

<sup>48</sup> J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free*, p. 160.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

too, almost as constantly on its own behalf, explores, but then insists on and in the end imposes, its own priority over the second.”<sup>50</sup>

Dunn’s historiographic analysis is valuable in one important aspect: We learn to step out of our democratic comfort zone and are drawn to assuming and to a great extent engaging in an outlook towards our future that the idea of democracy is far from becoming a stable, universally shared and commonly understood idea, and is far from providing us a secure means to handling an uncertainty that we are inevitably facing in future. Similarly, the democratic institutional settings of the modern republic give little hope that things will remain as smooth and sustained as we are made to believe by political representatives. Moreover, Dunn’s analysis offers a clear historical timeframe within which our current system of government is founded: “the period of time over which it makes sense to think of democracy as setting about its global conquest reaches back no further than America’s founding”.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, Dunn has demonstrated that democracy is derived from nothing other than political choices. In the course of history it grew triumphant only due to the political actors and their situational decisions to bring about or to limit changes: “that one vast overarching choice has been composed in turn of myriads and myriads of other choices [...] each in the end made by a single partially self-aware living human actor.”<sup>52</sup> It is therefore methodically crucial to investigate the contexts of these decisions, their justification and description as well as the external circumstances and forces which lead to the decisions to organise society the way it was done. “To grasp those contexts and recognize those pressures will to some degree safeguard us against the temptation to romanticize our sense of what has been in play, or draw it too ingeniously from our parochial horizon of experience.”<sup>53</sup>

## 6. CONSEQUENCES FOR THE ANALYSIS OF CURRENT PROCESSES OF DEMOCRATIZATION

In Dunn’s point of view democratization is closely connected to the political value of democracy and is – in contrast to the determined forms of government – to be regarded as: “open-ended, indeterminate and exploratory.” He continues: “It sets out from, and responds to, the conception of democracy as a political value, a way in which whatever matters deeply for a body of human beings should in the end be decided.” Hence, the decision is based on circumstantial and intellectual incidences, which lead towards the choice for a democratic system. In order to grasp the intellectual dimension of the social, cultural, economic and political processes it is important to draw careful attention to the local perceptions of these changes und the associated wishes and hopes of the population. With regard to the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>51</sup> J. Dunn, “Democracy and its Discontents”.

<sup>52</sup> J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free*, p. 139.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

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developments in Russia John Dunn emphasizes that we must bear in mind: "It is more rewarding to consider it not objectively and at an analytical prudent distance (as a frozen mass of externally detectable and specifiable behaviour), but in more immediate relation to the political perceptions, judgements, and sentiments of its denizens."<sup>54</sup> The central aim is to interpret the reasons for political agency and how these reasons serve as an evaluation and judgment of political change. Consequently, he states: "from the viewpoint of past, present, and prospective political choice and its more or less articulated grounds and rationales, dispersed, as democracy requires us to see these, across its huge and often understandably bemused population."<sup>55</sup> In this way we would also succeed in finding a balanced understanding of the role of the demos in that process of democratization and provide an alternative view to what has nowadays become so widely neglected. That is to say, that the instructed changes of the latest waves of transformation were legitimized to achieve "political normality". But it remains open as to what that "political normality" is actually supposed to mean. Obviously it was connected with a process of fashioning the demos towards normality without taking into account that it is the normality that actually needs to be thoroughly and deeply imagined as something closely linked to the demos itself and its way of living. Therefore an analysis has to start off with the people who are simply living in our human society and not with the idea or the people that should be there. The moral aim which can usually be detected in the theories of democracy and in the theories of democratization has to be reconsidered and challenged in the face of historical complexity. With Dunn's theoretical approach we are offered a view that is not solely informed by theoretical, universal and analytical textures but rather by a critical contextual understanding.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The triumph of democracy has been widely discussed in the literature on democratization, especially after the revolutions of 1989. Recently, the initial euphoria, which was closely connected with scientific attempts to project the path of democratic institutionalization and cultural transformation towards commonly shared democratic values, turned into a somber view on the consistency of the success of the implementation of democratic regimes, as well as the scientific probability of any sort of prediction. Based on this change, a highly contemporaneous debate has begun on the necessity of returning to a more historical perspective on the conflicts that explain and explicate the emergence of democracy. Although this approach promises to shed more light on the longer term effects of introducing democratic institutions and their interconnection with social and political cleavages it focuses too narrowly on democratization as the implementation of institutions. In contrast to this the political-historical approach of John Dunn offers a methodological approach that allows for a critical view on the reasons for political choices and the relevance of democracy as an idea that shapes

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<sup>54</sup> J. Dunn, "The Aftermath of Communism and Public Trust", p. 203.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

political praxis and political institutions that label themselves democratic. By his distinction of democracy as a word, as an idea and as a form of state Dunn highlights the need to gain a view on democratization as political agency in tight relation to the theoretical debates surrounding them, rather than as a solely systematic scheme.

Bourke and Geuss describe Dunn's attempt in a twofold manner: "The first is his attempt to rehabilitate the standpoint and the cognitive and practical skill of the political actor, and this means recognizing the importance of understanding the judgment of real political actors – where 'judgement' most definitely does not mean simply the subsumption of individual cases under pre-given concepts." They then continue: "Dunn's second and related innovation is his emphasis on the historical variability and context-specificity of political concepts, once again in opposition to the tacit Socratic and Platonic assumption that key political terms [...] designate in each case something that is definably the same hic et ubique."<sup>56</sup>

As such the democratic theory of John Dunn offers an analyse of the traces that the term democracy has left in world history, which can help to nourish current theoretical debates and improve scientific approaches to studying the success or failure of democratic regimes. An approach on the basis of his methodology would necessarily include a focus on the understanding of the hope and beliefs held in the population regarding the choices taken in the political process and a better understanding of the relevance of the effect of political ideas on political causalities. It would also dwell on the implications of local contexts on the forming of or the adapting to political concepts in the "single causal field of politics: not as a reality outside and above politics, to which the latter is conclusively answerable."<sup>57</sup>

The question why democracy has triumphed is therefore closely linked to why it could become a reasonable political choice and to which extent the forms of regime and the logic of political praxis succeed in reproducing the expectations which are trustfully identified with their legitimacy. It would apply imaginative force to trace back "what it makes sense to do politically, within, and in relation to, a modern republic."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> R. Bourke and R. Geuss (eds.), *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009, p. 4-5.

<sup>57</sup> J. Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics*, London: HarperCollinsPublishers 2000, p. 46.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.