Democracy and Utopia

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I

Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains....How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer.

J. J. Rousseau
On the Social Contract

I begin this paper with Rousseau’s famous remarks for two reasons. They remind us how utopian democratic aspirations are; and they remind us how dystopian they can become. Having observed that at least some constraints on the liberty of each is necessary in order to secure justice for all, Rousseau imagined that democracy could legitimate those constraints. He argued that free and equal citizens should participate in collective decision-making in order to discover what justice, or the General Will, requires, and having done so, each should consent to its embodiment in law or policy and to being bound by its requirements. Hence democracy would enable a free people to discover what they ought to do, and to impose on themselves their duties. Democracy thereby legitimatizes their chains since their chains are both just and self-imposed. So intertwined are liberty and justice in Rousseau’s democracy that what justice requires is precisely what a free people want, and no just law can render a citizen unfree.

Though utopian, Rousseau’s vision of democracy is likely attainable only in an unattractive world, and this brings us to the dystopian possibilities of democratic aspirations. The reconciliation of freedom and justice that democracy supposedly makes possible in Rousseau’s vision requires, as is well known, consensus: either the citizens agree on what justice is (and so on what the law must require), or they agree to be bound by what the majority says it is (this they do in the original contract creating their society). Says Rousseau: If and when, after due deliberation, consensus is unattainable and majorities have to decide, those who dissent must conclude that they were mistaken about what justice requires, and they must therefore concur with the judgment of the majority. And having in this way consented, their chains are on Rousseau’s account legitimated! One can not help feel that Rousseau here undercuts his vision by placing stability above both freedom and justice; for justice is now what some and not all want, and dissidents are forced to be free, that is, to surrender their considered opinions or conscience to that of the larger number. Alternatively, consensus reigns, and no one has to be forced to be free. But for this result to occur with any degree of regularity, Rousseau makes clear, a number of preconditions must be met. The community must, for instance, be small in size, austere and severe, without an elaborate division of labor, with no significant social
cleavages and private associations as well as no significant inequalities in wealth; moreover, citizens must put aside their private interests when engaged in political deliberation, for private interests are multiple as well as selfish, and so are likely to make consensus impossible. Here again, it appears that Rousseau is moving away from freedom and justice. A small, homogenous community may secure consensus, and so stability, but it will do so by eliminating rather than accommodating liberty, and so it can not achieve the kind of justice with which Rousseau began, the kind that a genuinely free people want.

Rousseau’s vision nevertheless suggests a working definition of democracy as commonplace as it utopian: democracy names a form of collective deliberation and decision-making that takes place under conditions of equality, liberty and inclusion. There are at least four different ideals or principles included in democracy so conceived. The first is deliberation: collective decisions ought to be made collectively, and only after informed and reasoned discussion, argument and debate has occurred. In general, the ideal of deliberation implies that political decisions be made collectively rather than by a single person or a few isolated persons, and that decision-making be guided by reason rather than by considerations of might or power, wealth or augury, or be left to accident or happenstance. The goal is to enable and empower multiple decision-makers, representing the variety of interests and perspectives, experiences and knowledge, present in a community, to reason and deliberate together on whether, how, and with what probable results, collective problems might be resolved, conflicts diminished, or opportunities seized. By applying in this way collective, deliberative reasoning, any decisions made are likely to be just or, more cautiously and realistically, are likely to produce outcomes that are the best they can be, all things considered.

A second ideal or principle is political equality: each member of the collective or community ought to have an equal opportunity to influence collective deliberations and decide collective decisions. An important point to make about this ideal is that the concept of equal opportunity need not be, and usually is not, construed in wholly formal terms. Democrats often contend that political equality is not satisfied, for instance, if each member of a community or collective can legally participate in collective deliberations, or if each is given an equal vote to decide outcomes. Instead, many democrats insist, the members may have to be at least roughly equal in cognitive and other resources in order to insure that no individual or group is systematically advantaged, or disadvantaged, by such factors as wealth or class status, education or gender, ethnicity or religion, strategic position or location.

A third ideal or principle is political freedom: all members ought to be free from

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1This conception is meant to capture central ideas and ideals associated with especially contemporary participatory and deliberative theories of democracy. Elaborations and interrogations of these theories may be found in a very wide literature; well-known, influential, and helpful examples include Pateman (1970), Barber (1984; 1998), Fishkin (1991; 1995), Dryzek (1990; 1996), Gutmann and Thompson (1996), and the essays by Habermas, Cohen, Mansbridge, Phillips, Young, Benhabib, Christiano and many others in the collections edited by Benhabib (1996) and by Bohman and Rehg (1997).
coercion, intimidation, threats, bribes and forms of manipulation that may prevent them from expressing their opinions or otherwise impair their willingness to speak, to raise questions and engage fully in discussion and debate. The requirement of freedom accordingly implies that information relevant to deliberations must be available to all, and that transparency must characterize the deliberative process and the more general context within which politics and the affairs of the collective take place. Freedom also and relatedly implies individual autonomy, which requires that persons be reflective and self-governing. The interests and values, wants and needs, self-understandings and projects, that partly constitute the individual must be well-considered and genuinely chosen rather than having been internalized or accepted as a result of fear, conformity, unreflective habit, manipulation, hegemonic discourse or the like. This insures that collective decisions will be guided by interests and values that actually are the expression of a free people.

The fourth ideal or principle is that of inclusion: the members of the collective or community ought to include all those affected by its collective decisions. This ideal suggests that the boundaries of a collective or community, or the criteria defining membership, have to be elastic, varying across issues, or in some way accommodative of the interests of those who are not considered part of the collective and yet are affected by its actions (and non-actions). As we shall see, this may include the interests of a variety of entities.

Now it seems clear that, understood in something like this way, democracy really is a utopian ideal or good. It not only has sparked, and continues to spark, the imaginations and hopes of people, it has done so because of its attractiveness and worth. Indeed, democracy is in my view required by justice, both because the democratic process is a just or fair way to make collective decisions, and because that process is more likely than any alternative to secure just decisions. A political process characterized by collective deliberation, equality, liberty and inclusion is both intrinsically just and likely to produce just outcomes, that is, to produce, over time, collective decisions that are, normatively speaking, the best they can be.

Democracy is also utopian because it is radical, in the sense that achieving it to any substantial degree requires demanding and significant changes in current ways of thinking and being. Democracy seems in particular to demand a number of virtues of individuals (as citizens, or as members of a collective or community), and to require a number of demanding social and cultural conditions as well as political structures and processes.

Additionally, democracy is utopian because it is unlikely to be fully realizable in any probable world and, like all utopias and utopian ideals, it excludes certain possibilities and threatens other values or goods. This is due to a number of reasons. One is the fact that the ideals constitutive of democracy are, like all ideals, vague and indeterminate, such that what democracy practically requires is contestable. Hence democracy is not fully realizable in part because it will never be clear what exactly “full realization” means. Another difficulty is that democracy is, as we have seen, a complex good, consisting of several ideals, and it is virtually certain that there are tensions between them, theoretically and practically. Concrete manifestations of democracy will almost surely, then, reflect compromises made between these
ideals, compromises that may favor one ideal rather than another, and which will necessarily incur some costs, disadvantages and risks. Yet another problem is that, however complex a good democracy is, it is only one good among many, and there is no reason to believe that democracy is completely or even partly compatible with all other goods, some of which may be required by justice. Democracy is not community or diversity, stability or efficiency, spirituality or non-violence, the satisfaction of basic needs or economic equality or abundance, civil rights, animal rights, or environmental justice. It is quite likely that achieving democracy requires sacrificing or trimming other goods, or that achieving other goods requires compromising the good of democracy.

It seems, then, that imagining a place in which all free and equal persons affected by collective decisions deliberate together to secure a just society will involve major, but contested and contestable, alterations in individual and social life, and that it will foreclose alternatives and incur a variety of costs. As Harvey (2000, 182) and many others have said about utopias generally, the democratic utopia requires imagining a place or space that embodies certain “social and moral goods” and not others, and it therefore forecloses alternatives, however temporarily, and in this way constitutes “an authoritarian act.”

II

The purpose of this paper is to draw on a handful of contemporary utopias in order to further explore the meaning of democracy and, in particular, the claims I have made here about its radical character and its inherent indeterminateness, inner tensions and costs. I shall do this in two different, though overlapping, ways. In this section of the paper, I shall consider in what will be a too brief fashion some of the central virtues that seem to be required by democracy, and how in these utopias these virtues are cultivated, encouraged and protected. I will then explore, in the third section of the paper, and again in a too cursory manner, how the four ideals of democracy are instantiated in these utopias in order to bring out their ambiguities and tensions, the consequent need for often unstable compromises, and the seeming inevitability of incurring costs, disadvantages and risks when constructing a democratic utopia.

None of the authors on which I will be drawing set out to depict a democratic utopia, insofar as that might be construed to mean that constructing an ideal democracy was their central goal, and a depiction of that ideal a central focus of their texts. To the contrary, the depictions of, and claims made, about democracy in their texts are generally speaking merely a part, and sometimes not a major part, of a broader version. It is unfortunate that one of these texts, Mulford Sibley’s Simalta (nd), has never been published. I will nevertheless draw on it since Sibley was a very thoughtful academic political theorist as well as democratic activist who had reflected a great deal on the meaning and demands of democracy, and whose text does have much to say about its character and role in a good society. An exegesis of the text, by Sabia

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2 Copies of the manuscript are archived at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and Pennsylvania State University.
What virtues are essential to democracy? I count at least six. (1) A commitment to
democratic justice is surely essential. By this I mean being committed to working with others in
order to discover and further social or collective justice, especially through democratic
deliberation—that is, through processes of collective deliberation carried on under conditions of
liberty, equality and inclusion—but through other forms of democratic political action as well (for
example, litigating, lobbying, protesting). (2) Respecting equally the dignity or moral value of
others is also essential. At a minimum, this virtue requires commitment to the ideals of political
equality and inclusion, and thus to the principle that the interests of each and all be given equal
consideration in the making of collective decisions. Toleration of others, and some significant
degree of concern for their well-being, are I think inescapable components of this second virtue
as well. (3) Another essential virtue is autonomy. As we have noted, the democratic citizen
must be self-directed, and must also be confident and courageous in the sense that he or she is
willing to assert both his or her interests and the interests of justice in the making of decisions
and more generally in public or collective life. (4) The democrat must be reasonable, and of
course well-informed about the affairs of his or her community. Reason is essential to
autonomy, and both reason and information are essential to participation in processes of
collective deliberation and other forms of political action. (5) Empathy, or something like it,
seems crucial as well. Empathy helps individuals secure an understanding of the perspectives,
needs and interests of others, and hence facilitates the equal consideration of interests, and more
generally both the process and the goal of democratic deliberation. (6) Respect for law, or for
the democratic decisions made within associations, is also a virtue of a democrat. The
democrat does not, of course, blindly respect and unquestionably obey democratic decisions, but
he or she will respect their status as the considered judgments of the community or association.

Human beings are not born with these virtues. Democratic theorists, and utopian thinkers
and activists committed to democracy, know they need to be cultivated and encouraged,
especially in childhood, and reinforced and protected throughout a person’s life. Doing so
requires interventions and disciplining, forms of education and socialization that aim at
encouraging or instilling these virtues, and subduing or eliminating attitudes and habits that
threaten them. It requires as well sanctions against forms of conduct and ways of living that
deny or threaten these virtues, and reinforcing and protecting mores, conduct and ways of living
that embody or promote or enable them. One stark difference between utopian writers is their
willingness to embrace the need for something like a state and legal system in order to protect

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3See also the essay in the same issue by Dagger (1999).
political liberties and political equality, and democratic forms more generally. Anarchists of course reject this sort of protection, believing that democratic politics requires no state and is safer without it, while others believe legal protections are essential. Robinson’s (1999, 192) Martian constitution provides explicit guarantees of political liberties and equality, as does the world government in Sibley’s utopia; Harvey’s (2000, 249) utopian vision would apparently include legal guarantees of democratic rights as well. By contrast, Le Guin’s communal anarchist society embraces democratic ideals and practices but tries to secure them through informal means. Her utopia famously identifies and suggests the weaknesses (as well as the strengths) of doing so, for instance by showing how the lack of formal protections for democratic rights and forms opens up possibilities for inegalitarian and unaccountable forms of influence and control and abuses of power by those who hold strategic positions by virtue of their institutional or even geographical location, or by virtue of their expertise, or ability to control information, agendas, and other goods and resources. That democracy does not necessarily dictate a state is a fine example of the indeterminate nature of democratic ideals, and of the need to make critical choices—in this case, between accepting and rejecting a state—the outcomes of which are not likely to be altogether satisfactory regardless of the choice made (for the safety of democracy is likely to be threatened by the presence, and by the absence, of a state).

The cultivation of democratic virtues in children is in some of these utopias addressed in some detail. Consider, for instance, the cultivation of autonomy and equal respect for others. In Le Guin, the central theme of that fine novel is arguably the on-going dialectical struggle that is required to negotiate individuality and community, and so also autonomy and respect and concern for others. The mostly communal rearing of children in nurseries and schools allows for more or less uniform socialization aimed at these (and of course other) virtues. Children are encouraged on the one hand to develop autonomy and self-confidence in part by allowing and enabling them to explore and develop inclinations, skills and talents which best suit their character or seem to them most appealing or challenging, and this they do in structures that, as they age, expand their choices (for instance, regarding what subjects and activities to pursue) and their role in helping determine (for instance, with teachers) the rules and policies of the structure. On the other hand, much learning, including learning of the principles of anarchist communism, and the encouragement of many social skills and activities (such as participating in collective decisions) are clearly aimed at promoting equal respect, concern for others, social solidarity and habits of cooperation. It is, again, interesting that Le Guin (1974, 168) raises the question whether, in the absence of formal mechanisms of social control and regulation, agents of socialization like schools can do the job expected of them, since the educational system is depicted as having been corrupted, no longer doing its job of cultivating in particular the virtue of autonomy.

Education also aims to encourage in children the development of individuality and autonomy on the one side, and habits of equal respect, toleration and concern for others on the other side, in Prugovecki’s utopia. Three practices are particularly illustrative. One is the cultivation of group-decision making skills, a high art universally practiced in this society, and a second is the games that are played (Prugovecki, 355, 87). Group decision-making is taught in the schools so that children learn how every individual can bring to a group task or activity
unique or particular talents, skills, knowledge or other resources that others may lack, while simultaneously teaching that the group as a whole is better at performing tasks and activities than are individuals, in part because each contributes to the whole. Hence the individuality of each person is recognized and respected, and so the value of autonomy encouraged and celebrated, while the value of cooperation, and the virtues of equal respect, tolerance and even concern for others, is likewise recognized and cultivated. The second practice concerns games played both by children and by adults which tend to be cooperative and non-competitive, so that “individual achievement was encouraged, but not at the expense of other players.”

The third practice aims at cultivating empathy. Defined in this text as “the ability to put yourself in the position of another human being,” empathy is described as “the fundamental force” of this utopian society because it promotes understanding of the circumstances, interests, values, feelings and emotions, of the other, thereby facilitating social interaction, mutual understanding, trust and cooperation (Prugovecki, 347, 175). Children are treated in the educational system to “empathy training,” a process that includes the use of electronic equipment that enables one child to experience directly the emotions and feelings of another. Noteworthy is the fact that the equipment is “the only form of negative reinforcement we use if a child has done something nasty to somebody” (Prugovecki, 359). When a child treats another badly, the culprit is forced to feel the victim’s suffering in the hope that he or she will learn what cruelty or meanness does to people.

Of course education aims also to enhance the rationality and knowledge base of children and young adults. Reason, rationality, and reasonableness are notoriously ambitious and contested terms, but there can be no doubt that democrats do and must care about the virtue of reason given their claim that deliberative processes best promote the search for justice in the making of collective decisions. In many of these utopias, the formal education of children, and the informal education of adults, aim to secure a broadly educated, knowledgeable and rational, as well as politically well-informed and attentive, citizenry or membership. Specifically political or civic education is not often discussed in these utopias, though it surely is included in the curricula of children, but education in the broader sense, as the learning of democratic virtues and skills, is very widely practiced by children and especially by adults.

Indeed, although I have been mostly emphasizing education and the cultivation of democratic virtues in children, what is most important about most of these utopias is their recognition that a democratic society cultivates and encourages democratic virtues, not by formal education, but by informal education and, in particular, by practice. The virtues, as Aristotle taught, are habits, and the way to cultivate habits is to practice them until they become, so to speak, second nature. Thus, most of these utopias depict and/or presuppose what are, in Pateman’s (1970) sense of the term, participatory societies and not merely participatory democracies, where the latter means extensive and intensive participation only in conventionally understood political--governmental--decision-making contexts. Older children and adults are typically involved in democratic practices throughout social spheres, for instance in schools, as we have noted, but also in the economy, and in the organization of everyday life and community activities. In Le Guin, for example, the entire society is necessarily politicized, since a state
does not exist. To secure a just society built on the premises of communal or communist anarchism, widespread participation and collective decision-making must therefore occur virtually everywhere, perhaps especially in economic institutions given their centrality to the life of most adults. Hence workers collectively decide within federated structures how to organize and manage all economic processes and functions, and a variety of democratic devices, such as rotation in office, is widely used in all institutions, including the economic. Community life is organized democratically, as are nurseries and schools and universities. Such participation in collective self-government serves to inform citizens about their communities and associations, to enlarge their understanding of social processes and problems, and to develop through practice their democratic virtues and skills (such as speaking and listening, arguing and persuading, contesting and compromising).

Sibley’s world utopia, which has a highly structured, federated political system, is also a participatory society. Much social life occurs in the democratically organized small neighborhoods, where participation in collective affairs is expected at the age of seventeen and in community affairs at much earlier ages. Most economic firms are cooperative in structure, so democratic practice is integral to them, and all other economic firms, most of them government owned, also empower workers. The empowerment of workers, and the existence of coops, are features also present in Robinson’s utopia and in Harvey’s as well. Both rotation and the lot are widely used devices in Sibley’s utopia, and the lot is used in the selection of some government officials in the Robinson text too. The use of the lot and rotation, as well as the expectation of other forms of participation in a wide variety of contexts, both reflect and promote the idea that citizens have duties to the collective which they should not try to avoid, and also that everyone is equally able or competent to participate in ruling.

In Molly Glass’s utopia, virtually every facet of social life is also organized democratically. This novel depicts a small and isolated community—the members are on a space ship—of about two thousand people who live an austere and intimate life governed in part by Quaker ideals. Just about every facet of social existence is seemingly organized around either standing or ad hoc committees and participatory meetings. The democratic virtues are in this utopia embodied in detailed practices, with respect for democratic justice and democratically secured decisions, equality, liberty and autonomy, rationality and empathy, all being manifest in one or another process or structure. An important example is the practice of consensual decision-making, which I shall discuss below. But there are other examples as well. Rationality or reason, for instance, is embodied in such practices as committee specialization, in the deployment of meeting “facilitators,” and in the deference paid to “weighty Friends” who are people “whose voice was always worth listening to.” Equality and liberty are fostered and practiced by permitting people to form ad hoc committees at will, and to attend and speak at any meeting, even if they are not weighty Friends (1997, 127, 138, 141). Family and neighborhood life is intimate and close-knit, and seems intended to foster and reinforce the democratic virtues of commitment to democratic justice, respect for community decisions, concern for others and empathy.

Although these examples and comments barely scratch the surface, they provide some
indication that one of the ways a democratic utopia can not escape foreclosing alternatives is the
need in them for cultivating certain virtues and reinforcing them through often intensive, as well
as widespread, democratic practices. In none of these utopias are inegalitarian, authoritarian,
elitist, or bureaucratic tendencies or ideologies and practices—as they are conventionally
understood—found acceptable, and manifestations of them are in children and in the society
either eliminated or constrained. Thus “egoizing” is not tolerated in children in Le Guin’s
(1974, 29) utopia, even though ego-strength is essential to autonomy. Expressions of
“dominance” are likewise eradicated in children in Prugovecki’s (2001, 112) vision. Good
citizenship on the part of adults is encouraged or even required in virtually all of these
utopias—for example, a “universal public service” requirement is required of all young adults, as
part of the education system, on Robinson’s (1999, 202) Mars, and the lot and rotation
essentially require public service as well, both on Robinson’s world and in the imaginary worlds
of others of these authors. And bad citizenship—failing to participate, to deliberate, to treat
others equally and with concern, to cooperate, and so on—is generally sanctioned by formal
and/or informal mechanisms. Authoritarianism is in this way not escaped.

Bureaucratic practices, with their tendencies to hierarchy, privilege, exclusion,
ossification and abuse of power, are in some of the utopias tolerated to some extent. This is due
to the fact that some of these utopias depict large-scale, complex societies, and in such societies
bureaucratic forms, as part of the need for some significant degree of centralization, are
seemingly essential to securing a variety of goods, such as social coordination and economic
efficiency, stability and the production of some modest or high level of wealth. Hence there is
some more or less explicit degree of compromising democratic values in this respect, together, of
course, with claims about how the society constrains bureaucratic pathologies by democratic
practices within and by the imposition of democratic checks from without. But the best of
these texts do not claim that democracy makes these problems go away.

III

I want now to turn attention back to the four ideals constitutive of democracy—collective
deliberation, political equality and freedom, and inclusion. My goal is to illustrate how the
theoretical meanings and especially practical implications of these ideals are indeterminate and
so contestable, and how choices that have to be made about how to instantiate these ideals are
never wholly satisfactory, and point to inherent tensions or conflicts.

Consider first the ideal of inclusion. The fundamental point to be made with respect to
this ideal is that inclusion seems to require some degree of political centralization and so of
representative democratic processes and forms. This means that visions of highly decentralized,
wholly participatory and consensual politics, are put at risk, even in very small societies, as both
the Glass and Blumenfeld texts suggest. Like Glass, Blumenfeld describes a very small
community of 1800 citizens who practice participatory democracy. The difference is that this
community is hardly isolated (as is the space ship community envisioned by Glass); it is rather
one of many such communities in an apparently federated political system that includes at least a
large city, and probably the entire nation of England in the year 2099. One of the interesting
features of this democracy is that collective deliberations are “machine assisted.” Essentially a highly sophisticated computer information and reasoning system, “machine-intelligence,” or MI, serves in part to inform the members, as they deliberate, how their ideas, assumptions, and proposals comport with the larger world of which they are a part and on which they to some degree depend (Blumenfeld, 1999, 60). In other words, the decisions of this community are affected by and affect others, and the principle of inclusion, recall, demands that all those affected be included in collective decision-making. The result is, on the one hand, that the liberty of the members to control their community and shape its social life is constrained; on the other hand, they participate in a larger representative democracy and suffer the advantages, and disadvantages, of both that kind of democracy and the centralized political system within which it is ensconced.

Even in the isolated and equally tiny community depicted by Glass, inclusion is a force for centralization and representation. In this community/society, representation is unavoidable given the desire to democratize most of social existence and the limits on people’s time; they can hardly participate in all of the committee meetings and decisions, and so they rely on both representation and one or more centralized committees and a “Yearly Meeting” to coordinate decentralized activities and affairs, and to deal with concerns that transcend neighborhood, functional and other committees and units (Glass, 1997, 138). Of course, in this peculiarly isolated community, centralization and representation is not much cause for concern, but in the larger utopias depicted in all the other texts, it most certainly is. Representative institutions and practices introduce political inequality, threaten political liberty, and often require majority decision-making (given greater complexity and the greater numbers of conflicting interests that generally attend institutions representing large units). The centralization that seems unavoidable in large-scale, complex societies, and which permits some degree of democratic control, coordination and regulation of the affairs of the whole, also attenuate that control while threatening the values of liberty and equality. This seems to be the price of the ideal of inclusion given interdependence and the threat of externalities, that is, the imposing of harms and other costs on other units by any one decentralized unit.

Prugovecki imagines that his utopia can escape this problem by institutionalizing a version of the popular dream of a cyberdemocracy. As in Blumenfeld’s work, decision-making in Prugovecki’s complex, wealthy and large utopia (of 200 million people) involves the use of a highly sophisticated computerized internet system, “a gigantic complex...of interconnected computers,” which assists as well as informs the deliberative decision-making of citizens. Supposedly, this system, together with a highly educated citizenry skilled in group decision-making, makes participatory deliberations at all geographical levels, from the local to the national, not only possible but efficient. The basic claims are that the system allows all citizens to secure needed information relevant to rational decision-making, and that it does so in an efficient way in part because it condenses and rationally orders essential information, eliminates frivolous claims (for instance, people talking about irrelevant matters) and biases and emotional appeals (Prugovecki, 2001, 47, 112, 118). Decentralization is also cited as an alleged factor making this possible, since Prugovecki (2001, 116) claims that voting on national matters occurs only “three or four times a year” because so many matters are handled in smaller units.
Were one to believe this, one might believe the system could work, but either this is implausible—this is an extremely large, complex, interdependent society that, for instance, has national programs of genetic manipulation and birthing, child rearing, education, transport and defense, even space travel—or a great many decisions are being made outside the system, which is to say in a non-democratic, non-participatory, surely bureaucratic manner. The standard problems—of limits on people’s time, selective interest, and of the motivational problem posed by the inability of individuals to make a difference in large number contexts—can not disappear with such a technological fix.

The more plausible large scale visions, in the texts of Le Guin, Sibley, Robinson and Harvey, thus do not try to avoid the need for some degree of centralization and representation, nor deny the costs and risks incurred. Le Guin in some ways defuses the problems more than the others, because her utopian society’s political economy is limited in complexity and because there exists considerable social homogeneity—there are, for instance, no religious, class, regional or social cleavages, there is a single language, and so on. But even so, the need for and dangers of centralization, bureaucratization and representation are not only noted but emphasized, with Le Guin (1974, 95) indicating how unavoidable and in some ways desirable these practices are (given interdependencies and the desirability of inclusion), while also indicating that they are a key source, if not in fact the key source, of the corruptions that threaten this utopia. In Sibley, the dangers and vices, necessity and virtues, of centralization and representative democracy are likewise emphasized; indeed, in a published work, *Nature and Civilization* (1977, 134), Sibley opined that “justice entails a kind of balance between [the] centripetal and centrifugal tendencies [of modern societies], and one of the cardinal problems of modern politics is to find where that balance lies in practice.” Justice demands some degree of centralization, and hence representative democracy, because it supplies goods, including the good of democratic inclusion, that cannot otherwise be achieved.

Harvey and Robinson echo these insights and sentiments. Like Le Guin and Sibley, they imagine a world-wide utopia that aims to combine decentralized and centralized, representative and participatory, forms, and they do so because of the desire for many goods, including the open-ended, indeterminate ideals of democracy which point in both directions. Hence they both recognize that compromises and imperfections are inevitable, and that conflict needs to be managed democratically rather than wished away. Harvey (2000, 251, 263), for instance, wants a world order that respects “the right to pursue development on some territorial and collective basis that departs from established norms,” yet recognizes that such a right puts at risk the democratic and other values of people within and without what must therefore be only quasi-autonomous units; and he observes that working out compromises between units will be an ongoing difficulty and challenge, something “to be fought over.” In his utopian sketch, which imagines a federated and representative system with considerable decentralization and participation, he reiterates the point that such a system will be conflicted, dynamic and require constant renegotiations, for instance over the very “statutes of federation” that identify the territory, membership, and rights and obligations of units. Robinson (1999, 192f) similarly demands a highly complex democratic system, with “semitransferential” local units practicing participatory democracy, a “democratic political economy” that insures worker participation and
some degree of “worker autonomy,” and a “global state” that constrains, manages, regulates all the units, local, economic and otherwise, within it. The result is a system that is sensitive to the good of inclusion, and that is characterized by “flexibility,” constant “change,” and on-going conflicts and “arguments.”

Imagining a genuinely democratic system for large scale, complex, heterogeneous societies forces these authors not only to limit decentralization and the ideal of participatory democracy, but to search for ways in which democratic values can be sustained at the level of large units, such as large regional, and world-wide, units. Federalism, with a well articulated and vibrant system of representation, is very popular; the goal is to insure responsiveness and accountability to local needs and interests while serving all the members of an interconnected and interdependent world. Legal protections of basic democratic rights for citizens and workers by a world government (Sibley, Robinson) and/or by other units is also common (Harvey, 2000, 276, advocates only an “advisory” rather than sovereign “world council,” and so places sovereignty in “federated regions”). I have mentioned that Sibley and Robinson both advocate use of the lot for selecting some government positions, and lot and/or rotation is deployed in many functional units in the utopias of several authors. Robinson (1999, 199, 200) also imagines a plural executive in order “to depersonalize the executive function of [the world] government,” and a voting system designed to encourage candidates for office to broaden their appeal across social divisions, thus forging compromises and “healing ...divisions” that are unavoidable in a heterogeneous world.

The principle of inclusion, then, requires centralizing a social order to some degree, and that means, in turn, giving up on a wholly decentralized and participatory vision of democracy and embracing to some extent a robust form of representative democracy. Inclusion, I have tried to indicate, is in itself a good thing--a requirement of democracy and justice--and accepting some degree of centralization, and embracing to some extent representative democracy, will have positive as well as negative consequences, and will require ongoing adjustments and vigilance.

There is, in addition, another implication of the principle of inclusion that deserves mention. Taking inclusion seriously means taking seriously the question of who and what should be represented. Representatives “represent” those who are absent, and this may and should include those citizens who are not present because they are outside a unit (as when MI in Blumenfeld’s society represents those citizens outside a local unit to the members of that unit so that they will consider the effects of their choices and actions on those not present), and also those citizens who are absent because, say, they are suffering long term physical or mental illnesses, or are excluded because of their age (as in the case of infants and young children). But there are other absent entities also, entities who arguably should be included and formally represented as well: the unborn, future generations, the rights of animals and the environment, are familiar possibilities. Including and providing for these sorts of entities equal consideration in the making of collective decisions increases the complexity of decision-making and is likely to increase conflict, at least to some degree, but either the principle of inclusion, or other considerations of justice, might well require this. Interesting and instructive in these respects is the presence in Robinson’s (1999, 193f) Martian world of a very powerful “Environmental
Court,” which among other things reviews and can nullify laws that in its view seriously threatens environmental goods. The court is quite large, with some members being popularly elected, others elected by the parliament, and yet others appointed by the executive council. Its powers insure among other things that legislators keep the interests of a viable environment in mind when deliberating, and in this way the Court secures the inclusion and representation of interests of valued entities besides human beings. The rulings of the Court, he also says, have often been disputed, a source of conflict.

Deliberation is a second ideal the implementation of which is contestable and does not easily harmonize with the other democratic values. The basic problem here is that the ideal valorizes reason and reasonableness, and so can be exclusionary and inegalitarian. An obvious case in point is the exclusion of the young on the ground that they are deficient in reasoning powers and in autonomy, and so can not contribute, but may detract from, the process of deliberation and its goal of securing just outcomes. The result of their exclusion may well be that children are systematically disadvantaged; they are in any event, and in at least one sense of the word, certainly not being treated equally. This logic not only can be, but often is, extended in an informal fashion, when the voices and interests of the less well-educated and the less articulate are discounted in deliberative (and other) decision-making contexts, and when those with special knowledge or expertise are given greater power or influence. It can also serve to discount or denigrate, as “unreasonable,” non-deliberative forms of political participation, such as protests and demonstrations, as well as symbolic and artistic forms of political communication. On the other hand, the value of deliberation puts a premium on an educated citizenry and so provides good reason to insure equal and substantial educational opportunities, equal access to information, and opportunities, if not expectations or requirements, for all citizens to gain politically relevant experiences (and so political knowledge) by participating in political activities.

In both Prugovecki and Blumenfeld, recall, machines serve not only to facilitate the sharing of information and communication, but to enhance the quality of deliberation. These are not mere machines, they are “intelligent machines” that actively participate in deliberations (especially in Blumenfeld), and which construct, shape and even censor what is said and heard. The presumed gains are efficiency and, more importantly, “reasonableness,” but there are costs and risks as well. Both authors seem to think that the machines can and should function “objectively” or “impartially,” and that they can present information in unbiased and non-emotional ways (Prugovecki, 2001, 118f, Blumenfeld, 1999, 60). Blumenfeld’s version of MI has the machine literally debating the citizens when their views betray ignorance (for instance, about the effects of their actions on others), or betray factual and/or reasoning errors due to biases, emotions, wishful thinking or limited foresight, so that there is said to be an

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4For a critique of the conventional exclusion of children along these lines see Cummings (2001, ch. 6), and for a defense see Dahl (1989, 126-7).

5For a recent and thoughtful account of these dangers see Young (2001).
“on-going conflict of perspective between the rationality of MI and our glandular-driven outlook.” Just such a division between reason and emotion is, however, dubious, an expression of a valorization of rationality that forgets that “emotions” serve to direct and inform “reason” as well as sometimes distort it.

An obvious problem raised by such machines, addressed by both authors, is that they may be used by sinister forces to control or manipulate collective decision-making. Prugovecki (2001, 120) insists this is not a problem in his utopia, while Blumenfeld (1999, 62) seems to leave this open as a dark possibility. But the real problem is that valorizing rationality to this degree distorts the nature of political, especially democratic, decision-making. The fundamental problem is the assumption or suggestion that political problems have correct answers, rather as we suppose there to be correct, or valid or true, answers in mathematics and empirical sciences. But political decisions ordinarily require judgment, and judgment is informed by imagination and emotion as well as by reason, and requires a balancing and compromising of goods and bads, norms and interests, for which there is rarely a uniquely correct or right answer. Relatedly, the idea that there can be wholly unbiased or objective information is mistaken, since much of the relevant information on which political judgments are to be made in a democracy must reflect the situated perspectives and interests of particular human beings.

Political equality, in some respects the defining value of democracy, is also perhaps the most contentious with respect to its theoretical meaning and practical implications. When I introduced the ideal, I noted that many democrats reject wholly formal interpretations of this ideal, for instance that it requires merely equal votes and/or the equal right to participate in collective affairs and deliberations. The contentious issue, then, is the degree to which equality needs to be realized in more substantive ways—and how equalizing political influence is to be achieved. Do people need to be equally intelligent, reasonable, autonomous? Must they all be equally respectful and considerate of others? Do they need equal material resources? Can the political system be insulated from inequalities in resources and forms of social distinction that disadvantage some or advantage others, and if so how?

Most of the utopias drawn on here are very egalitarian, and most are clear that this is, allegedly, essential to democracy (as well as to justice). Not only is the virtue of equal respect expected of all, but practices intended to secure that virtue, and to protect against unequal advantages and disadvantages in the political system (as well as in other domains), are demanded. This explains at least in part demands for gender equality, constraints on various institutions such as economic units and on everyday life that might produce inequalities of wealth or popularity or status, demands for equal educational opportunities, economic equality, and the disappearance or discounting of the significance of status that reflect differences in levels of education, experience and expertise, official position, and so on. A number of the texts (Sibley, Le Guin, Prugovecki) call for economic equality to help secure democracy, while most of the others (Robinson, Harvey) call for the satisfaction of basic needs and constraints on economic inequality for the same reason. As is well known, the fundamental problem with this degree of egalitarianism is the threat it poses to liberty, political and otherwise, and I shall take this up below, when I turn to this ideal.
Before doing so, I want to touch on another illustration of the indeterminate nature of political equality, and of how conflicting interpretations and instantiations of the ideal incur different, yet nonetheless quite important, dangers. I have in mind the contrasting claims that political equality requires majority rule and that it requires unanimous or consensual rule. The former view is the more popular, and perhaps the more plausible. According to it, majority rule is the decision rule most compatible with political equality because only it prevents minorities from controlling decision-making. Any rule that empowers less than a majority puts excessive, unequal, power in the hands of a minority, and any rule that requires something larger than a majority does the same. On the other hand, a not implausible case can be made for unanimity or for a consensual rule (the difference is that a consensual rule permits decisions to be made once no one objects, whereas unanimity requires the formal assent of all). The claim in this case is that such a rule insures, as majority rule cannot, that the interests or judgments of all are equally respected, since nothing can be done unless all agree (or none object).

Now consensual decision-making is unquestionably attractive, as the case of Rousseau attests. It provides not only a plausible interpretation of what equality requires, but seems to protect and valorize the liberty of each, since no decisions and obligations can be imposed on individuals without their consent. Consensual decisions thus appear, also, to be particularly fair or just. So it is not surprising to find that consensus is either strongly encouraged or even required in a number of our democratic utopias: it is the norm in Sibley’s local units, and in Blumenfeld’s, and it required in seemingly all cases of formal decision-making in the utopias depicted by Le Guin and by Glass. “A rule by majority or by representation always had been anathema to the old Quakers,” says the narrator in Glass’s novel; and one character actually expresses the view that it might be wise to limit the size of meetings so as to avoid disagreement and secure consensus: “Every house ought to send only its clerk and maybe one other person to Monthly Meeting. Twenty people. That’s always a good size for coming to agreement” (Glass, 1997, 141).

This remark betrays what is perhaps the fundamental weakness associated with valorizing consensus. It assumes that there exist common interests, and solutions to political problems and conflicts which are uniquely best when in fact both assumptions can be mistaken. It is especially likely, once we move beyond small, homogeneous communities, that interests will sometimes conflict to such a degree that accommodation or compromise is impossible, and no best solutions for resolving conflict therefore exist, at least not on the account of the participants. As has been often pointed out—and as a number of these authors are aware—this entails, in turn, certain dangers. Most obviously, it means that the search for consensus can be fruitless and, being fruitless, the result is a privileging of the status quo. Unfortunately, the status quo may be unjust; it may be the cause of serious harms or disadvantages to some, or to many, or even to most, who are unable to alter their circumstances because of the need for consensus. Additionally, when agreement is impossible the rule of consensus means that the illusory search for it can actually increase conflict as frustrations and anger mount—or, alternatively (or additionally), that the desire for consensus increases pressures to conform, since those who question what most want may be cast as unreasonable or uncompromising hold-outs.
Unfortunately, majority rule is equally problematic. This rule is accepted in Sibley’s utopia in larger units, is regularly practiced in the participatory democracy described by Prugovecki, and I assume is regularly practiced in the context of Robinson’s world government. The essential, much discussed, problem is, of course, the fact that majority rule threatens “the tyranny of the majority,” that is, threatens minorities who may be disadvantaged, or even seriously mistreated or harmed, by majorities. In the hope of avoiding the latter possibility—of severe injustice—many advocates of majority rule demand inegalitarian constraints on majorities with respect to the protection of basic rights (democratic rights, and sometimes other rights as well). But the protection of rights, even if efficacious, does not eliminate the problem of minorities being disadvantaged by majority rule. Decisions of majorities are, in the views of minorities, never the best they can be, and it is certainly possible that the minorities are right. Yet the rule requires at least their formal obedience, and hence acceptance of their plight (resistance being ordinarily justified only in the face of grave injustices such as the violations of basic rights).

These considerations provide a segue to a brief consideration of the final democratic ideal, political freedom. The essential purpose of political liberty is to allow persons to participate in politics (political equality and inclusion require that liberty so understood be equally enjoyed by all). To deny persons the freedom or right to participate is to corrupt or distort the search for social justice, since that search will be deprived of the input of those who are excluded, and will likely result in decisions that ignore, and may well harm, their interests. Hence, political liberty expresses the presumption that the lives, interests and concerns of persons are important, that they are worth attending to and considering, and are often, even ordinarily, worth protecting and perhaps even promoting. And this presumption, in turn, rests on something like the liberal ideal, to which Mill gave famous voice, that a culture of liberty is an essential ingredient of social justice, and that the protection of freedom broadly construed—and the individuality and diversity which freedom makes possible and encourages—is an indispensable ingredient in the happiness or well-being of both individuals and communities. In calling for (equal) political liberty, therefore, democracy is rightly seen as a friend of freedom and of a liberal culture. Yet democracy, as we have already seen, and as Mill (drawing in the main on Tocqueville) warned, can also pose threats to liberty.

Whether made by majorities or by the entire community, democratic decisions often—not always, but often—curtail the freedom of individuals; their chains multiply, as Rousseau remarked. This is especially a threat in the democratic utopia, because the democratic utopia aims at securing both a particularly vibrant democracy and a particularly good society. As we have seen, however, a vibrant democracy entails encouraging certain virtues and discouraging others; it places a premium on certain kinds of character or personhood, like being a good citizen, and certain kinds of conduct, like being willing to compromise, while denigrating or discounting alternatives, like being a private person or rebel, and being unwilling to compromise on principles or being more interested in competing than in compromising or cooperating; and it demands that people at least ordinarily conform to and obey democratically made decisions. True it is, the decisions made in the democratic utopia reflect the desire to construct and shape
social life in accordance with visions of justice arrived at democratically, and this seems, indeed it is, a wonderful thing; but the more social life is constructed democratically, the greater the likelihood that the space of freedom, individuality and diversity will be compressed.

In the face of this conflict, encouraging the democratic utopia to be self-limiting in its pursuit of democracy and justice so as to preserve the ideal of a liberal culture might be thought reasonable. This might mean, for instance, that non-democratic “experiments in living” (to use Mill’s phrase) have to be tolerated, that some private rights have to be protected from democratically made decisions, that some inequalities be accepted, that economic or educational or religious or familial institutions have to be given considerable latitude, perhaps liberated or regulated rather than prohibited or controlled and managed. Moving in this direction, on the other hand, means increasing the threats to which democracy is exposed, as freedom invites the growth of private power, inequalities, and possibly undemocratic habits and anti-democratic attitudes. Freedom is essential to democracy, giving to political liberty its point and value, but it is also a threat to the democratic ideals of collective deliberation, equality and inclusion. Choices and compromises have to be made, and ongoing conflicts have to be expected and, hopefully, negotiated without too much pain and suffering. But choices, compromises, and pain and suffering cannot be avoided. Describing constitutional constraints on, and world government power over, the semi-autonomous local governments of Mars, Robinson (1999, 201) observes: “This provision attempts to chart the difficult course between local autonomy and global justice. It is the paradox of a free and tolerant society that in order for it to work, intolerance cannot be tolerated. The two injunctions ‘people can govern themselves’ and ‘no one can oppress another person’ must exist as a living contradiction or dynamic tension.”

Works Cited


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