

Democracy

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Democracy has a straightforward meaning: “rule by the people”; however, the meaning of “the people” and of “rule” is far from straightforward. The historical geography of democracy is a story of various attempts to find answers to practical problems such as: Who belongs to the demos? How should rule be organized? What is the scope of the activities over which democratic rule should be extended? Disagreement over basic definitions, practices, and institutions is constitutive of the dynamism of actually existing democratic politics.

Questions of the scope of rule and the delimitation of the people include important geographical questions. For example, the problem of rule raises issues of the spatial reach and territorial organization of the mechanisms of popular rule. Is democratic rule synonymous with electoral practices and representative mechanisms? At what geographical scales are such activities best organized? And does democracy also extend to more participatory practices such as citizens’ juries or local participatory budgeting? Likewise, the problem of defining “the people” raises questions about how to determine membership of a polity. Should cultural criteria of shared belonging to a community prevail? Should criteria of place of residence be used? Or

should a spatially expansive principle of affected interests be used to define the identity of those who should have a say in shaping decisions?

Despite the centrality of geographical questions to the practical politics of democracy, democracy has not been an explicit object of analysis in geography until very recently. Heightened interest in this topic is in part a reflection of real-world processes of democratization, and an awareness of the significance of electoral processes to the exercise of power in the real world. It is also, however, a reflection of shifts in the normative paradigms which underwrite critical human geography in particular. Until recently, there has been little explicit focus in human geography on the normative issues that are at the core of debates about the relationship between democracy and spatiality. Geographers have often avoided issues raised in fields of political philosophy on the grounds that they seem to be too “liberal.” Since the 1990s, however, there has been a shift in various subdisciplines toward investigating the ways in which normative problems central to democratic theory play out in practice. These issues are reflected, for example, in discussions of citizenship, deliberation, and participation in areas such as development geography, urban studies, planning studies, and environmental studies. The absence of democratic institutions is now recognized as a key factor in the reproduction of social injustice and inequality, and the exposure of vulnerable or marginalized groups to serious harm. At the same time, geographers have begun to investigate innovative mobilizations by social movements that reconfigure the meanings and practices of democracy. At a more abstract level, the theories of spatial ontology

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developed by geographers have opened up new understandings of “the political,” and have drawn the discipline into debates informed by a distinctive strand of contemporary political theory that focuses on the agonistic, dissensual aspects of democracy. This strand of theory supports critical evaluations of the contemporary world as increasingly “postdemocratic” and/or “postpolitical” (see Swyngedouw 2011).

In short, issues of democratic practice and problems of democratic theory are now much more evident in human geography than they once were. Broadly speaking, this increased concern with democracy is divided across two areas of inquiry: research on geographies of liberal democracy and explorations of a variety of alternative forms of democracy.

Geographies of liberal democracy

Liberal democracy is usually taken to refer to forms of institutionalized popular representation, involving periodic mass election of representatives to authoritative legislatures (and, in many cases, of executive heads of state), under conditions of freedom of speech and of association. This is a model unevenly developed in the Global North, and widely emulated and/or imposed in other parts of the world. Liberal-representative democracy is usually legitimated by appealing to the basis of politics in the preferences and liberties of private individuals recognized as equal citizens under the rule of law. There is an enormous field of literature, largely in political science, devoted to examining the conditions under which such liberal democratic institutions develop, as well as to particular aspects of these systems, including political parties, elections, voting behavior, citizenship, and the media. There is also a substantial body of liberal political theory associated with the justification of

institutions of liberal democracy, a body of work that often provides critical insights into the operations of actually existing liberal democracies. Both political science and political theory assume a given spatial formation of democracy as the norm: territorialized national states, internally divided in some way or another.

Modern democratic theory has therefore developed around a particular geographical imagination. It assumes that democracy is framed around bounded national territories which are internally organized through a nested hierarchy of scales. In geography, research on liberal-representative democracy has focused on two areas: electoral geographies and geographies of democratization.

The subfield of electoral geography focuses on explaining and mapping the spatial distribution of votes. Geographical processes can make a significant difference to the outcomes of elections in terms of who wins and who loses. Geographers have demonstrated how the spatial organization of electoral systems affects how votes are translated into representative majorities in liberal democracies. Recent attention has focused on developing more sophisticated and contextually sensitive explanations for voting behavior. Research on electoral processes has broadened out to include the geographies of campaigning, party formation, and political communication. Work in electoral geography has shown, then, that the spatial organization of formal democracy has consequences for outcomes in terms of criteria of equality, fairness, and representativeness. Accordingly, recent research in electoral geography has more explicitly addressed the normative issues raised by practices of gerrymandering, political redistricting, and the design of representative devices (Johnston 1999).

Geographers have also explored the process of democratization as part of a broader examination of the conditions for the formation and maintenance of liberal democratic polities around the world. The diffusion of liberal democracy as a global norm of governance since the 1980s has followed in the wake of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe; political transitions away from authoritarianism in Latin America, Africa, and Asia; and the application of norms of democratic governance in the geopolitics of Western international financial policy, trade negotiations, and military engagements. Geographers have investigated the degree to which the adoption of democratic forms of governance can be accounted for by specifically geographical factors. This research contributes to debates over whether democracy can be established and sustained only after various socioeconomic and cultural prerequisites have been met, or whether it is itself the prerequisite of economic development or peace-building.

Geographers have also critically assessed the theoretical assumptions through which liberal forms of electoral democracy have been circulated as the global norm. Debates about democratization raise questions regarding the degree to which the norms of Western liberal-representative democracy can and should be practically applied in non-Western contexts and deployed as normative benchmarks of critical analysis. Rather than democracy having a single form that is traceable to a unique origin point, the mobility of democratic practices suggests that the devices through which different imperatives of democratic rule are enacted can be combined and adapted in different ways. As a consequence, the values enacted through these devices – for example, the ways in which interests are represented, conflicts resolved, participation practiced, accountability enforced – may be

highly variable in different geographical contexts (Bell and Staeheli 1998).

Alternative democratic spaces

Criticisms of theories of liberal-representative democracy that assume the nation-state as the natural container of democratic politics have encouraged geographers to give increasing attention to various alternative models of democratic politics. There are two aspects to this focus: a concern with scales of democratic politics above and below that of the nation-state; and a concern with the potential for radicalizing democratic politics in established and new arenas.

The first aspect of the attention to alternative models of democratic politics is the focus on the spaces of democratic politics that exist above and below the level of the nation-state. While electoral geography tends to focus on the translation of subnational electoral outcomes into aggregate national election results, a burgeoning literature focuses on the city or the region as a privileged scene of democratic politics in its own right. The focus on these subnational scales is related to the argument that *place* is the key spatial modality in which identities and interests are experienced and negotiated. At the same time, in political science and political theory, the territorial framing of democracy is increasingly subjected to critical investigation by confronting democratic theory with the facts of contemporary transnationalism and globalization. Increasingly, settled assumptions about inclusion and participation in democratic politics at national scales are thrown into question by transnational social mobilizations and identifications, which point up the limitations of territorialized models of representation. Settled assumptions about the objects of democratic decision-making are, likewise, increasingly under strain with the

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proliferation of nonterritorial concerns, such as global climate change, pandemic disease, and integrated transnational financial markets.

The shift of attention to the complexity of spaces and scales through which democratic politics operates is related to a second aspect of research on alternative democratic spaces in geography. It is concerned with searching out and affirming various fractures in liberal representative regimes. These explorations are committed to thinking of democracy as more than simply a procedure for legitimizing the decisions of centralized bureaucracies and holding elected representatives accountable. Critical human geographers tend to think of democracy first and foremost in terms of contestation and dissent. It is assumed that “the political” is a realm in which new identities are formed and new agendas generated, and through which the stabilized procedures, institutions, and identifications of official politics are contested and potentially transformed. Such an assumption is related to an alternative sense of “democratization,” understood not so much as the geographical diffusion of established norms of democracy but as the deepening of democratic impulses and their extension of new arenas of everyday life. In contrast to the focus of electoral geography and mainstream political science on the formal democratic procedures of elections, voting, and parties, attention is paid to the diverse practices and sites where questions of accountability, citizenship, justice, and participation are contested.

Different schools of democratic thought which inform geographers’ focus on alternative democratic spaces tend to share an emphasis on “participation” as the central normative value of democratic politics. Geographers have drawn on a broad family of egalitarian thought about the relationships between democracy, rights, and social justice, including post-Rawlsian

political philosophy; post-Habermasian theories of democracy, including feminist critical elaborations of this tradition; various postcolonial liberalisms; agonistic liberalisms and post-structuralist theories of “radical democracy”; the revival of republican theories of democracy, freedom, and justice; and anarchist and “autonomist” traditions of political activism. All of these traditions share a conviction that democratic politics is about more than formal procedures for the aggregation of individualized voter preferences. Taken together, they amount to a tradition of thinking about “radical democracy.” In geography, radical democracy has most often been conceptualized with reference to a post-Marxist approach developed by the political theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (see Massey 1995). Their work emphasizes the idea of democracy as a diverse set of practices of challenging the boundaries of “the political” in two senses: by establishing new issues as counting as political, and by focusing on the active formation of subjectivities and identifications in and through political practices of agonistic contestation and collective mobilization. Another feature of this style of radical democracy is the considerable emphasis it puts on issues of space, understood as a scene of multiplicity and encounter with difference, and therefore as the very site of democratic culture. It is an understanding which emphasizes the idea that democracy is an inherently contested, evaluative, incomplete formation that is always open to further perfection, without hope of its finally culminating in a pure form.

Rather than being restricted to this tradition of post-Marxist theory, heavily inflected by poststructuralist ideas, the notion of radical democracy might actually be better thought of as referring to a variety of approaches that emphasize the inclusive, participatory, and contestatory qualities of democratic politics.

The most influential of these approaches is the family of theories of so-called “deliberative democracy,” often shaped by a critical interest in the ideas of Jürgen Habermas. Approaches that develop strategies for informed, structured participatory discussion and decision-making are now central to debates on democratic theory. These approaches propose a much more active role for citizens in all facets of decision-making, as well as, in many cases, the extension of democratic norms to a far wider array of activities. They also involve thinking about a range of activities that are not directly political, in the sense of being tied directly to decision-making processes, as nonetheless important facets of a broader democratic culture by virtue of their contribution to the quality of the public sphere.

Theories of radical democracy, whether of a Habermasian or poststructuralist inflection, often focus on forms of noninstrumental cultural practice and performance. These are understood as key mediums of democratic opinion formation or democratic subject formation. In turn, both traditions share the problem of whether the forms of influence that can be generated in the public sphere or in cultivating an agonistic democratic ethos can or should be articulated with the institutionalized exercise of power. Post-Habermasian approaches finesse this issue through concepts of weak and strong public spheres. Poststructuralist theorists who address the communicative conditions of pluralistic democracy through figures of democratic ethos are even more wary of drawing too close to sites of decision-making and rule. For them, the force of democratic politics is reserved for the disruptive energies of contestatory practices that reconstitute the dimensions of the political arena.

In practical terms, theories of radical democracy are often associated with calls for the

decentralization of decision-making and political participation to subnational scales of regions and cities. This localizing impulse easily falls into the trap of assuming that subnational scales of governance are somehow more democratic by virtue of being closer to people’s everyday concerns. In contrast, the rescaling of political authority away from the nation-state is sometimes presented as being a means of depoliticizing issues. At the same time, increasing attention is given to emergent forms of transnational democracy, focusing on whether systems of globalized economic and political governance can be subordinated to democratic oversight. In work on issues of global justice and transnational democracy, one finds sustained attention to the diverse agents of justice through which democratic justice can be pursued and secured, moving beyond an exclusive focus on states as the privileged containers of democratic politics. Again, sometimes this process of rescaling is seen to exemplify the development of “postpolitical” or “postdemocratic” forms of rule. It may be more productive to think of emergent transnational aspects of democratic politics as raising two important challenges to how the geography of democratic ideals and practice are conceptualized. First, this process challenges any simple contrast between representative and participatory forms of democracy (Low 1997). Any viable form of democratic polity is likely to combine aspects of these practices in different ways. For both practical and normative reasons, representation seems an irreducible aspect of any viable, pluralistic model of democracy. Not only do representative procedures enable the “time-space distancing” of democratic politics, but they also embody important principles of difference and nonidentity within the “demos.” Representation is also an unavoidable mechanism for the integration of so-called mute interests, such as future generations or nonhuman actors. Second,

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transnational political processes are suggestive of a move beyond the predominant territorial framing of the spatiality of democracy. Rather than thinking simply in terms of the need to articulate subnational and national scales with global scales, discussions of these topics increasingly focus on the diverse spatialities of democracy, ones that articulate territorial and nonterritorial practices, and on scalar and nonscalar conceptualizations of space.

Conclusion

Geographers' contributions to spatializing the analysis of democratic practices such as elections, and to imagining alternative democratic geographies, overlap with emerging concerns about how democracy can be understood in a world where the sites of politics are multiplying and crucial decisions are made in ways that cut across territorially organized political regimes. In political science and political theory, contemporary debates about democracy often hinge on geographical themes and geographical problems. In short, geography is at stake in a new way across the social sciences: understanding contemporary democracy requires geographical contributions by everyone, and democracy as an object of analysis offers considerable potential for new forms of cross-disciplinary engagement. Further engagement with these debates by geographers, however, presents a challenge for prevalent understandings of critical vocation in the discipline. The predominant understanding of critical analysis in human geography has always distanced itself from what are presented as "liberal" approaches, where liberalism is usually understood by reference to economics. It is difficult to appreciate the concerns of contemporary theories of radical democracy without acknowledging the degree to which such theories draw on key themes from traditions of

political liberalism, such as pluralism, citizenship, rights, or the separation of powers. Radical democracy in this expansive sense is not best thought of as a rejection of liberalism *tout court*. One of the lessons learned by diverse strands of radical political theory from the experience of twentieth-century history is that struggles for social justice can create new forms of domination and inequality. Liberalism can be thought of as a potential source of insight into the politics of pluralistic associational life. The problems of coordination, institutional design, and justification, on which liberal political theory dwells at length, are unavoidable in any normatively persuasive and empirically grounded critical theory of democracy. It is tempting to see in the energy of theories of radical democracy a promise that everything can, and should be, democratized, and that all interests can, and should be, included in democratic practices; however, an abiding aspect of liberal theories of democratic politics is a concern with the justifiable limits of collective decision-making, a concern informed by an acknowledgment of the potential harms, injustice, and violence that can be generated by the putatively democratic exercise of coercive power. Democracy, it should be remembered, is a way of doing politics, and not a substitute for politics. Thinking about the ways in which commitments such as those based on faith, or practices mediated through bureaucratic institutions, or relationships underwritten by the force of violence, can and should be democratized remains a pressing problem of empirical, normative, and theoretical analysis.

SEE ALSO: Citizenship; Civil society; Electoral geographies; Political geography; Social movements; State, the

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Further reading

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