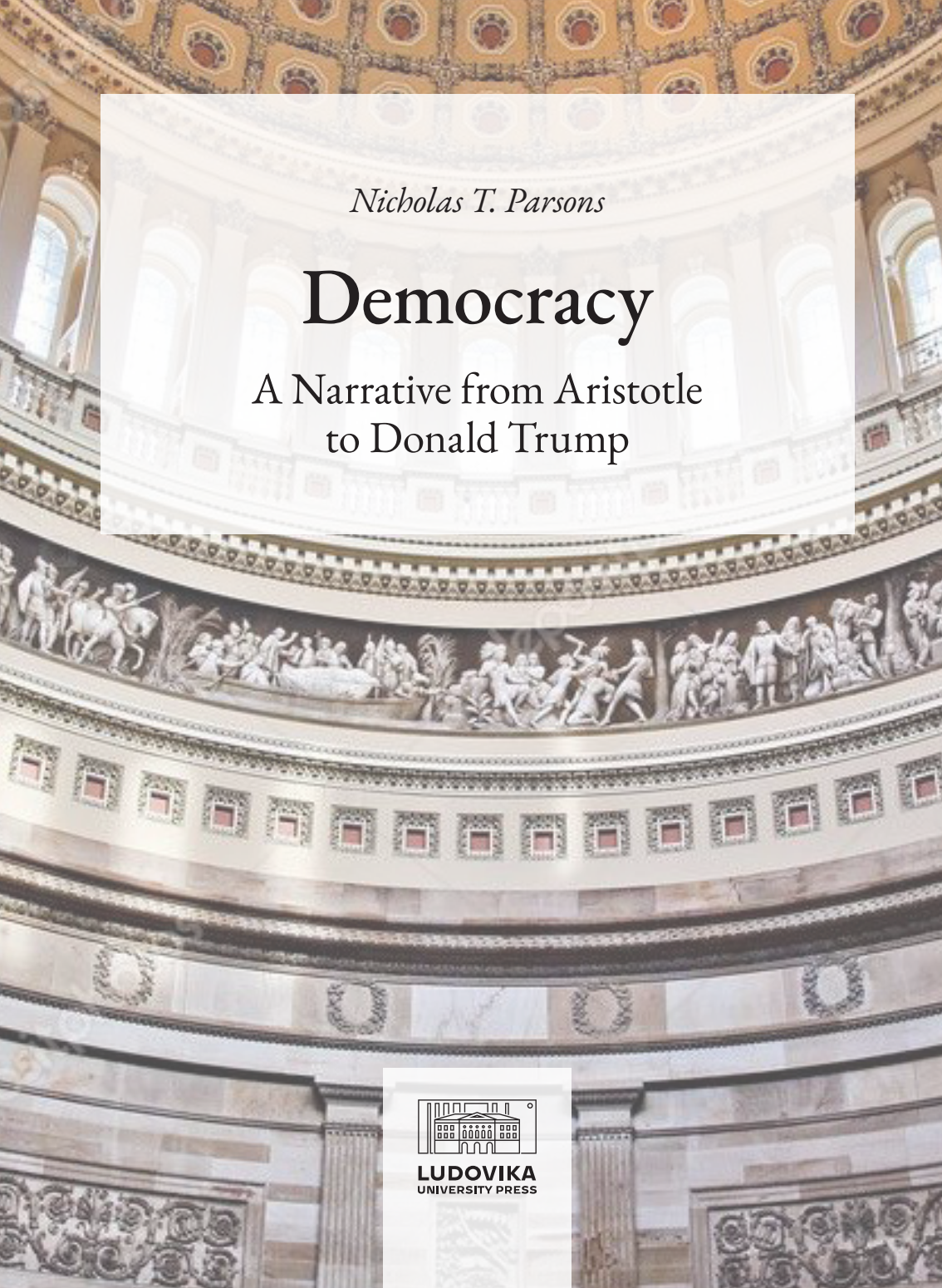

Nicholas T. Parsons

Democracy

A Narrative from Aristotle to Donald Trump

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This book is dedicated to my wife, the art historian Ilona Sármány-Parsons. With super-human patience she has endured or improved my perceptions of democracy over two years during which democracies have been alarmingly in crisis and turmoil.

Introduction

This essay describes the idea of democracy and its reception from the time of Aristotle to the present. The introductory section considers how the word *democracy* is used and misused today. It also draws a distinction between democracy as practiced with electoral validation and some forms of pseudo-democracy – technocracy, juristocracy and (arguably) ethnocracy. This touches on issues of identity, nationalism, populism and the erosion of the nation state, which are dealt with as they arise in the following historical survey.

Underlying much of the analysis in this book is the enduring resistance of democracy to utopianism, whether the latter masquerades as Rousseau's "will of the people", or as utilitarianism, or as extreme Comtean positivism. We approach here a constant tension between the rule of the elite (Plato's philosopher kings) and the ordinary citizen, allegedly too stupid or too easily swayed by false information to make decisions on cardinal matters to do with his or her own best interests. Democracy can of course be instrumental in decisions that turn out to be, even disastrously, not in the common interest. But as John Maynard Keynes (one of the truly great democrats of modern times) pointed out, the same can be said of "experts" (especially economists).

Aristotle gave a very precise description of the way democracy worked and explained why it would lead to anarchy. In pre-imperial Ancient Rome a measure of equilibrium between the Orders was achieved by the *Lex Hortensia Plebiscitis* (287 BC) which raised the voting influence of the plebs to that of the aristocrats in the Senate. Late Antiquity saw the transition from the analytical and participatory *homo politicus* of the small self-governing *polis* to the institutionalisation of Christianity and the emergence of *homo credens,* the world of the believers. Successive Roman imperial rule, caesaro-papism and dynastic Christian rule based on serfdom found little space for democratic ideas, except insofar as the more subversive ideas of Christian doctrines (communitarianism and biblical equality) provided some counterweight to an absolute use of dynastic divine right.

A more sophisticated approach to participatory rule may be seen in the Italian city states where civic pride had replaced that of *civis romanus sum*. Great emphasis was placed on cultural excellence derived in turn from intellectual and aesthetic discussion, as well as a measure of secularisation. The revolt in Florence (Savonarola, 1494–1498) proclaimed a number of democratic slogans (anti-corruption, liberation from a debased papal authority), but soon turned authoritarian and repressive, just as the Roman revolt of Cola di Rienzo had done (1347) and as Protestant sects or states would sometimes later become despite Luther's inspiring vision of the "priesthood of all believers".

The narrative of the essay traces a thread of incipient democracy from Christian Humanism (Erasmus) through the Reformation and the examination of political legitimacy that ensued (Thomas Hobbes, John Locke). A more sceptical and science-based approach to governance leads up to the Enlightenment, when the principle of toleration becomes more widely accepted and practised. The essay surveys how the fundamental basis of modern democratic values was laid in the Enlightenment period, particularly through the work of philosophers such as Montesquieu in France and Adam Smith in Scotland. The French Revolution was an ambivalent caesura, which again proclaimed democratic principles but ended up, as utopian visions usually do, being even more arbitrary, violent and repressive than what it had replaced.

The second half of this essay begins by analysing the first nation state that embraced democracy fully in its constitution, the USA, although African Americans had to wait nearly two more centuries for recognition. The 19th century begins with the rise of nationalist liberalism in Europe, checked in 1848–1849, but finally triumphant with the formation of new nation states and the liberation of others in the second half of the century or early 20th century. Against a background of imperialism and colonialism, the nature of the dominant political liberalism in regard to democracy is examined. While this was a period of domination and exploitation, it also saw the abolition of the slave trade (1834), strong advances in industrialisation, the concomitant rise of Socialism, discoveries in science and medicine and the beginnings of a realisation that free trading was preferable to mercantilism.

All these had important influence on the advance of democracy. Most influential of all was the towering figure of Karl Marx who lit a fuse that was to detonate with revolutions in the 20th century and much of whose pioneering sociology and political activism has survived (somewhat repackaged) even the collapse of the ambitious and ruthless experiment of Marxism–Leninism in the 20th century.

A separate section from the mainstream narrative examines the fate of democracy in the historical context of Central Europe, and especially since the establishment of the European Union. It is argued that more attention should be paid to the ancient historical and geopolitical legacies of these Central European states in dealing with the disputes between them and Brussels; and also that the EU itself should be more attentive to its so-called "democratic deficit".

The final part of the essay deals with the specific challenges facing democracies today, which are seen as necessarily fighting with one hand tied behind their backs in dealing with issues such as climate change, mass migration, the abuse of power by global business and the latest *trahison des clercs* represented by "critical theory" and "intersectionality".

A Few Observations on Power and Governance...

> "For by natural birth all men are equal [...] and as we are delivered of God by the hand of nature into this world, every one with a natural innate freedom and propriety [...] even so are we to live, every one equally [...] to enjoy his birthright and privilege, even all whereof God by nature hath made him free [...]. Every man by nature being a king, priest, prophet, in his own natural circuit and compass, whereof no second may partake but by deputation, commission, and free consent from him whose right it is."[1] (Richard Overton, a member of a democratic and republican movement known as The Levellers during the English Civil War.)

[1] Richard Overton: *An Arrow Against All Tyrants,* 1646, quoted in Dahl 1989: 32.

"I am not happy with your support of religious freedom. It has been my experience that countries which decided to introduce religious freedom, such as England and the Netherlands, have not been able to establish order to this day."[2] (Maria Theresa in a letter to her co-ruling son, the later Emperor Joseph II.)

"Beings who have received the gift of freedom are not content with the enjoyment of comfort granted by others."[3] (Immanuel Kant)

"A great deal of democratic enthusiasm descends from the ideas of people [...] who believed in democracy because they thought mankind so wise and good that everyone deserved a share in government. The danger of defending democracy on those grounds is that they are not true."[4] (C. S. Lewis)

"Dictatorships guarantee safe streets and the terror of the doorbell. In a democracy the streets may be unsafe after dark, but the most likely visitor in the early hours will be the milkman."[5] (Adam Michnik)

"Any theory that becomes the ideology of a political movement or the official doctrine of a state must lend itself to simplification for the simple and to subtlety for the subtle."[6] (Raymond Aron on Karl Marx.)

2 Quoted in Bibó 1991: 502.
3 Immanuel Kant: *The Quarrel between the Faculties,* 1798, quoted in Berlin 2019: 302.
4 Lewis 1986: 17.
5 Cited in Keane 2004: 1.
6 Aron 1965: 114.