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Stein Ringen: What Democracy Is For

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INTRODUCTION

DEMOCRACY IS VICTORIOUS. The competition has collapsed. Most countries have made themselves democracies of sorts and the remaining outright nondemocratic ones count only a handful. But citizens are turning away. They care less for democracy, believe less in it, participate less in it, and have less trust in its governance.

In this book I look inside the democracies that are usually thought to be the most robust and find them wanting—and possibly on the decline. Even those that are best by a comparative measure, such as the Scandinavian ones, do pretty poorly by an absolute standard. If we think democracy is now assured, we are mistaken. Democracy is strong in quantitative terms, in the number of democracies in the world, but weak in qualitative terms, in how well those democracies perform.

If democracy should decline, the loss would be immeasurable. It would be in the freedom and security of ordinary women and men and children and families to live their lives by their own ambitions and aspirations. It would be in our well-being.

We may not think that what we have won can be lost. But it can, in particular if those of us who have had the good fortune to live under democratic rule for some time slip into forgetfulness about what it means for us. Democracy can be taken away, of course; that is always a danger. Or it might just wither; that is perhaps a more imminent danger. It could disintegrate into despotic reality within democratic formality, the *despotisme doux* that Alexis de Tocqueville warned against in the 1830s, with a perceptiveness later unmatched by any student of politics, when he observed democracy in action in its then most advanced form, in America. Perhaps we are already deep into this *despotisme*; it was after all Tocqueville's genius to see that citizens could fall into a trap of unfreedom while still believing themselves to be free. His time was not unlike ours: a post-revolutionary one with democracy spreading and the direction of its inner development in the balance. The danger he saw was subtle, not so much that democracy might give way to violent or cruel government as that centralized government would become overwhelming and that citizens, out of convenience, selfishness, comfort or misunderstanding, would allow themselves to be degraded even if not tormented. In chapter 6, I suggest we may well be there.

Danger comes from two quarters: from defects in the machinery of democratic politics and from citizens themselves in how they practice and understand democratic citizenship. The first danger I address in chapters 1 to 3 and the second one in chapters 4 to 6. Throughout, my message is that we need to set up against the dangers both to and in democracy not only a defense of it, although that too, but a determined effort to *improve* it. The way to protect democracy is not to cheer it, which we do too much, but to reform it, which we do too little.

I start with questions about what democracy is and what makes one better than another. We have but the vaguest notions of democratic quality, and I hope to add to our understanding of that core concept. Then I turn to the economy. In a brilliant little book, *Equality and Efficiency* (1975), the economist Arthur Okun warned against the transgression (as he called it) of economic power into the domain of politics and argued that this in the United States had caused a political acceptance of poverty, which did not reflect American values. To counter such transgressions, I seek to breathe new (and, I hope, realistic) life into the notion of economic democracy. Finally I consider governance and the question of how democratic governments can and should provide necessary rule without becoming overpowering. My prism is the welfare state, that great civilizing project in modern capitalism which nevertheless also contains the danger of excess. I lay out ideas for a “welfare state for investment.”

In the last three chapters, I consider democratic citizens. While they depend on democracy for freedom and well-being, democracy depends equally on them—on their capacity to be citizens and on their beliefs about citizenship. Poverty is destructive of freedom. The United Nations has majestically agreed on “millennium goals” to rid the world of the scourge of poverty. Let’s take that mission seriously. In chapter 4, I seek to explain what freedom from poverty means. I then turn to the arena where most people live most of their lives, to families. Those little organizations are exceptionally productive, materially but also morally, in the nurturing of values and norms. Finally, I turn to the core concept of value in democracy, to freedom. Isaiah Berlin famously warned against ideas of freedom that could pervert to ideologies of unfreedom. In that spirit I recommend a concept of real freedom, which I think is helpful, indeed necessary, for us who struggle with the blessings and burdens of being free citizens.

WHAT PURPOSE DEMOCRACY?

What is democracy for? The question is not as easy to answer as one might think. Democracy is for many things, no doubt, and there are clearly

many valid answers to the naive question. But I have come to see that the many potential purposes of democracy can be arranged in a sort of hierarchy and that it is possible to identify among the various democratic values one that is ultimate and defines its moral purpose.

Democracy, it is often said, is for government by popular consent, but that is not much of an answer. Government by consent is perhaps what democracy *is*, but then what is consent for? To enable the ruled to control the rulers? If that is the case, well and good, but just why should you and I be concerned to hold an intangible fraction of collective control over those who govern? Perhaps because this is the only way to assure rule by *popular* consent. Unless the power to control the rulers is spread out broadly through the citizenry, control will at best be in the hands of a small group of citizens and we will have a minority of controllers controlling a minority of rulers. But again, why is control important and why popular consent?

A classic answer is that power corrupts, in which case the purpose of consent is to prevent arbitrary or oppressive rule. But what is it that makes rule arbitrary? And if we are afraid of oppressive rule, what is it we fear? Rule is supposedly arbitrary if it goes against the will of the ruled, but what is it the ruled want from their rulers? Rule is perhaps oppressive if it denies or takes away from the ruled what they value. But what is it we value and that governments can give or deny?

One thing we obviously expect of a government is protection. But protection of what and against whom? Of life and limb clearly, but that does not tell us much about democratic governments specifically; a democratic government deserves no special praise for doing what any government should. Against domination, as Ian Shapiro argues in *The State of Democratic Theory*? Probably, but why? What is it we are made to sacrifice if others are able to dominate us?

We can start to pin down an answer by going back to basics and being reminded that no man is an island, entire of itself. We depend on dealing with others and on each other; we perforce live in community. Therefore we have to cooperate in various ways. Cooperation is difficult, however, and with the need to cooperate comes risk. It is difficult because we all know that often it is to our benefit that others cooperate but that we do not. It is dangerous because in cooperation we commit ourselves to paying attention to others. That creates bonds of dependency, which the strong and fortunate can use to harass the weak and unfortunate. Society therefore, at least civilized society, depends on some form of governance to help people to cooperate and to regulate for fair and orderly cooperation. But once we allow others the power to govern, we are at risk that they will use the power we grant them to make themselves the ones that harass us in their own interest. For the sake of our well-being and security, we

should therefore want necessary government to be under our control to ensure that it governs precisely for our well-being and security and not against our interests.

That is a start towards an answer, but no more than a start. Concepts such as well-being, security, and interests are still elusive. Just what is it we want a good government to do and deliver, and just what is it a good government does not threaten?

We want many things from our government, and never more so than in the advanced democracies where we enjoy unlimited freedom to make demands on those who rule. We are not terribly worried that we demand more than governments can possibly deliver and we do not hesitate to demand different things that cannot come in the same package. We want economic growth and environmental protection and we expect our governments to deliver both, although we know it is impossible to maximize both at the same time. We want more and better services and lower taxes, and we expect the government to square the circle. All that is in the nature of the democratic tug of war and not something anyone should get themselves worked up about. But beneath our many and often contradictory claims on governments and expectations of goods we want them to deliver, there must be some yardstick of value. Good governments deliver goods, but we must hope there is something more to it. Presumably we want democracy because we need governance and because we believe democracy encourages good government. But what, finally, is it that makes governments good?

The answer I have arrived at is this. It starts from well-being, from the living of good lives. Everyone wants to live a good life. That is true because it is self-evident. The good life, however, is not found in any specific way of life. There is no recipe that tells everyone everything about what is good for them and for everyone else. Well-being can only be found person by person in the realization of a life that is good for him or her in the phase of life where he or she happens to be. Some ways of life are incompatible with any notion of a good life—for example, a life utterly devoted to doing evil or dominated by greed and egoism or one that is thoroughly frivolous and unreflective—but for the rest the life that is good for Mr. Jones is the life that is good for him. That is likely to be different, at least to some degree, from the life that is good for Mrs. Smith. This is true because we know it from experience. Some live to work, others work to live. And some of those who for a while live to work later find that working comes to stand in the way of living.

Well-being, then, the business of realizing good lives, depends on the Smiths and Joneses of this world being able to find the lives that are good for them, being able to change their minds about how they want to live, and then being able to modify their ways of life accordingly. That, again,

obviously depends on many conditions—resources, competence, markets, friends, family, and much more—and we will visit all of those as things unfold below, but is in the end something individuals must sort out for themselves. What they must do for themselves, they must have the opportunity to do. Our well-being is ultimately of our own making, but we cannot make our lives good unless we have the tools to do it. Since well-being is in the realization of the life that is good for each person, we must all be free to shape our lives in ways that are good for us. It comes down, I take it, to the freedom of the individual. That's what governments can and should foster and protect, what oppressive governments refuse, and what arbitrary rule perverts. That's what we are denied when we suffer under domination.

Democracy has a purpose. It is (or rather, should be) for the good of the persons who live under its governance. It is to help them to live in autonomy and security and to get on reasonably with their lives as they wish. And it is to enable them to trust that they and their children can live as their own masters also in the future. It is, in short, for the freedom of the common man. It's *freedom* that democracy is finally for. That's the idea this book is built around: to analyze democracy according to its purpose, to find that purpose in the lives of persons and to think of it as ultimately a matter of freedom.

WHAT FREEDOM?

One way to think about freedom is to imagine that it is the natural state of affairs in human life, but that trouble has come into paradise and deprived us of the freedom that is really there for us. In that case, the task is to clear away trouble so that we can reclaim our natural freedom. Or we might think, with Hobbes, that human life inclines to being nasty, brutish, and short and that freedom must be created, recreated, and delivered. I am of the second persuasion.

That leads me to a discussion that circulates around the difference between liberty and freedom, between *having* liberty and *being* free. Liberty is a mysterious quality. Not to have it is to be damned, but when you do have it you find that it does not do much for you. To run around and make choices all over the place is time wasted, silliness, and the stuff of neurosis—and a far cry from a life in freedom.

A free life could possibly be an easy life since when we are free we can do as we wish. But that is not how I see it. I believe a free life is potentially a good life, but I also think that freedom is difficult. The benefit is that you can live according to your own ideas about what it means to live well,

but the cost is that you yourself have to sort out those ideas and resolve which ones are sound and worth living by.

In the liberal tradition that harks back to John Stuart Mill, freedom is the liberty to do as one wants without interference or coercion. The difficulty of freedom then comes into consideration after the fact in the *use* of liberty. I think that's too late. It leaves the *definition* naked, as no more than "do as you like." From that concept, it is (to use Isaiah Berlin's words) "no very great distance" to an idea that freedom comes from more of everything, from ever more rights and ever more abundance. But that makes freedom insatiable and renders it destructive to the individual who pursues it. It is also a dangerous idea in society. Before we know it, we are, in the name of freedom, parading an ideology of greed and selfishness to a world of mass poverty, environmental depletion, and cultural antagonisms.

My alternative is to bring the difficulty of liberty into the definition. Freedom—and here I follow Joseph Raz in *The Morality of Freedom*—is being your own master. That depends on the liberty of the liberals but does not stop there. To be master of yourself means to be able to do as you want, provided what you want is worth wanting. The challenge and difficulty lies not primarily in the choice of actions according to your wants but in being in control of what to want. If you live for the satisfaction of wants you just happen to *have*, you are not living a life of your own making. Freedom is power, but it is power over meaning, purpose, and ends as well as over means and choice. This understanding of freedom contains, inside the definition, wisdom, restraint, and self-control—what I call *reason*.

These ideas I consider in the final chapter. There I search for the foundations of freedom in the inner life of individuals. In earlier chapters I consider social foundations: How well do democracies perform in the promotion and protection of freedom? Is there an escape from economic domination? Can the welfare state empower citizens? Is poverty avoidable? Are families the source of values and norms that are in turn at the core of reason? It is democratic culture as much as democratic politics I am in search of.

GOOD GOVERNMENT

This book is my third from a project on "good government," following *The Possibility of Politics* (1987 and 2006) and *Citizens, Families, and Reform* (1997 and 2005). I now complete a journey that started with the economics of the welfare state and continued through a political analysis of social issues with a moral analysis of democracy.

The problem from which I started was the power of piecemeal reform, Karl Popper's bastion against tyranny in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945). The prevailing view at the time was that reform was either socially futile or economically destructive. Those opinions were mainly grounded in theoretical logic, including a good serving of Marxist theory. I approached the matter from an empirical platform and tried to form a verdict on reformist redistribution by balancing effectiveness in relation to goals against costs in the form of (unanticipated) side effects. My experience has made me a determined defender of the heroic idea of reform.

It was immediately clear that the problem of reform was only a convenient entry into a broader problem and that what I was really on to was the meaning and capacity of democratic governance, given the constraints that democracy imposes on the exercise of political rule.

As I moved on, however, it gradually came to me that even the problem of democratic governance, big and unruly as it is, was in turn wrapped into a yet broader *problematique*. There is a grand idea about recent social history that we may refer to as *the liberal vision*—a fundamentally affirmative confidence in the genuineness of progress. The liberal vision starts from economic advancement and sees, or hopes for, rationality in the use of prosperity through a unity of democracy and benevolent government whereby economic potential translates into improved life chances for more people. Not surprisingly, an outlook on history as bright and optimistic as this has been of shifting credibility but has always had a following of hopefuls, myself with my confidence in reform being one of them. It has recently been brought to front stage again in Benjamin Friedman's courageous book, *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*. The reform skeptics I took on at the start of this project were obviously on the other side of this vision. In their camp, the economy was something that either could not be tamed without being destroyed or had to be tamed with more powerful tools than pitiful reform.

I came to see my project as an inquiry into the validity of the liberal vision. That caused my attention to shift step by step from public policy to democratic values and performance. For democratic rule to be effective, that effectiveness would, if we follow Max Weber, have to come from authority more than from power. Authority in turn originates in democracy itself rather than in governance. That begs the question not only of effectiveness in rule but of the solidity of the democratic architecture that underpins rule. In *Citizens, Families, and Reform* I started to drift in that direction, and in this book I take the plunge and try to consolidate.

In the first part of the project, during twenty years of careful, step-by-step research, I explored welfare-state reform against the dismal predictions of its detractors.

First proposition: The distribution of income in industrial societies tends towards stability and is insensitive to (weak) policy interventions, at least in the long run. My reply: Advances in comparative research on income since about 1970 have shown that income distributions fluctuate strongly within nations and differ strongly between nations, and that such fluctuations and differences are associated with changes and differences in government policies.

Second proposition: Although the distribution of income is not stable, the incidence of poverty is, the implication being that reformist policies are not sufficiently powerful to rectify injustices at the bottom of the distribution. My reply: This proposition has been shown to rest on weak definitions of poverty that make empirical results noninterpretable, to be not robust for alternative methods of measurement, and to be unable to stand up to stricter and more appropriate criteria of definition and measurement.

Third proposition: Although the distribution of income and the incidence of poverty are not insensitive to reformist policies, class inequalities of opportunity are, the implication being again that deep, hard-core inequalities persist unabated. My reply: Support for this last stand of the antireformists has been sought in elaborately estimated statistics that propose to show long-term stabilities in class inequality. These statistics have, however, proved no less fragile than those on stable income distributions and poverty rates. Stability results rest on excessively relativized methods of measurement that are biased in favor of the preferred hypothesis; the results are nonrobust for tests against alternative methods and are disconfirmed by methods of unbiased measurement.

Of these propositions, the most difficult one to resolve was the one on class inequality. That took about ten years of work, in fruitful collaboration with my colleague Ottar Hellevik, but has now been brought to a successful conclusion. The process of disentangling the substantive consequences of intricate methodological choices in the technology of reading the descriptive information contained in mobility tables is chronicled in appendix A, where also the final conclusion is given: that we can now consider the stability thesis of class inequality overturned.

This conformity of findings on income, poverty, and class vindicates, I think, my instinctive optimism about reform and, by extension, the power of democratic governance—of government with its hands tied. That resolves to my satisfaction the validity of the liberal vision as far as the potential for effective governance goes. However, the liberal vision rests on the double act of democracy and benevolent government. I had been able to deliver one of the partners but the second one was still missing. If potent rule is *possible*, what does it take in the democratic foundations to make it more assured? It is to that question I have turned in the works summarized in this third book from my long project.

A NOTE ABOUT THE STUDY OF POLITICS

These works are inspired by some ideas about fruitful ways of studying politics or more broadly, society, for that matter.

One is an idea of individualism. By this, I mean that we should observe persons in order to reflect informatively on goodness or badness or progress or decline in politics and society, and that observing persons means ultimately to observe individuals. Thus, for example, I think we should pronounce on the quality of democracies by their impact on people more than by, say, some principle of “democraticness” in the political regime. In the study of poverty, I think it is essential for our ability to tell truthful stories that we observe the lives of individuals. Valid accounts of poverty cannot be created from above—for example, from the distribution of income—but can come only from below, from putting together what is known about how persons have it.

A second idea is one of reason. I defend the basic idea that people are themselves the best judges of their well-being, and I put that in the language of reason rather than of rationality. The concept of rationality has been badly damaged by *rational-choice theory*, a strange concoction that has people making life choices on the basis of a mental calculus of utility, by which is meant the ability of a choice to add positively to the satisfaction of one’s preferences, whatever they may be. A model of that kind may be useful as a methodological assumption, but the trouble is that some advocates of rational choice have come to see it as a guide for moral pronouncements. “I don’t vote,” a prominent colleague from the rational-choice school said in a recent conversation, and regrettably not in jest, “I’m rational.”

A third idea is to look beyond procedures, processes, and structures to results, outcomes, and consequences. The democratic way to study politics, I think, is to study it from the angle of how people live and how it affects the way they live. The three institutions or superinstitutions under scrutiny here are democratic regimes, democratic governments, and families. In each case, I ask what they *do* and try to assess them by how well they do what we should think they should do for us.

A NOTE ABOUT METHODOLOGY

Social scientists are prone to having strong opinions about methods. My opinion on the matter is not in favor of this or that methodology but one that can be formulated as a double principle: the right methodology is always the one that is right for the job at hand, and the right methodology for the job at hand is always the simplest one that will do the job.

It is my experience that empirical social science is often at its best when it is simple and descriptive and easily goes astray when it makes itself too fancy for its own good. Of course, we must be prepared to use the most advanced techniques of analysis, including mathematical analysis. I am an admirer and practitioner of advanced statistical analysis of complex data sets. In previous work, I've gone to great lengths in that direction, and I think with good results. I build on some of that work here, in particular in the family analyses in chapter 5.

But I'm at the same time deeply skeptical of fancy sophistication. Where I here use statistical analysis, on poverty and democratic quality, I go to the opposite extreme and use the simplest methodology anyone could imagine. I seek to analyze complicated phenomena with elementary indicators and no more mystery in computation than percentages. I know from previous work that methodological simplicity is often analytically powerful. I present an example of that experience in appendix G. I argue, and I think show, that in some cases methodological simplicity can produce findings that elude more complex procedures.

The simplicity of indicators is to some degree deceptive. The indicators approach rests on its own theoretical logic, and I try to explain that logic in particular in chapter 4. Indicators take us beyond strict measurement towards drawing a statistical portrait of a thing the complexity of which may be lost when squeezed into the straitjacket of measurement. On poverty in particular, I question what has hitherto been seen as completely obvious—that the scientific job is to measure it. I argue that measurement just cannot tell us what society needs to know about it.

I hope that methodological eclecticism and simplicity has paid off in these works. Through conceptual analysis, I have been able to establish that freedom is not the same as liberty and that it rests also on the self, on skills and control and the ability to use liberty well. By subjecting families to economic and organizational analysis rather than sociological discourse, I show that they remain immensely productive institutions but that their productivity is slowly slipping. And I find out why: it has to do with subjective and almost imperceptible changes in the family project around the sense of purpose and trust. Economic democracy, I find, is not a dead end. If we reshape the question from one of centralized power to one of decentralized redistribution, a good serving of it is available and there for the taking.

With the use of indicators, I am able to offer statistical findings that are original and robust. Poverty is not an ambiguously relative something that there is a bit of here, there, and everywhere with little difference and that perpetually recreates itself irrespective of development and economic affluence. It is a real thing; there is terrifyingly much of it in some countries and wonderfully little in some others. It *can* be eradicated—and

therefore it should be. Democracies are not only different in the way they do democracy, they are also different in how well they do what we ought to expect of them. Countries that appear to be equally democratic are enormously different in democratic quality. When ranked by quality, the big model ones are not the best ones. Since democracies are differently good, democracy could be better.

These findings are significant and respond to good substantive questions. They are, of course, not final and eternal and are certainly not offered without qualifications. But they *are* interesting and pretty strong. I consider them to be well established and satisfying.

As always, there is more research to do. I hope to do some of it, including further methodological work on the indicators approach: better indicators and better data that can be treated with additional sensitivity. The term, “social indicators” has had some bad press. It is an uphill struggle to defend simplicity in an environment where sophistication is the methodological order of the day, if often for its own sake. I take delight in rehabilitating an idea it is now time to take seriously, and I recommend the indicators approach as a vehicle for further statistical research.

My two cases of indicator analysis are easy to criticize in the way indicator analysis can always be criticized: Why those indicators and why not some other ones? Why not crunch the data into more refined parameters? That should be done and ought to yield additional knowledge, or at least the reconfirmation of findings some might still consider hypotheses. But I also know with some confidence that there might not be much payoff in some forms of elaboration. The index of democratic quality, for example, could be more finely grained or be estimated from more indicators, but that would not matter much for the range of difference on display or for the ranking. A choice of indicators must, of course, be theoretically sound but is also, if we are honest about it, inevitably a bit intuitive and arbitrary. Usually, as in my cases, we have to do the best we can with the data that happen to be available. Imperfect as all this is, much has been learned in these experiments in simplicity and much of what is to be learned is already there in the first-order analyses.

A NOTE ABOUT COMPOSITION, READING, AND CONTEXT

I offer here some reflections on democracy today and in the future, reflections grounded in the idea that the final purpose of it all lies in the freedom that citizens need to live well. Democracies come in many shapes and forms, are always imperfect, and are constantly in need of being reinvented and improved. Citizens depend for their freedom on something

that is dangerous to their freedom: on governance. Governance—or rule, if you will—should therefore be both effective and constrained.

The six chapters constitute six essays, all related but adding up to less than a unified treatise. Each deals with its own big question, which in turn deserves a book of its own. I have sought brevity in form as well as in methodology. There is a great deal of invisible work behind these essays in other publications and lectures (see the chapter footnotes and entries in references). I have thought of that work as experiments, and I think of this book as a summary of what has survived experimentation.

One way of keeping things reasonably short has been to push some material into appendixes. They are a mixture of background, additional evidence, and methodological follow-ups. I hope they contain interesting analyses and perspectives, but the appendixes are not strictly necessary reading.

The last chapter contains the philosophical platform I have worked from. The guts of it are explained here in the introduction, and that is probably enough for many purposes. The full chapter is perhaps heavy reading—at least it was heavy going to write it—and those who are not specifically interested in the political philosophy of freedom may be excused for making do with my summary above. On the other hand, the nonreader of that chapter will have missed what I have to say about, for example, faith and freedom and about evidence-based faith.

My context is advanced contemporary democracy, although we should perhaps be cautious about advertising democracy as “advanced.” I have in mind democracy as it is where it is established and where it has come to at the beginning of the twenty-first century.