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Seminar Presentation
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Subject to the Sphinx: Capitalist Democracy as Solution and Enigma

John Dunn
Cambridge University

I want in this seminar to focus a question that is of very evident importance for understanding contemporary politics, and to which I'm confident that we don't at present know the answer. I'd also like to try to see if I can make any headway with identifying the range of candidates for what might in the fullness of time turn out to be the correct answer to it, and to bring out some of the range of styles of thought and inquiry on which we would have to rely in assessing candidates for providing (or contributing to) that ultimately correct answer. The question is familiar, and in one way very much at home under the aegis of a Center for Japanese Studies. But, as I tried to suggest yesterday, and somewhat at odds with the deep and enormously attractive figure in whose honor I was then speaking, insofar as it is a question about Japan, it is less one today about Japanese idiosyncrasies (let alone its civilizational or normative limitations) than about Japan's robust and emphatic presence at the center of the developing force field of human collective life today the world over.

The question, as I hope my title conveys, is just what have we come to be subject to politically, in accepting as the sole viable, and uniquely compelling, candidate for legitimate political incorporation in the world today the modern representative democratic republic? Why has this, in many ways drastically untransparent and plainly still highly accident-prone, state form succeeded in brushing aside all other candidates to a notionally cosmopolitan, worldwide, or species wide, standard for political legitimacy and practically coherent political authority? Why has it done so so fast? Why has it done so to such a slight degree by dint of its proven practical efficacy in conditions or settings like those to which it has recently been extended on such a striking scale? Why, too, has it spread in

this way, in the teeth of its always pretty evident ideological fragility and presumptuousness?

Faced with questions of this grossness, the modern academic instinct, at its soberest, is to break them promptly down into more manageable components, and ideally into components that have come to be treated with comforting self-confidence in the disciplinary purlieu of the would-be respondents. An alternative, more economical but also inherently flakier response is to treat the question, somewhat procrusteanly and opportunistically, through, and by taking sides in relation to, some prominent recent academic or journalistic *prise de* position that clearly covers much of the same ground. In the present case, there is a natural candidate for this approach—to cut the question down to size by endorsing, amending, or sweeping from the field, the answer to it offered by Francis Fukuyama's well-known volume The End of History and the Last Man. I don't propose to adopt either of these strategies in a reasonably pure form. But I prescind from them for very different reasons: in the case of Fukuyama, because I have already said what I would wish to say about his book in a readily available public setting, because I essentially agree with one leading element in his answer, and more especially because I do not believe that a more sustained and intimate exploration of my grounds for disagreeing with other elements in it would be prepossessing in itself, or likely to prove instructive on the more pressing issue of how to answer the fundamental question at stake more fully or more cogently.

My reason for not adopting the first strategy, however, can't be put as clearly at anything like the same pace, and will simply have to emerge as I go along. In essence it just is that the components into which my original gross question can be briskly broken down are not noticeably more manageable than the question itself, and none of them has, in my view, proved wholly tractable to the disciplinary routines of any sub-community within the modern academic division of labor. I think that that outcome was foreordained, and that it will certainly continue into the humanly imaginable future, just because politics inherently resists—it is in the end simply impervious to—the epistemic strategies of the modern social sciences: not, of course, that it ensures that social scientists must be wasting their time in studying it, or that they will never learn or grasp anything of real value about it (judgments, as we all know, that are very far from the case), but simply that the social sciences in their entirety can never hope to do more than pant myopically along behind it—that it will always outrun them, and they can never hope, more than momentarily, to catch up with it, let alone lay firm hold upon it.

That, of course, is just coat trailing: more an expression of mood than a piece of consecutive thought. But I hope it suggests the spirit in which I want to press my question and the type of interest you may reasonably hope to find in trying to answer it for yourselves—what sort of payoff it may have. Briefly, I see it, and mean it, not just as a question about politics (about a large chunk of political subject matter), but also as a political question in its own right: a question of and in politics—a question about what this huge swing of accumulated political experience really means, and about what attitudes we (you, I, all the human beings now alive or likely to be so in the next two or three generations), have good reason to adopt toward it. Intellectuals across the world over the last few decades have been made to recognize—some of course more attentively and humbly than others—that in many respects this cannot sanely be conceived as a single clear question, let alone as one that might have a single, unified, clear and valid answer. But the endless particularization, subdivision, and relativization of prospective answers to it does nothing to show that there isn't here in the end a single great drastic question, one unified and highly structured challenge to human understanding, and once we acknowledge the historical presence and human weight of that question, however fully we also recognize the endless proliferation and relentless individuation of due answers to it for every particular human being across time and space, we can't coherently deny the potent constraints on those answers that come, and must come, from the commonality of the question itself.



Why is the question of just what has brought about this huge shift in the prevalence of a form of government necessarily a question not merely about politics, but also in and of politics? It is so, in my judgment, because nothing else in modern political experience bears so directly and emphatically on the assessment of what, in virtually every society in the world today, most of its denizens have good reason to hope for or fear from politics: because it forms, to use a somewhat hectic metaphor, the fulcrum of contemporary political judgment. I meant my title both to appeal to our diffuse but still fairly robust confidence as citizens of this type of state today that this is indeed so, but also to place immediately in question the equivocal and notably untransparent rationales that most of us can yet offer for just why it should be so. It might be the case that this state form has spread so drastically just because it manifestly deserves to do so, because it has done so under the sheer impetus of its own self-evident merits. It might also be the case that it has spread not because of any clear and directly

perceptible features of a less enticing kind in its motley array of rivals, but instead because of a cumulatively clearly proven consequential superiority that it has manifested over the last century or so against each of these rivals in a wide variety of settings. Still more encouragingly, it might be because of both simultaneously: because its superficial and apparent attractions as a regime form precisely map on to its deepest and most dependable causal characteristics, because it combines ideological charm with the steady provision of practical benefits more or less impartially to all comers, to a degree hitherto unprecedented in the political history of our species. It might be the case that we (and now, so many others also) have come to subject ourselves to it—to accept it as a system of legitimate rule—because it isn't really an instance of subjection at all: because its service is perfect freedom, or if not nothing but freedom, at least optimal freedom (the maximization of human opportunity to live freely among a given grouping and within a given territorial domain). What is important to register here is the chasm between these two views. The first, if coherent at all, and if valid in its own terms, would mean that we could somehow judge democracy without inspecting its consequences—judge it intrinsically and once and for all, as soon as we have accurately grasped the conceptual components that go to make it up. I do not myself think that makes sense; and I draw some comfort in so judging from the readily apparent failure of one of the very cleverest, and by far the most persistent and intellectually industrious of contemporary political philosophers, Ronald Dworkin, to conceive it clearly so that it does make sense. If you think your way carefully through his recent book Sovereign Virtue, the fruit of three decades of very strenuous consecutive thought by a philosopher of unsurpassed energy, ingenuity, and internal clarity of mind, you will find not merely that the preferred and clearly self-commending interpretation of democracy that he claims to identify is to be distinguished starkly from the form of government whose fortunes I wish to consider (not least in the latter's American instantiation), but also, more surprisingly, that it is only somewhat sophistically describable as democracy at all.

In itself this is far from surprising, since, as Josh Ober has recently reminded us, the critique of democracy goes back as far as Western political philosophy (or perhaps as democracy itself), and since that critique has never been refuted, even if it has by now been rather effectively brushed aside as a continuing ideological force or even a politically obtrusive presence. The second version of the thesis that democracy's unique eligibility is plain and intrinsic and rests on its simply being a systematization of freedom in practice, a system of optimal freedom in mutual coexistence within a given territory, is less implausible either politically or conceptually than the first; but unlike the first, it depends for whatever validity it turns

out to possess on the consequences that democracy as a form of government does prove to have in particular settings and at particular times. It is far less hard for most of us to believe it true than it would be to believe the first version true, if we cared to think about that version at all. But whether or not it is true will depend not on features of our own sentiments or thought processes (our own credal or affective susceptibility), but on what does or does not take place in the world. When we consider the consequences of democracy in practice, what does or does not take place in the real world in different times and places under it, and not infrequently in part because of it, the picture of self-evident comparative advantage, of a steady bow wave of plainly superior merit surging permanently in front of it, and in due course sweeping over and engulfing the entire globe, becomes simply absurd. The record of relative success and failure is patchy, irregular, and inordinately complicated: impossible to read at a glance, and not especially clear even under sustained and repeated re-inspection.



Since the competition between forms of government across the world is not merely one to win the balance of actively engaged preference or locally effective power within given populations, but also one between the external political patrons of contrasting forms, and thus between the relative power that they too are in a position to exert in other peoples' territories, we can be confident that predictable consequences of each form of government enter the competitive process incessantly and from more than one angle. At least *ex ante*, also, we have strong reasons to expect the articulation of these two sites of conflict to be sufficiently confusing to all participants to render many prospective consequences of either establishing or excluding a representative democratic state form on the site in question very far from predictable. When we encounter a political pattern as pronounced as the recent extension of this state form, we can reasonably infer that systematic causalities have been at work, and settle down to try to identify them. But we should not be surprised to discover that these causalities are very hard to abstract at all precisely, and virtually impossible to demonstrate conclusively in any given instance.

It might be true that this state form has spread as it has because it is for the present the solution to the riddle of capitalist history. It might even be true that it has spread because it knows itself to be that solution: because it somehow synthesizes consequential efficacy with a fully apprehended and hence perfectly communicable intrinsic superiority. I hope, though, that I have said enough

already to convince you that that last presumption is at best a logical possibility, a condition that might obtain, non contradictorily, within the history of the universe, and that is not simply incoherent even in the terms in which it is described. What it certainly isn't is a condition that stands a chance of being actualized with any frequency within that history, or of remaining actual for any length of time, even where it is by fluke actualized in the first place. Nor is it one that is capable of vindicating its own credentials by its internal endowment of guaranteed comprehensibility. So whatever it may help to explain, it certainly cannot explain the rapid diffusion of the state form itself. That diffusion would be simply unintelligible if the form of government possessed no powerful attractions to anyone and if its consequences proved uniformly disastrous. But we can't hope to understand much of the diffusion merely by noting that representative democracy has some *ex ante* attractions for some potential political agents in any modern society and that some prospective consequences that might plausibly be attributed to it in particular settings at given times fall among this schedule of attractions. Perhaps it could logically be true that the modern representative democratic state form was the solution to the riddle of global capitalist history, and knew itself to be that solution, but actually, and extremely conspicuously, it just isn't. And even if it was apparently true, that happy structure of internal normative and practical transparency would not necessarily explain why the human world at the time was best conceived as a global entity, why its dominant economic form, however variegated in detail, should also be unmistakably capitalist in character, or why, under capitalism, all but uniquely in comparison with earlier epochs of human experience, the basic structuring of human collective life should make a single clear and comprehensive overall sense.

In seeking explanation in the social sciences, as in judging strategically in everyday life, almost everything hangs on what you choose to take as given. If you take as given the prior economic history of the world as a whole, and the political and military history endlessly entwined with it, and then ask why the democratic regime form should have expanded its territorial control so dynamically since 1941, different explanatory elements gain or lose salience as you shift your attention across decades or regions of the world, switching from economic to military and back again, permanently implicating political institutions, appeals, and errors, and always confounding sooner or later what you most hope to explain, the advance or retreat of democracy itself, by so doing. I don't myself believe there to be a magical way out of this predicament—a sort of intellectual Houdini technique that can position political analysts, however briefly, outside

space and time, and place all the potential epistemic materials of history or disciplined inquiry fully at their disposal, to survey these endlessly interacting causalities synoptically and weigh just how each bears on all the others. More particularly, I do not see how anyone can hope to factor out just what contributions representative democracy as a state form has itself made to advancing or retarding a diffusion that has clearly also been driven, as well as impeded, by external military and economic power and by its own interactive effect upon the growth and functioning of economies.



There are two conclusions that I would like to draw from all this—the first epistemic and bearing on the idea of understanding politics itself, and the second practical and bearing on the activity of political judgment. The epistemic conclusion is skeptical, without (I hope) being simply frivolous. It is that, despite a century or so of intellectual practice, prominently linked to the practical extension of this state form, we have made no clear intellectual headway in seeing how to pose the question of why that extension has occurred, as and when it has, and hence no reliable progress in seeing how to answer it. Certainly, as is scarcely a matter for wonder, some passages of thought and some episodes of social scientific research have gone far more convincingly than others in the course of this lengthy and bemused exploration. But there is no reason whatsoever to conclude that we have learnt from their having done so, how to understand this huge movement of political history any more decisively and reliably as a whole than John Stuart Mill or Alexis de Tocqueville, or for that matter Karl Marx, really understood the global political trajectory over a comparable time span in their own lifetimes.

I do not mean, in putting the matter that way, just to commend a greater humility in relation to our own predecessors (though that might be no bad thing in itself). I simply mean to underline the dismaying modesty of our own collective achievements, more especially when set against our own relatively recent pretensions. I doubt (perhaps incorrectly) that this relative failure is at present especially important not because our epistemic vanities or delusions about politics are bound to prove inconsequential, but because we can depend upon them having no seriously bad consequences, or no substantial consequences at all. Epistemic vanity and delusion was all too important to the political history of Marxism, and quite central to its single most malignant component, the degenerated version of