
[Book Review]

The Idea of Democracy in the Modern Era

by Ralph Ketcham

(Laurence: University Press of Kansas, 2004. 302 pp. \$35, cloth)

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Ralph Ketcham's book offers a critical analysis of liberal democracy from both a historical and a theoretical viewpoint. Ketcham, a scholar of American political thought, focuses on a complex understanding of human nature, as having both a positive capacity for justice, moral sense, and rational choice, as well as a negative capability for selfishness, ignorance, greed, and irrationality. By reevaluating ancient Greek and Confucian political theories, Ketcham looks at how good democratic government has been reframed through four global cycles of modernity.

The first modernity, which included the acceptance of the idea of universal natural laws, spanned the period from 1600 to 1750 and produced new political concepts of individualism and liberalism. In describing this modernity, Ketcham notes that "Dovetailing with the humanism of the Renaissance, the commercial ethic of capitalism, and the moral and spiritual individuality of the Reformation, and using the empiricism and inductive thinking of Baconian science, a 'new science of politics' took shape" (p. 34). Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, whose views typify the political thought of this first modernity, emphasized mundane individualism. This concept of individ-

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ualism easily combined with capitalism and opened the door for a majority rule that did not rest “on divine right or higher law or deliberations in the public interest.” Although American revolutionary thinkers, like Thomas Jefferson, followed the concepts set up in the first modernity, Jefferson was also attuned to the classical concept of citizenship developed in republican theory.

The second modernity began in the nineteenth century and introduced a period of greater participation in democracy. Under Jeremy Bentham’s famous dogma, “the greatest happiness of the greatest number,” the idea of democracy enhanced majority rule, and a new liberalism emerged that was connected to social Darwinism and John Dewey’s pragmatism. As Ketcham has noted, “The first modernity in its political dimension had Newtonian guidelines of order, balance, and harmony, while the second followed Darwinian guidelines of struggle, competition, and indeterminacy”(p. 55) Moreover, the second modernity created a new understanding of democratic ideas. It was understood that “Science and the efficiencies of corporate organization, as well as effective majority rule, not abstract rights and natural law, should provide the guidelines for democratic government”(p. 91) This kind of liberal democracy reemerged as the liberal corporate state in the twentieth century. Ketcham notes that, “the post-1945 corporate state was in practice the pragmatic, gross national product-oriented, bureaucratic government presided over by the likes of Harold Wilson, Ludwig Ehrhardt, Robert Menzies, and Lyndon Johnson”(p. 99) Ketcham goes on to note that contemporary democracy emerged from the second modernity, with dogmatic socialism on the left and libertarianism on the right(p. 232)

In East Asia, such modern intellectuals as Fukuzawa Yukichi (福沢諭吉)and Nishi Amane(西周)in Japan and Yan Fu(嚴復)and Liang Qichao(梁啓超)in China in the late nineteenth century used ancient Confucian thought to introduce the new ideas of the Western second modernity into the intellectual domain of their countries. Although Western democracy was an unfamiliar concept to East Asian states, with their long histories

of feudalism, East Asian enlightenment thinkers tried to understand this system and found democratic ideas amenable in the context of the ancient Confucian concept of good government. Traditional Confucianism emphasizes “the wide responsibility of the state for the moral, qualitative condition of society,” as well as wise leadership and the development of a certain morality in people. This traditional foundation made democratic ideas somewhat familiar to political scientists in East Asia and helped to transform the second modernity into the third modernity. A third era of modernity in East Asia constituted the basis for the emergence of another style of democracy. As Ketcham notes, “a third modernity approach, anxious to absorb the good in second modernity thinking to be sure, but also attuning itself to East Asian culture, came into view in a way requiring the recasting of democratic axioms”(p. 180) However, it has proven difficult for East Asian states to implement democracy. In Japan, late nineteenth century modernism combined with a strong centralized state, which gradually suppressed democratic activities and systems, finally resulting in the military-run, totalitarian state of the 1930s. East Asian countries, generally, failed to become fully democratic before World War II.

Following the second and third modernities, a fourth modernity emerged in the last third of the twentieth century, known as postmodernism. Postmodernism has been traced from Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida. Postmodern theorists generally argue that all laws, institutions, rationales, and patterns of thought include dominant powers and multiple forms of oppression. As Ketcham has noted, “Somewhat in the fashion of Locke’s insistence on the sense-impressions-created diversity of human beings, and of Mill’s idea of ‘individuality,’ and of Dewey’s of an infinitude of ‘felt needs,’ and of Laski’s ‘inexpugnable variety of human wills,’ postmodernism(like previous modernisms) rests on parts and eschews or condemns wholes. Indeed, the whole is often understood, not even as the sum of the parts, but often as rather less than the sum.

Postmodernism adds, however, a vastly enlarged emphasis on the socialized and 'genealogized' human being situated in social groups formed most fundamentally by the experience of marginalization and other oppressions by dominant forces" (p. 204) Postmodern democracy not only emphasizes the different identities and forms of justice associated with each sub-group, heightening a sense of decentralization, it also has the effect of inducing skepticism in government and a sense of chaos or of conflicting interests within a democracy that lacks a set of universal principles. As Ketcham notes, "In general, however, postmodern thinking seeks to move democracy away from centralizations of power and toward various ways to foreground, enhance, and empower previously stigmatized or marginalized groups. Provoked and horrified by the hegemonic language and the global intentions and institutions of both sides in the hot and cold wars from 1914 to 1989–1991, some postmodern theorists have turned away resolutely from all the powers and forms of government" (p. 205)

Given that procedural democracy, following the second modernity, left behind its moral dimension, social structures, and sense of justice, how do we overcome the problematic democracy of the twenty-first century? Ketcham examines interpretations of human nature in the political community and notes, "The understanding and practice of government, then, we might say, are vital to human life, both as a dimension of our nature and as essential to the survival and fulfillment of the 'good life' that the complexities of human nature make possible" (p. 237) This understanding of human nature, and the development of good citizenship leading to good government, have been emphasized since the times of the ancient Greeks and Confucius. In the U.S., Jefferson, for example, pointed to the people's need to cultivate "the sociability, the capacities for reason, the moral dimension, the political understanding, and the sense of justice" associated with democracy as the basis for good democratic government. Alexis de Tocqueville also considered the practice of forming associations a mode of training for public-spirited citizenship,

leading to participatory democracy. Although Ketcham argues for the importance of a political system that maintains its neutrality in relation to self or group interests in a world without the common foundations provided by custom, religion, and higher laws, including natural law, his essential point concerns the importance of the role of citizenship in the liberal democratic system. Ketcham, therefore, concludes his book as follows: "There is no complete agreement among these varied metanarratives, but humans have often discerned a core of convergence, at many levels, that sets forth concepts of the common goods, applicable in some fashion for all humankind. The inclusion of some sort of this sensibility, embedded in a complex understanding of human nature, may be the best foundation for a rationale for democracy that can help make self-government good government in the twenty-first century" (p. 264)

Ketcham presents his work as a college textbook on the history of political thought, but the topic and scope of this book are beyond those of a textbook. As Sir Winston Churchill famously noted, "Many forms of government have been tried and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others that have been tried from time to time." We are still searching for good democracy and good government. Since World War II, many new democracies have emerged in Third World countries, although many democracies have also failed, resulting in authoritarian or despotic states. On the other hand, while the leading liberal democratic countries, including the United States and Great Britain, have achieved a fully participatory liberal democracy, they have also been criticized as lacking "the moral energies of a vital democratic life" (p. 229) Liberal and conflict-interest democracy, however, cannot create good government. As Ketcham suggests, we cannot deny that contemporary democracy is strongly inclined to the politics of difference or to the politics of identity.

As a Japanese researcher, however, I hold a different view of the third modernity outlined above. My first point of contention arises from the following question: in comparison with the first, second, and fourth modernities outlined above, should East Asian democracies be regarded as a third modernity in worldwide history? The idea of a third modernity has features of a traditional political culture, a culture that is common to East Asian societies. Second, although it is undeniable that East Asian countries are based on Confucian culture, how the Confucian tradition is, in reality, involved with democracy is another problem. For example, as Ketcham has pointed out, Confucian tradition encourages paternalism and was utilized to govern people as subjects of the Emperor in the Meiji era. Liberal democracy in Japan was finally achieved during the period of the U.S. occupation, with its policy of democratization after World War II. However, contemporary Japanese politics remains conflicted with the problems associated with the second and fourth modernities. Furthermore, the Confucian tradition is fast disappearing from the political and social cultures of East Asia. Idealistic Confucian guidelines do not necessarily produce good government and democracy in practice. Despite my objections to ideas relating to the third modernity, though, *The Idea of Democracy in the Modern Era* is a valuable work. Ketcham's discussion of East Asian modern enlightenment movements in the late nineteenth century offers an interesting insight into the operation of democracy in non-Western nations.