

CAN

A SHORT HISTORY OF A

DEMOCRACY

RADICAL IDEA, FROM ANCIENT

WORK?

ATHENS TO OUR WORLD

JAMES MILLER

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX | *New York*

Farrar, Straus and Giroux
175 Varick Street, New York 10014

Copyright © 2018 by James Miller
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
First edition, 2018

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Miller, Jim, 1947–
Title: Can democracy work? : a short history of a radical idea, from
ancient Athens to our world / James Miller.
Description: First edition. | New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
2018. Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018002536 | ISBN 9780374137649 (hardcover)
Subjects: LCSH: Democracy—History. | Democracy—Philosophy.
Classification: LCC JC423.M617 2018 | DDC 321.8—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018002536>

Designed by Richard Oriolo

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or
business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan
Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension
5442, or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

www.fsgbooks.com
www.twitter.com/fsgbooks • www.facebook.com/fsgbooks

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

CONTENTS

PRELUDE: WHAT IS DEMOCRACY? 3

The riddle posed, and some answers explored, in five historical essays

ONE. A CLOSED COMMUNITY OF SELF-GOVERNING CITIZENS 19

The strangeness of Greek democracy || Solon sets Athens on a path toward aristocratic self-rule || the Athenian uprising of 508 B.C. || Cleisthenes extends political power to ordinary citizens || the use of political lotteries, rather than elections, to select officers in Athens || the first appearance of the word *demokratia* || excluding others: Athenian autochthony || Pericles as exemplary demagogue || Thucydides describes the Athenian democracy at war || Plato's critique of democracy: knowledge vs. opinion || the resilience of Athenian democracy, and Hannah Arendt's idealized view of it || how Athenian democracy actually worked in the fourth century B.C. || classical democracy in decay and eclipse || the sublime value of unity, and the martial virtues as constitutive of the ideal democratic citizen

TWO. A REVOLUTIONARY ASSERTION OF POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY 53

Radical democrats seize power in Paris || Republican thought, from Polybius to Rousseau || the French Revolution, from the fall of the Bastille to the fall of the monarchy || the *journée* of August 10, 1792 || a carnival of atrocities || first calls for a democratic constitution || Condorcet in the French Convention || drafting the world's first democratic constitution || Robespierre, Marat, and the debate over Condorcet's democratic constitution || the Terror, and fresh doubts about the wisdom of direct democracy || the appearance of a new idea, "representative democracy" || the retreat of democratic ideals in France || the human toll

THREE. A COMMERCIAL REPUBLIC OF FREE INDIVIDUALS 91

American distrust of popular passions; the tempering influence of commerce in eighteenth-century America || 1776: Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, and the Declaration of Independence || the ambiguous place of democracy in America during the revolutionary era || modern democracy from France to America: the democratic-republican societies of the 1790s || the American dream of a commercial democracy || America's first great demagogue, Andrew Jackson || Tocqueville celebrates the Fourth of July in Albany, New York, 1831 || Tocqueville on democracy as an egalitarian form of life || the strange insurrection over the right to vote in Rhode Island, 1842 || Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the American struggle over the franchise || demotic culture in America: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, minstrelsy || Walt Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* and the fantasy of a democracy still to come

FOUR. A STRUGGLE FOR POLITICAL AND SOCIAL EQUALITY 133

The Chartists and the London Democratic Association; the first Chartist Convention and first Chartist petition, 1839 || Karl Marx's ambivalence about democracy; communism as the realization of individual freedom and social equality || conflict as the paradoxical essence of nascent modern democratic societies || Mazzini and his democratic faith in cosmopolitan nationalism || the Paris Commune of 1871 || the Commune as revolutionary icon || the rise of mass political parties; the case of the German Social Democratic Party || the Russian general strike of 1905 and the St. Petersburg soviet || Rosa Luxemburg on revolutionary self-government || Robert Michels and Max Weber debate democracy vs. domination as the key categories for modern social thought; the "iron law of oligarchy" || disenchanting democracy at the dawn of the twentieth century

FIVE. A HALL OF MIRRORS 173

What Woodrow Wilson meant by democracy in proposing a world "made safe for democracy"; his 1885 manuscript "The Modern Democratic State" || Wilson as president; the Great War as a crusade to promote liberal democracy || Russia in revolution || the improvisatory democracy of the Petrograd soviet || Lenin and the Bolsheviks seize power through Russia's soviets ||

existential conflict over the meaning of democracy: Wilsonian liberalism vs. Leninist communism; the Versailles Peace Treaty and the League of Nations
 || the Guild Socialism of G.D.H. Cole: a vision of democratic socialism for an industrial society || Walter Lippmann on the psychological limits to an informed public || John Dewey and the persistence of the democratic faith
 || Edward Bernays and the value of propaganda || George Gallup and the rise of survey research and public opinion polling || Joseph Schumpeter on democracy as “rule of the politician” || the cruel game of modern politics: sham democracies vs. democracy as a universal ideal, solemnized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948

CODA: WHO ARE WE? 213

Manhattan, January 2017, protesting the election of Donald Trump: “This is what democracy looks like”; but a democratic process also elected President Trump || when President Barack Obama said, “That’s not who we are,” who are “we”? || “There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide” || global democratization from an elite perspective: the life and times of Samuel P. Huntington || “Democracy is in the streets”: the return of participatory democracy in 2011; Occupy Wall Street || problems with the direct democratic program of the postwar global left || protecting pluralism in a framework of liberal rights the only viable approach to realizing a modern democracy || Condoleezza Rice keeps the American faith: exporting democracy at gunpoint || measuring the advance and retreat of democracy worldwide as a form of government: the Freedom House index, *The Economist’s* Democracy Index, and the United Nations Human Development Index || challenges to democracy today as an ideology and ideal || Václav Havel on the dangers of political demoralization faced with the challenges of self-government || upholding Abraham Lincoln’s conception of democratic hope

NOTES 247

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING 283

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 287

INDEX 289