

The Lost Language of Democracy: Anti-rhetorical Traits in Research on Democratisation and the Interwar Crisis of Democracy

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ABSTRACT

The article points out that the concept of democracy as used by people at large has been ignored in the research on democratisation and interwar democracy. It also shows some of the ways in which the rhetoric of democracy has been sidestepped, discussing some structuralist and other preconditionalist accounts in which the focus has been on the questions of modernisation and legitimacy as well as on political culture and ideological traditions. The article shows, furthermore, that studies of democratic transition have displayed some interest in the rhetorical aspect of politics, although this potential has not been fully played out. The article points out the difficulty of doing comparative research on the language of democracy, but nevertheless calls for a rhetorical perspective to the study of democracy.

KEYWORDS

Democratisation, interwar democracy, rhetoric, transition, comparative studies.

INTRODUCTION

There is no other period than the interwar years during which democracy has been so vehemently both praised and condemned. The period that was prescribed as the new era of “the universal acceptance of democracy” (Bryce 1929 [1921], 4) turned soon to be generally conceived of as the era of the cri-

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sis of democracy. Consequently, much effort has been put on attempts to explain the faith of the interwar democracy as well as on the attempts to analyse general causes and conditions of democratisation with the help of the interwar experience. Despite the polyphonic and multifaceted contest over the meaning and value of the interwar democracy, the *ex post* research has shown quite little interest in the rhetoric of democracy. The main actors of democratic politics have been rendered almost voiceless in these studies.

This article discusses some of the ways in which this silence of a citizen has been brought about. The article takes off with some notions on structuralist accounts of democratisation in which the mistrust in everyday political language is more or less explicit, turning then to other preconditionalist approaches to democratisation in which the focus has been on the questions of modernisation and legitimacy as well as on political culture and ideological traditions. Furthermore, some attempts to bring in an actor perspective and the strategic play of political elites to the study of democracy will be analysed. The article will be closed with a critical discussion on comparative research of the language of democracy, the argument being that a rhetorical perspective should be included in the methodological repertoire of a student of democracy.

PRECONDITIONS: CLASS STRUCTURES, LEGITIMACY AND CULTURE

Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1966) was a path-breaking account of studies focusing on class structures and class coalitions as explanatory factors of successful or failed democratisation. It is also a case in point if we look for anti-rhetorical accounts of democracy. It is an historical-sociological account in which the researcher's own class terminology has taken over and left the empirical language-use out of the picture. As a consequence, democracy was treated quite anachronistically in Moore's study. We are told, for example, that the British 1867 Parliamentary reform took place in "a democratic context" (Moore 1968 [1966], 38-9), that "the American Civil War was the last revolutionary offensive on the part of what one may legitimately call urban or bourgeois capitalist democracy" (*ibid.*, 112), or that French democracy was instable during the nineteenth century (*ibid.*, 426). It seems that terminological matters were in Moore's Marxist account more or less epiphenomenal, for he maintained that "[i]t is well to be explicit once more about what this rather sonorous phrase [Western democracy] means, even if definitions of democracy have a way leading away from real issues to trivial quibbling" (*ibid.*, 414). Quite obviously, there is no reason to expect any closer analysis of the language of democracy, when the work that claims

to be about the origins of democracy says very little about the subject matter even on a definitional level.

Moore's theoretical and methodological approach had a great impact on the research on democratisation, although the anachronistic bias in his attempt to show the "bourgeois route" towards democracy has been pointed out (e.g. Skocpol 1973, 5, 12). In some cases, the role of bourgeoisie as the main engine of democratisation has been replaced by the working class (e.g. Stephens 1989). It has not been altogether unproblematic, though. In order to present the labour movement and the socialists as the main advocates of democratisation, some adjustment was needed. It was necessary to downplay some deviant statements on the primacy of democracy among some factions within the labour movement because, as it was held, "[t]heir mistakes do not make them antidemocratic" (*ibid.*, 1035). Likewise, it was held in one influential class structure analysis that the rhetorical reservations that can be found, for example, in the debates in the German Social Democratic Party before World War I "must not be allowed to obscure the basically democratic thrust of working-class interests" (Rueschemeyer *et al.* 1992, 59). Consequently, when *de facto* critical statements about democracy do not matter, it is only natural that the undertaking cannot be based on any rhetorical analysis of the language of democracy. Language is viewed as a sort of sham matrix that veils the real interests of the main factors and actors of democratisation.

It is many times difficult to make any clear distinction between historical class analyses and the so called modernisation theories of democratisation. In both cases, the focus is on socioeconomic factors behind democratisation. Seymour Martin Lipset's article "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy" is a seminal study of the latter accounts, not least due to his poignant formulation: "the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy" (Lipset 1959, 75). However, it is important to pay attention to the fact that Lipset turned the developmental framework to a question of legitimacy and political symbols. He noted, for example, that "[w]hen the effectiveness of the governments of various countries broke down in the 1930's, those societies which were high on the scale of legitimacy remained democratic, while countries which were low such as Germany, Austria, and Spain, lost their freedom, and France narrowly escaped a similar fate" (*ibid.*, 90). Moreover, Lipset noted that democracy was likely to be more secure in cases where the status of major conservative groups and symbols was not threatened during a transitional period toward democracy. For him, legitimacy dealt with a common "secular political culture" (*ibid.*, 89). We ought to note, however, that Lipset did not pay any attention to political language, which could be taken as a gateway to the symbolic aspect of the legitimacy of a political system. In general, he

sort of promised more in his theoretical discussion of the symbolic aspect of legitimacy than what he delivered in the empirical study, for he discussed it in terms of “new social groups”, “industrial workers”, “colonial elites”, “peasant people”, “bourgeoisie”, “the workers”, and “the lower strata” having made an entrance into politics (*ibid.*, 88-9).

Indeed, “legitimacy is a mushy concept that political analysts do well to avoid”, as Samuel P. Huntington has maintained (Huntington 1991, 46). Yet it has proven to be difficult to live without. Huntington engaged himself in the issue of legitimacy in his analysis of the “third wave” of democratisation, concluding that the legitimacy of democratic regimes rests in part on performance, but also on fair procedures such as electoral processes and on a “democratic political culture” (*ibid.*, 258). For sure, Lipset’s “secular political culture” and Huntington’s “democratic political culture” are examples of a commonly used point of reference in studies of democracy, although it is often difficult to see what makes a culture a category of its own, as the socio-economic factors tend to play the key role in definitions of a culture. It is also difficult to see whether a democratic culture is an outcome of legitimacy or whether it is culture that brings about legitimacy.

It is nevertheless possible to note that political language seems not to have been in focus when a political culture has been investigated, even if the analysis of political culture has been based on a large-scale opinion survey (Almond & Verba 1965 [1963]) and on an analysis of political institutions, electoral behaviour, and social movements (Putnam 1993). We can also note that the analytical categories “civic culture” (Almond and Verba) and “civic tradition” (Putnam) are in many ways reminiscent to accounts in which the explanatory force has been put on national politico-cultural traditions (e.g. the German *Sonderweg*) and in which the focus has been on ideational traditions, as is the case, for example, in Sheri Berman’s study of social democracy (Berman 1998). In such accounts, the role of political rhetoric as the object of study is by and large dependent on the extent to which these traditions have been operationalised as ‘closed’ preconditions or as contestable rhetorical resources. For example, Berman’s emphasis on the role of ideas in her analysis of Swedish and German social democracy explicitly rejects any fuzziness of the analysed ideas and calls for “proper definitions of terms” (*ibid.*, 19). The question is, then, whether or not we can take political ideas as definable entities in the first place (*cf.* Freedon 1996), and, secondly, whether or not the definition of the idea bears with it a tendency to postulate or predict the results of the empirical study.

GRAFTING: ACTORS, ELITES, AND STRATEGIES

Transition studies of the ‘grafting’ of democracy ought to be regarded as a promising brand of literature to look at, if we are looking for the study of democratisation that has focused on the use of language. In this respect special attention deserves *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (1978), the volume edited by Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan that has paved the way for a number of comparative transition studies of democracy. The point was to bring in an actor perspective and a short-term temporality into the study of democratisation. The above discussed topic of legitimacy may serve as an example: According to Linz, who was behind the theoretical standpoint of the multi-authored volume, “a regime with a high commitment to its legitimacy has a higher probability of survival than a regime without such commitment” (Linz 1978a, 45). What is important to note, moreover, is that Linz pointed out the dynamic character of the legitimacy of democracy: “[l]egitimacy is granted or withdrawn by each member of the society day in and day out. It does not exist outside the actions and attitudes of individuals” (*ibid.*, 17).

In Linz’s chapter on the breakdown of democracy in Spain in the 1930s, we find a rich analysis of “loyal”, “semiloyal”, and “disloyal” positions of different factions (e.g. Linz 1978b, 149, 159-61). He based his study on an extensive empirical research covering sources which displayed an array of ‘first hand’ linguistic conventions. For our purposes it is also important to note that he pointed out that it was more common for the regime-maintaining parties to use the term “republic” than “democracy” in their rhetoric, which, according to him, emphasised content over the form as the main point of commitment and, thus, increased the antagonistic positions in Spain around 1936 (*ibid.*, 180). The awareness of the importance of political language can also be observed in Walter B. Simon’s study of the case of Austria, in which he noted that in the Austrian socialists’ rhetoric “[p]arliamentary democracy was explicitly endorsed as a means of somewhat doubtful value rather than as an end in itself” (Simon 1978, 84). Even so, the study of political language did not gain any particular primacy in the project, despite notions of, for example, incumbents’ “formulation of agenda” and “way of defining problems” (Linz 1978a, 40). The novelty was in the emphasis on a strategic play of the key actors and factions, elite negotiations and bargaining, not in adding a linguistic aspect to the study of democracy.

Still, Linz’s and Stepan’s volume could have paved the way for a rhetorical analysis of democratic (or undemocratic) transition, for basically everything that is targeted in the transition literature would suggest that political rhetoric is one of the analyst’s main objects of interest: negotiations and bargaining, strategic coalitions, deliberations, statements of key actors, and so

forth. This is not really the case, however, although it is possible to see some unexploited potential that would point at that direction. For example, the rhetorical aspect is somewhat unsystematically included in Giuseppe Capoccia's important work on the successful defence of democracy in interwar Europe, which targets the cases of Belgium, Finland, and Czechoslovakia (Capoccia 2005). Drawing on Linz and Stepan, Capoccia has focused on the short-term strategies of political elites and key actors in their attempt to defend political regimes, which have been defined by the author as democratic. The analysis is mainly about party dynamics and the political manoeuvres of the head of the state, but it also points out appeals made to the public opinion and the ruling elite's attempts to adopt some slogans of the extremists (*ibid.*, 24, 64, 210-12). While discussing repressive legislation against the extremists, Capoccia makes a notion of the importance of the terminology that has been used in the legislation, that is, whether "democracy" is defined in general terms or in some specific manner (*ibid.*, 56). Furthermore, he observes extremist parties' typical strategy to define democratic institutions as "corrupt", "weak", and "treasonous" (*ibid.*, 59).

However, this potential for a rhetorical analysis is not fully realised, because the concept of democracy is taken as an analytical point of departure and not as an empirical expression in the targeted sources of the research. Yet, we should nevertheless note the difference to approaches in which a hesitation in front of rhetoric has been clearly spelled out. For instance, Giuseppe Di Palma held in his vivid appraisal of the possibility to craft democracies, while discussing the signals that abound a transition, that "[t]here are signals of evanescent, difficult-to-interpret qualities, such as declarations, promises, opinions, styles and demeanor, choices of words, dress, place, and circumstances", which he, accordingly, had decided to dispend with discussing. Instead, he focused on signals that were "more concrete and precise", involving specific decisions, allocations, behaviors, as well as timing" (Di Palma 1990, 76).

COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF DEMOCRACY AND CONCEPTUAL STRETCHING

All the above discussed studies have in common a comparative design. They have sought to find and construct observable units that would allow a systematic comparison. It seems that words are taken as too "difficult to interpret" in this purpose, as Di Palma put it. In other words, it seems as if there were no place for a language analysis, because it would bring the analyst too close to the polyphonic 'reality' of politics. It is only symptomatic, then, that some approaches to democratisation are based solely on secondary literature, that is, previous research that is often done by someone else. This is the case, for example, in Ruth Berins Collier's work on the paths of democratisation

which has combined a social historical perspective to mass mobilisation with, as she claims, an actor-oriented analysis of democratic transition (Berins Collier 1999). Consequently, any references to language-use are, at best, only marginal.

Large-scale comparative approaches are often based on macro-level analyses, which rules out the study of political language. Furthermore, even such commonalities as governmental coalitions and electoral results seem to be difficult to handle in a strictly comparative manner. “Strictly comparable data are [...] difficult to come by”, as it was held in one large-n macro study of interwar democracy (Berg-Schlosser 1998, 354). Obviously, the lack of references to language-use can often be due to a generalising focus in the study as well as due to the form of dissemination. However, it seems that even when the role of “ordinary people” has been studied with an elaborate discussion of ordinary citizens’ role in democratic transition and breakdown, the analysis has been based on commonly used measurable and comparable data such as electoral behaviour, strike rates, and party systems (Bermeo 2003). Nothing is said about how these “ordinary people” conceptualised democracy.

Consequently, the order of things has been that “democracy” is first defined and then measured through different indirect ways. Even if it is quite widely acknowledged that democracy is an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1956; Collier *et al.* 2006; Hidalgo 2008), it is important to note that this contested character of democracy has been attributed to the analytical concept of democracy rather than to the one that has been used in everyday politics. The latter has been regarded, obviously, as being too much contested in order to be able to be included in the comparative research. In methodological discussions the focus has been on the question how it is possible to avoid definitional “conceptual stretching” and still make it possible for the concept to “travel” and cover different cases in different contexts (Sartori 1970; Collier and Mahon 1993; Collier and Levitsky 1999) rather than how it is possible to examine conceptual stretching, that is, different meanings given to “democracy” in everyday political life.

The study of democracy thus exhibits two kinds of overlapping mistrust on the rhetoric of democracy. On the one hand, there clearly exists a deep-seated conviction in many accounts which holds that language has played merely an epiphenomenal role, and therefore some deeper structural, cultural or ideological explanations need to be presented. On the other hand, it is also evident that many scholars really do not know how to handle the messiness of political language as they quite correctly hold that to speak in the name of “democracy” can mean almost anything, which makes it difficult to have any large-scale comparative aspirations.

FROM THE PROBLEM OF CONCEPTUAL STRETCHING TO THE STUDY OF
CONCEPTUAL STRETCHING

Just because democracy can mean so many different things for different people, “we need to understand a great deal more than we do about just who used the word democracy, in what ways, in what contexts, and for what purposes” (Markoff 2011, 270). However, to advocate a research strategy in which the emphasis is shifted from the warnings about conceptual stretching to the study of conceptual stretching does not mean that we would have an access to, or mirror, political phenomena as they ‘really’ exist merely through taking the original language usage into our mouth. What this article wants to point out, instead, is that we cannot ignore the meaning-constituting role of language in a manner that most comparative approaches to democracy do (see also Bevir & Kedar 2008). We need to have a better interplay between our scholarly language and the language of everyday politics if we want to understand democratisation and de-democratisation. However, such an enterprise is perhaps possible only when large-n comparative aspirations are downplayed. A student of democracy would benefit from taking one or two steps back from large-n comparative ambitions in order to make the comparative approach to democracy meaningful in the first place.

It may be the case that James Bryce was reflecting a bit too much on his own experiences as a former MP, when he held in *Modern Democracies* that “[t]he best way to get a genuine and exact first-hand knowledge of the data is to mix in practical politics. [...] Still ampler are the opportunities which the member of an Assembly has for studying his colleagues” (Bryce 1929 [1921], 19). But he was certainly right, when he maintained that “the historian or philosopher must go for his materials to such records as debates, pamphlets, the files of newspapers and magazines, doing his best to feel through words the form and pressure of the facts” (*ibid.*). It is a good time now to draw some practical conclusions from the distinction Bryce made between the study of natural sciences and human sciences. According to him, “[t]he terms used in the latter lack the precision which belongs to those used in the former. They are not truly technical, for they do not always mean the same thing to all who use them” (*ibid.*, 17).

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