INTRODUCTION: A PRE-HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY

Perhaps the two most important developments in western political life in the modern era are the nearly total replacement of theocracy by secular governments and the (at least aspirational) triumph of democracy over any alternative system of political organization. This book attempts not only to understand these developments, but also to demonstrate the profound connection between them. How did it happen that democracy was transformed from being, as it was for Herodotus, Aristotle, Plato, and Thucydides, one possible and problematic regime type among many to become what John Dewey would describe in the past century in the following terms: “Democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself” (Dewey 1927: 148)? My central claim is that understanding the triumph of democracy requires an appreciation of how modern democracy addresses and contributes to what Leo Strauss famously identified as the “theologico-political problem” (Strauss 1997a: 453).¹ That is to say, the origins of modern democracy differ from that of its ancient namesake most significantly in that modern democrats engaged in a centuries-long struggle against religious authorities and political forces supported by religion armed with the formidable power of divine revelation. Modernity could be neither a return to Athens, nor simply a revived Jerusalem precisely because Jerusalem had so thoroughly effaced the classical tradition of political philosophy in the intervening centuries.

Modern democracy emerged, then, in the context of a bitter struggle against a well entrenched religious foe that laid claim to authority regarding the most important moral, political, and philosophical questions. However, modern democracy as it was theorized by its major figures countered the totalizing tendencies of its reactionary political opponents arguably with its own totalism. Into the conceptual vacuum left by the expulsion of divine will from political life rushed the fortifying and irresistible “will of the people.” Popular sovereignty entered modernity

L. Ward, Modern Democracy and the Theological-Political Problem in Spinoza, Rousseau, and Jefferson
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clothed in the resplendent garb of its own metaphysical pretensions as nature reasserted its moral claim in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries against orthodoxies of various kinds. Armed with a sophisticated epistemology and an intellectual self-confidence that belied centuries of neglect of or derision toward democracy, modern democratic philosophers starting with Baruch Spinoza set on the arduous path to demonstrate not only that there is some natural basis for the claims to justice advanced by democracy, but (more audaciously) that democracy is synonymous or co-terminous with nature itself. Or they sought to make democracy what Dewey called the embodiment of the very idea of community. All other regime types are prima facie illegitimate, or at least inherently suspect, to the extent to which they depart from a recognizably democratic model.

The focus of this study is three figures that did more than any others to establish and expand the beachhead for democracy that would in time allow it to conquer modern western civilization. To borrow a catchy phrase created to describe very different characters in a very different time, Baruch Spinoza, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Jefferson were the “Three who made a Revolution” (Wolfe 1964). This is not to suggest that these three held the same views on all matters, or even identical reflections on democracy. As we shall see, each had distinct political philosophies and operated in his own unique historical and religious context. Nor do we mean to propose that these thinkers had a direct impact on each other’s political theory in a chain of relation extending from Spinoza through Rousseau to Jefferson. Rather our claim is that what these three shared as thinkers and as political actors were confidence in popular government and a concomitant commitment to subject religious authorities to secular rule. On a deeper level, Spinoza, Rousseau, and Jefferson share a fundamentally similar conception of nature and the nature of power. I argue that the continuity these three thinkers demonstrated in their philosophical commitments revealed itself differently in their respective political contexts, and even with respect to the temperament of the individuals involved. On a spectrum, we can see Spinoza as the most abstract and philosophical proponent of democracy, Rousseau as an intermediate figure trying to bridge metaphysics and political theory, and Jefferson as the reflective statesman, a philosophically informed political leader no doubt, but primarily a political actor who brought democracy down from the heavens. We might alternatively conceive of a spectrum reflecting the different practical effects of their democratic faith; it would set Spinoza as the most conservative in comparison to the more populist Rousseau and Jefferson.

This book deals with some familiar topics in an unfamiliar way. There is certainly no shortage of recent studies about democracy, but given