

4 *Models of Democracy* Part Three: 'What Should Democracy Mean Today?'

4.1 Introduction to Part Three

Well, here we are at last! In Parts One and Two of *Models of Democracy*, David Held looked at nine major models of democracy, outlining the key features of each, and sketching the associated political and economic conditions. He summarized some of the most important theoretical criticisms that have been made of those models, and finally gave his own assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. Scattered throughout this exposition and critique were fragmentary and tantalizing references forward to this moment: the moment when Held finally asks the (normative!) question 'What should democracy mean today?' and then goes on to give his own answer to it. What we have here, then, is a final model from David Held: his conception of 'democratic autonomy'.

These chapters are the culmination of the argument which David Held has been developing throughout the book. In them he sums up his thinking on democracy, and offers his own model in response to both perceived inadequacies in the traditional models, and the challenge to democracy represented by contemporary developments. One particularly valuable thing about chapter 10 is that it summarizes many of the important points in the earlier chapters of *Models*.

The important thing to note here, however, is that David Held's own model actually has two sides: the first, a conception of 'democratic autonomy' within the nation-state itself; and the second, an account of the complementary structure of 'cosmopolitan democracy' at the regional and global levels. (Together, of course, these twin models provide the definitive answer to the question I asked at the beginning of this study guide about where Held was 'coming from'! I answer it, in part, below.)

Now, David Held has written several books on these topics in recent years, and so his treatment here cannot be comprehensive. All he really has room to do is sketch in some ideas, set out some of the logical and practical implications, and suggest a set of further questions which arise and require further thought. So the feel of this chapter is a bit

more tentative and conjectural than the discussions of historic models earlier in the book. In one sense, it has to be: in this model we are talking about political structures which, for the most part, do not yet exist. But the point is also that the debate about the present character and future prospects of democracy is alive, continuing, open-ended. It's going on now, and new voices are continually joining in.

4.2 Chapter 10, 'Democratic Autonomy'

This is a substantial chapter, and Held's 'project' is actually very ambitious. In model Xa (democratic autonomy within the nation-state) what David Held is seeking to do is to think through, from first principles, what a genuinely democratic version of our present society and political system might look like, and then to outline a set of practices and institutions that would be necessary to bring it into being. He attempts to rescue what is most valuable from classic and contemporary models of democracy, while avoiding their characteristic weaknesses. He goes beyond many previous accounts by extending their scope to inequalities associated with race, gender and family life. He makes the case for the return of a more active conception of citizenship, within a broader account of the political sphere. He takes on board the meaning of new technological advances for the possibilities of representation and democracy more generally. In short, he produces a blueprint for how contemporary democracy could be extended, deepened and made real.

You have, of course, met many of these ideas before. Chapters 3 and 4 introduced you to Marx and Mill, and the contrasts between liberal and direct democracy. Late in chapter 8 (pp. 225–30) David Held rehearsed the principal weaknesses of both models from the point of view of democracy. Robert Dahl, whose interesting personal trajectory from classic to neo-pluralism we followed in chapter 6, turns up again here with a most useful list of five minimal conditions for democracy (p. 271), and in my notes in this study guide you will see that the models of the New Left and New Right (participatory and legal democracy respectively) address some of the core problems identified by Held; it is particularly interesting to see how he attempts to go beyond their analyses and overcome what he sees as their weak points.

Format

From pages 259–80 the chapter takes the form of a ‘conversation’ between two main themes: the statement and clarification of the principle of democratic autonomy, with a discussion of its practical implications; and a review of previous models with particular attention to their defects and how the new model is designed to overcome them.

Because the text goes to and fro in this way, only gradually building up to a full picture of the new model, it is not particularly easy to stop and summarize distinct subsections.

But there is a great deal that is valuable in this chapter. To get the best out of it, I would suggest:

- 1 Turn to page 282 and take a preliminary look at the outline of model Xa.
- 2 Make out some headings for notes to fill in as you go through
 - liberalism: strengths and weaknesses regarding autonomy;
 - Marxism: strengths and weaknesses regarding autonomy;
 - New Left/New Right: relation to autonomy model;
 - democratizing civil society: why and how;
 - questions and problems with autonomy model.
- 3 Go back to the start of the chapter and read slowly through, marking key phrases and taking some notes, as above. From pages 281–9 David Held clarifies the model and raises issues for further reflection. This should add something to your own questions above.

At the end, run through this checklist of questions. You should be able to answer them. If you are uncertain about one, you could look again at the pages indicated:

- What is the essence of the principle of democratic autonomy? (p. 264)
- What does this model owe to the republican, Marxist, and liberal models? (Useful table of their main points on p. 268)
- How, according to Held, does it overcome their limitations? (pp. 267–71)
- What is the core problem with liberal democracy from the point of view of democratic autonomy? (pp. 275 and 288–9)
- What scope is there for direct democracy in model Xa?
- Why does Held prioritize the principle of autonomy over participation? (p. 273)

- Why must its enactment involve a ‘double democratization?’ (p. 276)
- What is the difference between state rights, social rights and economic rights? (pp. 276–9)
- What mechanisms are available to deepen democracy and increase informed participation? (pp. 279–80)
- How might new technology change the debate about representation?
- What is meant by the entrenchment of democracy in economic life? (pp. 285–6)
- What is the difference between ‘productive and financial property’ and ‘consumption property’ and why might they be treated differently? (pp. 285–6)
- Why is empowerment for some dependent on a restriction of the autonomy of others? (pp. 279–80 and 286–7)

ACTIVITY

In thinking about model Xa, I found myself returning to two questions. Do you have anything in your notes on these?

Q1 What is genuinely novel about this model?

Q2 How far are you convinced by its prescriptions for institutional change?

What seems to me genuinely new and radical about the model is that it simultaneously confronts and attempts to deal with:

- 1 The economic problem, identified by Marxists and others, of the unequal distribution of property, wealth and power under liberal democracy, and the way individual legal and political rights are weakened by the lack of economic rights.
- 2 The related problem with the state under modern capitalism, in that its freedom of action, and hence the possibility of genuine democratic control over the policy agenda, is curtailed by corporate power.
- 3 The ‘other’ major problem with the state, identified by liberal critics of socialism and of collectivism more generally, of protecting the rights of the individual and ‘policing the frontiers of freedom’ against overwhelming and unaccountable concentrations of political power, and an expensive and self-interested bureaucracy.

- 4 The problem in civil society, neglected by most traditional schools of political thought, of the way that inequalities related to gender and race (usually but not always linked to economic inequalities) infringe the claims of citizenship.
- 5 The problem of legitimacy, and in particular, of apathy and non-participation by a large minority of citizens.

Held and the principle of autonomy

You may recall, in your earlier ‘brainstorming’, trying to tease out all the different dimensions of democracy – freedom, equality, representation, accountability, rights, open debate, the majority principle – and attempting to work out just how they related to each other. Well, Held’s answer to the five problems identified in the above list is to identify one core principle of democracy which underlies the rest, and from which a functioning political system, much more democratic than any we have seen, can be derived – given an extensive set of conditions of enactment. The principle itself takes precedence over any subsidiary aspect of democracy: for example, the unqualified right to participation, or absolute equality of treatment, or unlimited freedom. Apart from Held’s formal statement of the principle on pages 278–9, I like these sentences: ‘The *raison d’être* of the model of democratic autonomy is to enhance the choices and benefits which flow from living in a society that does not leave large categories of citizens in a permanently subordinate position, at the mercy of forces entirely outside their control’ (p. 287). Its aim is to give reality to the ideal of the active citizen, and ‘create greater fluidity and accountability of political power’ (p. 279).

David Held’s debt to both liberalism and Marxism is clear. One particularly interesting thing he brings out is the common set of aspirations that can be shown to underlie such apparently contradictory worldviews (p. 263). The second interesting thing is how Held employs insights from both traditions in his handling of the crucial question of the state. From liberalism comes a strong emphasis on the rights of citizens and a pluralist distrust of undue concentrations of power. There is an insistence that the state must be separated from civil society, that its powers must be carefully specified, and its agencies democratically controlled. From Marxism comes an acceptance of the central connection between economic and political power, and an understanding that the ownership and control of productive and financial systems leads to a disproportionate influence on the supposedly democratic political agenda.

As for Marx on the state, Held gives short shrift to the idea of its withering away and ushering in an era of direct democracy; he also points out the historical excesses of the command economies, totalitarianism, and the state bureaucracies of Eastern Europe. However, he certainly believes in the necessity of collective action by the state to legislate for, and enforce, the constitutional rights he envisages, as well as intervening on behalf of citizens in all those areas which experience has shown cannot be left to individualism and the market. It is highly significant that Held adds economic rights to the political rights of citizens, and adds a redistributive function to the rule of law. He insists that there must be a meaningful level of income or the citizen cannot effectively participate and be heard, let alone have an equal share in determining the conditions of his or her existence. (I take up these positions and what I consider some of their strengths and weaknesses in my interview with David Held on this website.)

4.3 Chapter 11, ‘Democracy, the Nation-State and the Global System’

The final chapter of *Models of Democracy* is short, clear and interesting. In it we get the ‘other side’ of model X, in which Held considers the meaning of globalization for modern democracy, and how it might be possible to construct at the regional and global level a complementary set of institutions to those enacting democratic autonomy within the nation-state. The crucial thing to register here is Held’s argument that the model of democratic autonomy he sketches at the national level may not be enough. If its aim is to give citizens a genuine degree of democratic control over the forces which shape their lives, then it may depend for its success – or any possibility of meaningful progress – on being linked to a model of cosmopolitan democracy on the world stage.

Chapter 11 is your first opportunity to look in detail at the model which Held has put forward in response to the questions posed for democracy by globalization. Note that Held’s chapter may come at familiar issues in a slightly different way, and that it offers some excellent summary statements of key concepts (for example, ‘what is globalization?’ on pp. 293–4). Of course, you will be clear that cosmopolitanism in some form represents only one possible scenario for the future. The fact that Held’s account appears here, at the end of *Models*, does not mean that it is the only ‘right

answer'. David Held fully accepts this himself. Nevertheless, as Held's considered position on the nature of cosmopolitan democracy, this chapter deserves careful study.

The chapter falls into three main sections. Held starts by setting out a number of additional unresolved problems facing democratic thought. On pages 290–4 he offers his own succinct explanation of how globalization and the increasing interconnectedness of nations and societies contradict some of the fundamental assumptions on which almost all democratic theory has been based; assumptions about 'the nature of a constituency, the meaning of representation, the proper form and scope of political participation, and the relevance of the democratic nation-state as the guarantor of the rights, duties and welfare of subjects' (p. 292). And that in turn raises crucial questions about 'the coherence, viability and accountability of national decision-making entities' (p. 291). Then on pages 293–4 Held offers a wide-ranging definition of globalization which questions some of the scholarly claims about the scale, novelty and meaning of this process.

The second section begins on p. 294, where he moves on to interrogate the traditional concept of the sovereign, autonomous nation-state. (Be sure you grasp the difference – explained in footnote 2 on p. 295 – between autonomy as applied to the state here, and as applied to the citizen in chapter 10.). The central question is this (p. 295):

'Has sovereignty remained intact while the autonomy of the state has altered, or has the modern state actually faced a loss of sovereignty?'

In other words, is there a *disjuncture* between the 'formal domain of authority' which states claim, and the realities, the structures and practices, of the political and economic systems operating at the regional and global levels? Held's answer is that there are at least four major areas of disjuncture, and from pages 296–303 he sets them out, each with a series of numbered points of explanation and discussion.

ACTIVITY

Read pp. 296–303. You should make notes on each disjuncture, so that you can recall (and answer!) the questions at the heart of them. These are:

- 1 *The world economy* Have developments in trade, international production, finance, and technology rendered the very idea of a national economic policy problematic?
- 2 *International political decision-making* Has the development of a multiplicity of international and transnational organizations produced ‘a striking tension ... between the idea of the sovereign state ... and the nature of decision-making at the international level’? (p. 299)
- 3 *International law* Why is there now a marked tension between national sovereignty and international law; and in what sense are claims now made ‘on behalf of an alternative organizing principle of world order’? (p. 301)
- 4 *Culture and the environment* Why has the process of political and cultural globalization eroded the idea of the state as an ‘autonomous centre of culture, able to foster and sustain a national identity’? (p. 302)

On pages 303–4 Held rounds off this section with a summary on democracy and the global system – these are very useful pages. He concludes that there has certainly been:

- 1 ‘a further “internationalization” of domestic activities’;
- 2 ‘an intensification of decision-making in international frameworks’; and
- 3 an alteration of the powers of the modern sovereign state by international and transnational relations.

The disjunctures reviewed do limit state autonomy and, increasingly, impinge on state sovereignty. They fundamentally challenge the idea of the democratic nation-state as ‘a community of fate’ within fixed boundaries, in which a legitimate government pursues policies which have the consent of those they affect, and is able to determine its own fate. On the contrary, Held’s analysis has shown a number of ways in which ‘the very process of governance seems to be “escaping the categories” of the nation-state’ (p. 292). In the face of these momentous developments, ‘*the model of democratic autonomy ... has to be rethought in relation to a series of overlapping local, regional and global structures and processes*’ (p. 304, emphasis added). Doing so has led Held to the cosmopolitan model set out in the final part of the chapter.

ACTIVITY

Read pp. 304–11, then make notes on these questions:

- **What is envisaged by ‘broad avenues of civic participation in decision-making at regional and global levels’ (p. 305)?**
- **What are the main institutional implications, and what will be required to make the new or reformed institutions effective?**
- **How is unaccountable economic power to be brought under a greater degree of democratic control?**
- **What are the significant common features of models Xa and Xb?**

The thrust of this final model is clear. We are all citizens of a number of overlapping communities – nations, regions, global networks – affected by forces, problems and organizations which transcend national boundaries. To bring about better democratic control of issues which escape the nation-state, ‘the territorial boundaries of systems of accountability [must] be restructured’ (p. 305). For this, we need to rethink the role of the regional and global regulatory agencies, reforming some (like the UN) and installing new ones, to produce a layer of democratic government capable of overriding states ‘in clearly defined spheres of activity’, where these have ‘demonstrable transnational and international consequences’ (p. 305). The many institutional consequences are clearly set out in the model.

In comparing models Xa and Xb, I am struck by the consistent emphases on:

- 1 framing ‘a set of governing institutions capable of regulating the forces which actually shape everyday life’ (p. 275). As these forces become internationalized, so democratic institutions and processes must evolve to offer citizens some hope of making these forces accountable;
- 2 the requirements that civil, political, social and economic rights should be constitutionally entrenched in such a way that they could be legally enforced, against states or international powers if necessary;
- 3 the need to exert some democratic controls on the present unaccountable exercise of large private concentrations of economic power, in the shape of corporations at the national level, and multinational capital at the global level;

- 4 the attempts to think creatively about the crucial links between economics, politics and democracy: the encouragement of ‘experimentation with different democratic organizational forms in the economy ... the enhancement of non-state, non-market solutions’ (p. 308).

Conclusion

Well, now you have finally read David Held’s answer to the question: ‘What should democracy mean today?’ It is a very full answer! But, as you know, his defence of cosmopolitan democracy is just one position in a vigorous, ongoing debate. In this study guide, I have tried to give you the materials, the teaching and the skills to be able to join in this debate yourself. Where do *you* stand on democracy today?