

Book Review: Bas Leijssenaar, Judith Martens, Evert van der Zweerde, *Futures of Democracy* (Nijmegen & Eindhoven: Wilde Raven, 2014)

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In his 2010 valedictory lecture, historian and philosopher Frank Ankersmit made the – philosophically familiar but publicly still provocative – argument that our so beloved Western representative democracies are in fact elective aristocracies.¹ The fact that we incessantly hold on to a deceptive conceptualisation of our governmental system is not only misleading to citizens who do not have the sovereign power that is inherently promised to them in democratic discourse, but it also leads to the wrong questions being asked and to inadequate answers to the problems that modern governments face. Failure to recognise the aristocratic character of our elected government makes us unaware of the dangers that are intrinsic to this state form, such as the tendency to degenerate into oligarchy. “And this means *in concreto* that political power is put in the hands of the high-profile elite of politicians, political commentators, leading economists and other people of influence, while the anonymous, silent citizen can whistle for it.”² Treating our government as a democracy provides us with the wrong defence mechanisms to these kinds of perils.

Ankersmit’s argument shows that when we rely upon the wrong political and analytical concepts, we fight the wrong battles. In this case we neglect to struggle against oligarchic tendencies. But it also shows that democratic imaginaries are ubiquitous. Everyone is a democrat, or at least claims to be one. This latter observation is one of the points of departure in the edited volume *Futures of Democracy*.³ If everyone claims to be a democrat, and innumerable academic books about the merits and forms of democracy are published every year, why do scholars still write and publish about democracy in a distinctively authoritarian, monographic – that is, undemocratic – way? *Futures of Democracy* expresses the wish to change this tradition, and enforces its argument by providing the initial impetus for this change. In the book, a broad variety of academics discuss an equally broad variety of topics that are somehow related to the title of the book. And whereas in traditional edited volumes ‘to discuss’ means that all authors write their own chapter without any interaction or exchange of ideas whatsoever, in this exciting book authors respond to each other’s arguments on the spot. In the margins of the main text are comments by other authors, to which the author of the main text replies. This makes for a completely new and fresh reading (and arguably also writing) experience, that indeed proves to be a considerable respite from traditional ‘reply to my critics’-kind of ‘interactions’.

The authors have managed to produce a very lively representation of scholarly debate on democracy. The first part of the book consists of essays, as diverse in topics as they are in depth and quality. The selection of authors has been based on

1 Frank R. Ankersmit, *De Representatieve Democratie is een Electieve Aristocratie* (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2010).

2 Idem, 8: italics in original, translation is mine.

3 Bas Leijssenaar, Judith Martens and Evert Van der Zweerde (eds.), *Futures of Democracy* (Nijmegen & Eindhoven: Wilde Raven, 2014), 14.

the ideal of fair representation: there are professors, assistant professors, postdocs, PhD researchers and MA students, who all had the opportunity to write about a topic of their choice, as long as it related in some way to the book's main theme – i.e. the future(s) of democracy. All these different authors commenting on each other's texts makes for a beautifully “embroidered robe which is spangled with every sort of flower”, as Plato metaphorically depicted the appearance of democracies.⁴ Two of the essays take up the relationship between democracy and religion – one about the congruency of Islam and democratic qualities and one about the Christian roots of democratic practices. The author of the latter, Marin Terpstra, is heavily interrogated by both a senior and a junior scholar in the margins of his text, and even resorts to the orthodox strategy of adding a ‘reply to my critics’ at the end of his essay. The other essays provide an overview of some actual topics in political philosophy: communism as a form of democratic extremism, transnational democracy, cosmopolitan and deliberative democracy and the democratic crisis in Greece.

The democratic aspirations of the editors have resulted in the situation that the authors have no common definition or conceptualisation of democracy. In his chapter on the Egyptian revolts on Tahrir square in 2011 and 2013, and on the compatibility between Islam and democracy in general, Evert van der Zweerde conceptualises democracy as a quality, defining it as follows: “Any entity (situation, procedure, regime, institution, government, practice) in which some (or all) have power over others (possibly including themselves) can be called ‘democratic’ if, or to the extent that in it, the overwhelming majority of those over whom power is exercised, have a relatively equal say in the fundamental decisions that determine the power exercised over them”.⁵ This entails going beyond the traditional focus on solely electoral aspects of perceived democratic processes, and leads to the conclusion that Egypt, even though the Tahrir uprisings resulted in military takeover, has become much more open and democratic society. Van der Zweerde's conceptualisation of this democratic quality also appears to inform the general notion of democratic publishing that lies at the foundation of this volume: “we have created an open and interactive book, with plenty of room for argumentation and critical thought for its readers, authors, and editors.”⁶

The most exciting part of the book consists of the dialogues that constitute the last 50 pages. Again, authors have been left at liberty to design their own procedures to interact, resulting in three very different discussions. The first debate is very lively, with three authors taking turns, and in the meantime commenting on each other in the margins, progressing towards some interesting insights in the relations between concepts such as *kratos*, *demos*, the people, and *Multitude* as elements of democratic thought. The second debate, about power in democracy, never really picks up pace. Although there are some well-formulated arguments towards the end, most of the discussion feels static and forced, with the authors referring to what their respective dictionaries write about the term *kratein*. All this is easily forgotten when the reader engages with the last dialogue on green democracy. The two authors immediately engage in a tense exchange of letters about the merits and shortcomings of ecological democracy. Does democracy increase the probability of green politics? And if not, can we ‘fix’ the preferences of citizens in a philosophically liberal way in order to

4 Plato, *The Republic* (Baltimore: Harmondsworth, 1974), Book VIII.

5 Evert van der Zweerde, “‘Democracy or Islam? Yes, Please!’ Political Progress in Egypt”, in: Leijssenaar, Martens and Van der Zweerde (eds.), *Futures of Democracy*, 25-43.

6 Leijssenaar, Martens and Van der Zweerde (eds.), *Futures of Democracy*, 18: italics in original.

save planet earth? In this last debate, we see the power of this 'open and interactive' book at work.

However, one cannot help but wonder whether the overall form of interaction in the margins – inspired by Islamic scholarly tradition – is done most justice when applied to a physical book. We live in luxurious times in which we have the disposal of far more inclusive, flexible and active media to discuss, debate and interact. The discussions that unfold in the margins of the book are a valuable addition, but could possibly have extended qualitatively and quantitatively in a sheer limitless digital environment. The book's introduction ends with a somewhat obligatory appeal to the readers to respond to the thought-arousing contents of the book, but gives no hints as to how the reader can join the debate he or she has just witnessed. Should he or she send a letter to the editors? A digital public space in which the reader would be able to log in and interact with authors, commentators or fellow readers seems like a feasible and arguably more democratic forum to actually obey the call of the editors to participate.

This issue raises the more general question of how democratic this book really is. "Ideally, the funding of the book, the decision about its contents, the procedure of writing, the choice of authors and the interaction between the authors, the role of the reader, the book's design, and the process as such, should somehow be democratic."⁷ I do not intend to judge the overall democraticness of this book, but I do wish to consider some issues that I had expected to be discussed in a 'democratic' book, but that the editors do not address. For example, the editors tacitly assume that crowdfunding is a democratic way to finance the publication of books. Recent research shows that this is not necessarily true, especially since only a very specific group of people finds its way to crowdfunding projects: people with enough financial resources, who have the skills and time available to use that particular platform. Crowdfunding activity therefore appears to be biased toward outcomes that reproduce or even widen existing social inequalities.⁸ The point here is not that the use of crowdfunding for this project is undemocratic, unsuited or unjust, but rather that one would expect the initiators to reflect on the use of this supposedly democratic method – especially considering their fascination for the form and procedures of this project. A book like this would provide an excellent forum to discuss this issue, and its absence seems to me a missed opportunity.

The same goes for reflections on the demos of this book. The editors seem to suggest that the demos is made up of the potential readers, but they fail to address the question of how the relation between the (potential) reader and the editorial board or the book in general is supposed to take shape. Is it in any way representative, is there anything like sovereignty still in the hand of the readers? Moreover, relating the question of democratic inclusiveness to recent academic debate about open access publishing, one could argue that democratic books would be open and freely accessible to all, enlarging the demos as much as possible. Again, I am not suggesting that a book cannot be democratic if this is not the case, but my point is rather that if the aim is indeed to democratise the activity of scholarly writing about democracy, these are questions that one is expected to consider. The fact that the editors fail to

7 Leijssenaar, Martens and Van der Zweerde (eds.), *Futures of Democracy*, 15.

8 See Rodrigo Davies, "Three Provocations for Civic Crowdfunding", *Information, Communication & Society* 18 (2015) 3: 342–355.

reflect on these kind of issues, or treat these issues too light-footedly, is definitely another missed opportunity. Indeed, following Ankersmit, it might even be more serious than that: we may end up overlooking the crucial questions that our societies face.

Although the term 'democratic' in relation to the processes and publication of this book could have been further elaborated on, the editors and authors have definitely provided a fresh and thought-provoking example of presenting scholarly thought that deserves succession. It can serve as a starting point for academic or public debate about the relation between democratic thought and the way of presenting it, providing us with the proper weapons to fight the right democratic battles. If it is not a step towards a more democratic form of publishing, it is at the very least an important step away from oligarchy.