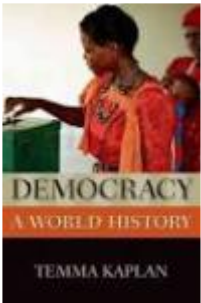


# Democracy, from King Hammurabi's Time to Tomorrow



Temma Kaplan's *Democracy: A World History* arrives at a timely moment. With presidential candidates and U.S. officials alike evoking the term "democracy" as a justification for political movements or a pretense for extraterritorial violence, Kaplan's history of democracy offers a sorely needed study at an opportune time. In this thoughtful and smartly written work, Kaplan deftly achieves her objective of analyzing the ways in which popular groups have utilized the language of democracy to forge change over time, often in opposition to society's leaders. Covering ancient Mesopotamia to the early twentieth century, Kaplan significantly adds to our understanding of the development of the democratic ideal usually presented from a Eurocentric perspective and provides a counter to cynicism in some quarters of the left toward the radical value of the concept. Kaplan, as a longtime activist and distinguished scholar, has written a number of path-breaking books, including *Crazy for Democracy: Women in Grassroots Movements* and *Taking Back the Streets: Women, Youth, and Direct Democracy*, that examine the topic of democracy in specific historical contexts. Indeed, one could argue that Kaplan has spent her accomplished career considering the issues at the heart of *Democracy*. The result is a finely crafted study that enhances our overall understanding of this vital topic.

As part of Oxford University Press' series, "New Oxford World History," *Democracy* primarily serves as a concise textbook, but it also offers an informative but accessible introduction to the subject matter for the general reader. *Democracy* incorporates an examination of different regions over time, and it also provides a rethinking of traditional world

histories and of those typically left out of the narrative, meaning peoples outside of Europe and the United States. This study moves beyond the focus on the "great" rulers to incorporate the views of everyday women and men of different ethnicities, religions, and cultures. This methodology fits well with Kaplan's overarching approach, a consideration of how different political alliances, including those of repressed and typically underrepresented groups, demand democracy through their use of language and direct action. Importantly, though, *Democracy* further analyzes the connections between the local and the global, as well as the past and the present, to enhance our historical understanding of the complex and shifting notions of democracy.

Kaplan's introduction provides the theoretical foundation for her study. Kaplan first discusses the definition of democracy, which, at its most basic level, is "a process through which people confer with each other to secure food, shelter, land, water, and peace for their mutual benefit" (1). But as democracies have brought people together within shared notions of inclusion, they also have excluded others, even to the level of subjugation of those considered outsiders. Thus, according to Kaplan, traditionally democracy has revealed two historical flaws: 1) "a lack of effective routine communication between elected officials and ordinary people;" and 2) much like authoritarian governments, democracies tend to impose their rules of governance on others through colonization or the removal of indigenous groups (3). Even as a flawed system, Kaplan still maintains that democracy offers the opportunity for the "greatest happiness for the greatest number," or given the total number of ideas that people agitating for change can promote, "democracies increase the chances of achieving peace, justice, and social benefits for all" (2). In this vein democracy moves well beyond the concept of "citizens electing governments" based on legal frameworks and constitutions (2). Instead, democracy also entails the participation of women and men united to form social movements

and unified in their demands for natural resources and rights as equal citizens. As a result, and despite its inherent vulnerabilities, democracy remains a model for many on how to establish and maintain social, economic, and political equality.

Following the introduction, Kaplan illustrates *Democracy's* major points with smartly conceived chapters that cover a variety of spaces and times. Beginning with the legal code written for King Hammurabi (Babylonia, Mesopotamia) between 1792 and 1750 BCE (Before the Common Era), Kaplan demonstrates how attempts to regulate water distribution shaped various laws in different locations. Besides Babylonia, Kaplan also considers drought in Southern Mexico and Central America, as well as in ancient Egypt and the Nile region. Not surprisingly, Kaplan devotes quite a bit of space to her discussion of democracy in ancient Greece, particularly in Athens, and in Rome. Even here, though, water also played a crucial role. For example, from the seventh through the fourth century BCE, the creation of Athens' fundamental precedents for representative and participatory democracy emerged at least partly from the water needs of farmers, craftspeople, shopkeepers, and merchants. The Greek Assembly, with its first meeting in the sixth century BCE, consisted of six thousand male citizens, including even those of the lower classes, who met at least forty times a year to discuss and vote on governmental and legal issues. The Roman Republic followed Greece's decline, although Kaplan points out that scholars question the extent to which the Roman practices were democratic. The first Roman legal code, the Twelve Tables, was written between 451 and 450 BCE, and Rome also saw the creation of the Tribunes, which represented the plebeians' interests. After Rome's decline, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Zoroastrianism "generated communitarian impulses, especially in their initial stages," but as Kaplan points out, some democratic gains came at the loss of freedoms for others (14).

Following a discussion of prophetic movements, including the Sikhs, *Democracy* discusses the impact of the mid-seventeenth-century "Levellers," the political movement during the English Civil War that promoted fundamental civil and political rights, including trial by jury, universal male suffrage, freedom of press and religion, and so on. Kaplan then moves to an examination of democracy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including the American and French revolutions. Kaplan's analysis of the French Revolution allows for a focus on women's roles, an area in which the author excels. For example, Olympe de Gouges, an early feminist, spoke out against the exclusion of women in her "Declaration of the Rights of Women" in 1791, and she also protested the marginalization of enslaved peoples from Africa. In 1848 Paris witnessed the spread of revolution as crowds demanded an end to the monarchy. The sustained struggles of women and people of color continued well into the nineteenth century. In the United States, the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery only in the states that had "risen in rebellion against the United States," but in the subsequent years the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments insured "all men rights of citizenship, including due process of the law, and grant[ed] formerly enslaved men the right to vote and be elected to office" (53). Of course, U.S. women were denied the same rights until 1920.

As the fight against oppressive political systems continued, the early twentieth century witnessed several of the world's historically significant uprisings, including the Mexican and Russian revolutions. Soviets, or the representative councils of St. Petersburg's workers, first formed in 1905, and in 1917 the Russian empire collapsed after self-governing soviets composed of soldiers and sailors stormed the czar's Winter Palace. During World War II the allies continued to fight in the name of "democracy," but Kaplan rightly argues that the wars "brought the ideas of democracy into question in many places," as many peoples around the world still lacked their

civil and political rights (78). For example, South African citizens continued their fight for equal protections under the law with the African National Congress, originally formed in 1912. And in India, Mahatma Gandhi and his son fought against racial and colonial oppression, as well as for independence from Britain. In 1938, just before the war, Gandhi even questioned the concept of democracy when he argued, "Democracy of the West is, in my opinion, only so called. It has germs in it, certainly, of the true type. But it can only come when all violence is eschewed and malpractices disappear" (photo caption, 84).

Kaplan argues that the postwar period brought a renewed sense of optimism. In the United States more young people entered college, and students from all parts of the globe gathered together to agitate for increased rights for workers and for collective freedoms. In addition, the activism of 1968 and the protests against the Vietnam War brought tens of thousands of people into the streets to participate in strikes and demonstrations around the globe. Kaplan argues that "democracy can only flourish when citizens are confident that those responsible for maintaining order will deal with all citizens in a responsible manner," and students often faced the ire of the police, especially with Mexico's 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre soon before the Olympics (106). Still, Kaplan argues that world-wide feminist activism developed from the civil rights, student, and labor movements of the previous decades. Chile's citizens also elected Salvador Allende amidst great excitement in 1970, although a brutal dictatorship took over by 1973.

Kaplan ends her fine examination of democracy with a brief discussion of the democratic movements, including in Spain, Greece, the United States, Chile, and Canada, that followed 2011's Arab Spring. Here, Kaplan points out that once again students and young people have led many of these political actions. Ending on a note of optimism, Kaplan argues that

although some of the recent groups have succeeded to some extent while others have failed, women and men continue the fight for rights (even those previously won but now eroded) in the name of democracy. Kaplan reminds us that for these groups, democracy still represents a hopeful possibility for the future, and socialists will continue to struggle for expansion of the concept in the social and economic realm.