

DEMOCRACY

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Summary

Democracy is a term most abused in the world today, as well as being most contested in past history. While the point at issue about democracy as a form of government is always a matter of political reality, the criterion for judging reality lies in the sphere of the ideal. In order to illuminate the problems of democracy at present and its future viability, this article tries to elucidate the various polemics on democracy through past centuries up to the present. It tries first to describe the historical origin of, and the controversy over, the ideal of democracy in ancient Athens, the earliest and still most exemplary stage of democratic experience in human history. Then it traces the trajectory of criticism against it with particular emphasis on the drama in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Finally it describes the triumph and some metamorphosis of democracy in the twentieth century. The subject matter of this long history of controversy comprises not only the problem of actual form of government but also the way of life in a society individually and communally as well. At the same time, it will be emphasized that, from the Hellenic times until now, the idea of democracy has been inseparably related to that of liberty and equality of humans. This inquiry will help the reader to discriminate what is already discussed from what is new about human experience in the politics of democracy today. They will also know that many of the old discussions are relevant still, at present and for the future.

1. Introduction: The Term “Democracy” Abused

Democracy is the most universally acknowledged political principle today. It is almost the only principle whose validity people all over the world may agree with. No political regime, no politician can claim their legitimacy without declaring that they are, or at least they have the intention to be, democratic. Yet a glimpse of the twentieth-century

political history cannot fail to convince one how diverse the meaning of democracy has been according both to political agents and societies. One may well wonder how it is possible to call under the same name democracy, the Western liberal parliamentary democracy with its plural voluntary political party system, and the “democratic centralization” of Soviet Russia with its communist one party rule as the state organ (see *Communist System*). Even Hitler once tried to describe his Nazism as “German democracy” as opposed to parliamentary “Jewish” democracy (see *Authoritarian System*). Most of the military dictators of the “Third World” after the Second World War did not hesitate to pretend their regimes to be democratic (see *Military Government*). Besides, within the Western parliamentary democracy, there has been much dispute between those who are called the “elitist” theorists of democracy who lay emphasis on political leadership and the “radical democrats” who call for more direct participation of the general public to the political decision making process (see *Decentralization and Local Politics*).

In the face of this abuse spreading throughout the world, some political theorists declare that the word democracy means almost nothing today, since it could mean everything. This may well be true as far as the twentieth century is concerned, but it does not apply to the long history of democracy of almost 2500 years. Democracy is a word of ancient Greek origin. It meant, as still now it must mean, the power or the rule (kratos) of people (demos). But, the meaning of the word “people” requires caution. Through centuries, the term “people” in politics had not been considered to denote technically, the whole adult population of a society (as we are apt to do in the world of universal suffrage), but only its particular sector, the lower, poorer and often the most numerous. From the days of its first appearance in the ancient Greek city states, especially in Athens, to the end of the nineteenth century, the term democracy had meant the rule of people of this particular sense. For the same reason, democracy had generally been regarded as defective as a form of government. Democracy and mob-rule were very often taken as synonymous. But, with the turn of the century, the diffusion of universal suffrage all over the world changed the whole scenery of democracy drastically (see *Election and Voting*). The fundamental question for many centuries whether the idea of democracy was correct or not, finally lost its meaning. The legitimacy of the idea of democracy could no more be doubted. The point at issue became solely what realities were to be ascribed to the phrase “the rule of people”. Naturally, the almost infinite varieties of human conditions multiplied by the vast number of new political citizens led to the diversification of the meaning of the term democracy. Only serious inquiry into the history of the idea of and controversy over democracy will save us from the present confusion of the term, and give us the clue for its progress in the future.

2. The Athenian Democracy

2.1 Democracy as a Form of Government

The ancient Greeks used to categorize forms of government roughly into three groups, according to the number of rulers. First, the rule of one person was named monarchy or tyranny, the latter being the degenerated form of the former. Second, the rule of the few was aristocracy, and its degenerated form oligarchy. Third, the rule of many was democracy. But with democracy, it was always controversial whether it also had its own

degenerated form, or democracy itself was already a degenerated form of government. Plato always strongly insisted on the latter, but Aristotle seems to have thought that it was the matter of actual circumstance, as we shall see presently. In any case, the criterion for discriminating normal or good form of government from degenerated one was undisputed at least in principle, that is to say, whether a given government aimed at common good or partial interest of the ruler (or the rulers). Another focus of the controversy over the form of government was whether one of these three should rule on its own or they should be combined in some way or other. This combined form in later ages was to be called mixed government. All of these Greek vocabularies and criteria about forms of government were to remain the essential component of the language of politics in the history of Western political discourse, until recently.

2.2 Political Life in Ancient Athens

The moment of Athenian ascendance over the Hellenic world in the fifth century BC was also that of its democracy at its highest tide. Athens at that time was a city state (polis) with less than 40,000 male adult citizens. Like modern states, citizenship was granted to all those, and only to those, who were Athenians by birth. This means that Athenian political citizens included not only wealthy and educated men but also just ordinary people. The center of Athenian politics was a vast assembly of these citizens called “Ecclesia”, the highest legislative organ of the state. It met frequently, at a minimum 40 days a year. All important policies to be taken by the state, i.e., war and peace, treaties, honors, finance and public works, were discussed and decided at the Ecclesia. Every citizen, wealthy and poor alike, was eligible to attend it, voice his opinion, vote and propose bills. The administrative and judicial activities of the state were organized on the same principle. Besides the equal right to speak at the Ecclesia, every citizen had the right to serve the state as a public official or as a juror of the court. They were selected to the position by lot, and normally for a limited period of 1 or 1.5 years. In most cases, a citizen could occupy the same administrative position once in a lifetime. Rotation by lot was the fundamental principle of the Athenian state organization. Election was limited to the positions, which required expertise, like the highest commander of the army. Aristotle remarked that election belonged to the politics of aristocracy rather than democracy. Thus, the political life in ancient Athens was literally democratic, unparalleled in any subsequent period. Both the representative system and state bureaucracy which characterize modern democracy were entirely unknown.

However, this highly participatory democracy was at the same time a heavily obligatory one. Athenian citizenship implied not only the obligation to support the finance of the state, but also they had to take up their own arms and go to the battlefield once a war broke out. Athenian democracy was the self-government of armed free citizens. Under this democracy, Athens in the fifth century BC enjoyed prosperity and strength. Of course, this democracy had its own dark side as was illustrated by the death sentence against Socrates. The instability and tumultuousness of Athenian democracy in the Ecclesia, a democracy of the people uncontrolled by their representatives, had been the object of criticism by many political thinkers. But, despite these criticisms, the famous words of Pericles in his funeral speech for the dead in the Peloponnesian war (as reported by Thucydides in *History*) tells us that the Athenians loved democracy not

simply as a form of government but as the way of Athenian life itself. He said, “Neither is poverty a bar, but a man [is able to] benefit his polis whatever obscurity of his condition”.

2.3 The Athenian Controversy over Democracy: Plato and Aristotle

2.3.1 Plato

The defeat of the Peloponnesian war brought about a hot controversy in Athens over democracy between democrats and aristocrats. Among those who saw the cause of defeat in democracy was Plato. As the champion of the aristocratic party, he found every reason for the disaster and the state of anarchy in democracy. The highest ideal of politics, Plato declares, lies in taking people out of the darkness of ignorance into the world of truth. This requires that the state must be led by a supreme intelligence, the philosopher-king (or kings). Men are born generally to different constitution and mental ability. But the leveling force of democracy cripples everything noble in politics. Once democracy prevails, the poorer sort irresistibly grows arrogant and suppresses their superiors. All public offices are to be distributed by lot without any consideration for the virtue of office holders. Justice is entirely ignored, and liberty of the individual in the worst sense of the word that everyone is allowed to do whatever he wants to becomes the only concern of the whole society. It is impossible for people not to abuse liberty they have got in hand. The inevitable result is universal anarchy. Then a tyrant who intends to usurp authority secretly at first, but afterwards overtly enters the stage by way of demagoguery. Hiding his sinister intention, he flatters people and promises them greater liberty provided that they submit to his authority. It is not difficult for him to persuade people who are now weary of general anarchy, yet still seeking liberty. Thus, Plato concludes, democracy overweighed with its principle of universal liberty necessarily results in tyranny, and the greatest liberty in the greatest servitude.

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Biographical Sketch

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