

Rousseau and the concept democracy research paper

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The most common definition of the term Democracy is the one inferred from its roots in the Greek language, where Demos means people, and Kratos means power. However, establishing that the term Democracy means the power of the people has no practical use if there is no convention on how to give that power to the people, or how people can exert that power, or even the scope of such power and who is considered to be called people.

Historically, there have been two conceptions of democracy, each with its own definitions.

There is a marked difference between how the ancients used to conceive democracy, and what is known now as democracy . Both conceptions admit that the power must be exerted by the people, but they disagree on what part of the population should be considered as demos or how this part should exert that power. The ancients, being the Greeks the most famous example, valued political participation over any other activity and, for them, being free meant to be able to participate as part of the political process . Democracy then was exerted in the form of direct participation in public assemblies where any citizen had equal weight in the political process . The modern sense of democracy implies much more than that, as it contemplates control and limitation of the powers of the State, and representative transmission of power .

Modern democracy is now defined as the effective participation of most adults of a society in the control of the political agenda through egalitarian vote based on an informed decision , and it is mostly exerted by representative electoral systems, given the practical problems in the application of direct democracy in large societies , but that representation is

the best way to guarantee that the people have a chance to influence in the political decisions of their societies, always respecting the opinions of minorities . The aim of this work is to find out if the ideas of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau are compatible with the modern concept of democracy.

The state of nature and the evolution of democracy

The evolution of democracy was not lineal, meaning that it did not suddenly appear and then grew to be as it is known today. Apparently it appeared in many small societies where it flourished and then disappeared as they became bigger and other forms of domination became more common, meaning that it has been invented many times in history by a number of small societies. In some primitive societies, as their members considered themselves equally qualified to make decisions for the group, a kind of primitive democracy appeared. It was a system where a good part of its members participated directly in the formation of the political agenda . As soon as these democratic social groups started settling down during longer periods of time, and discovered agriculture and commerce, the circumstances that favored the appearance of democracy started to dwindle, and other hierarchical forms of government were adopted . This reminds of what the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau used to say about the state of nature. In his Discourse on the Origin of Inequality , he would describe how societies went from an ideal state of nature where everyone was equal and innocent, to form societies where physical inequalities became moral inequalities , and new forms of relations started to form based on property, devised by the rich people to stay in power by creating

institutions and maxims, favorable to them, and then presenting such institutions and maxims to the poor .

Rousseau and sovereignty

According to Rousseau, the law is the purest of human institutions and should only be entrusted to the people. The sovereign is the people as a whole. An entity where every individual is part of and has a double relation with: as a member of the sovereign a person is bound to all other individuals, and as a member of the State he is bound to the sovereign . As he saw it, sovereignty is the expression of the will of the people, and it expresses itself in the form of laws . Moreover, the philosopher thought that the people should be entitled to write their own laws, and to give such laws to themselves . Curiously, Rousseau does not expect the people to formulate new laws, on the contrary, he expects the magistrates in the government to be just powerful enough to enforce laws created by the sovereign, which paradoxically should hardly create any new laws . The reason argued by Rousseau was that the Athenians lost their democracy because everyone proposed laws according to their fantasies . Then, if people had evolved so much as to be part of a republic, or have devised a social contract, they then already had great and wise laws, and should not try to change them. Instead, the sovereign must protect the institutions, and there should be as many possible obstacles to change them . One other curious fact is that Rousseau did not support representative democracy, instead he favored direct democracy such as the one practiced by the ancients. What is more, even when Rousseau did take into account the fact that societies are formed by a

collection of diverse personalities, he devised a system where the decisions taken by the body of the sovereign had to be unanimous , contravening the principles of modern democracy of respect of the minorities. This fact is contrary to what was defined as modern democracy since the philosopher proposes that everyone form part of the general will, and obey it unanimously , thus obliterating or surrendering all particular wills that might not be in tune to the general will .

Conclusion

As could be seen, Rousseau gives paramount importance to the laws, but does not determine who should formulate such laws, and was really worried about the problem of inequalities in society, so he proposed a way of organizing it, in which everyone in a community could participate in the control of their own political agenda. However, his propositions were more akin to those established by the ancient conceptions of democracy. Modern concepts of democracy give more importance to representative methods for exerting the power of the people, while Rousseau favored direct participation democracy which is part of the conception the ancients had of democracy. Moreover, his theory mentions the preponderance of a general will which can override any particular will or minority of wills, contrary to the modern tendency to respect minorities and to allow them to participate representatively in the political process. Although Rousseau is considered a modern thinker, it is hard to place him as a precursor of the modern concept of democracy given the discrepancies with what is known today as democracy.

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