

Democracy and democratic politics



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Introduction

Democracy usually refers to a political system that advocates the *kratos* (meaning the rule) or the *demos* (meaning, the collectivity) of ‘the people’ in Greek (Castoriadis 2007, p. 122). The *demos*, that also stands for the political body of the active ‘people’ who mutually contract with each other, is bound to the decisions of the majority (Hobbes 1994, p. 119; 1998, p. 94 & p. 117; 2006, p. 103). However, democracy has seen a variety of different definitions and interpretations. For the ancients, democracy was almost synonymous with direct participation in the decision making, rejecting tout court any form of expertism and delegation of powers to third parties (Castoriadis 1997). Modern democracies, however, function based on the principle of representation in parliaments and councils, whose operation abide to legislations of national Constitutions (Zakaria 1997, p. 41; Leach & Coxall 2011, p. 4) and jurisdictions that allow a body politic to exercise active surveillance over its representatives, discarding them if they betray their trust, or revoking the powers which they might have abused (Constant 1998, p. 326). This essay aims to explore these two diametrically opposite definitions, in order to provide a clear understanding regarding democracy and democratic politics. In addition, by examining up to what extent a state like the United Kingdom may be classified as democratic (taking into account the two different interpretations of democracy), it will expose the theoretical deficiencies of the modern conception. It will finally stress that democracy should be better understood as a system of open public consultation and participation (according to the ancient model), acknowledging the modern Swiss paradigm of direct democracy through referendums and public initiatives as a vital alternative.

The democracy of the ancients compared to that of the moderns

Benjamin Constant in his speech at the Athenee Royal addresses two types of liberty, one in the Greek and Roman antiquity and the other after the consolidation of the French Revolution. In this speech Constant (1998) champions modern democracy as a system that respects individual rights and personal freedoms, which, in his view, appear absent from both the ancient Athenian and the Roman model. Respect to individual rights is a fundamental principle of a modern democratic state. But at the same time, such a state bases its institutioning upon a complex of liberal-republican values that were born during the French Revolution, such as the state of justice, the rule of law, the right of the masses to elect freely their own leaders and representatives, freedom of speech, free trade and private property; ideals considered among the highest, able to ensure social peace, stability and prosperity for every human society, ideals that “ have remained with us ever since” (Graeber 2012).

Another important feature of modern democracies, however, is the principle of (majoritarian) consent, exercised through the process of electing a government. According to the modern democratic theory, “ elections give sovereignty or ultimate power to the citizens. It is through elections that the citizen participates in the political process and ultimately determines the personnel and policies of governments. Only a government which is elected by the people is a legitimate government” (Denver & Carman 2012, p. 5). The elected governors and statesmen are also accountable to ‘ the people’, and their power is limited to their demands according to John Locke (Laslett 2008, p. 109). In case this public consent is neglected, the government

should be immediately dissolved. Thus, “ it is for the people only to decide whether or when their government trustees have acted contrary to their trust, or their legislative has been changed, and for the people as a whole to act as umpire in any dispute between the governors and a part of their body” (Laslett 2008, p. 109). Democracy, therefore, is to protect people from arbitrary powers, since as Locke (2008, p. 281) stated, “ force without Right, upon Man’s Person, makes a State of War”.

Individual rights, consent and protection from arbitrary powers in modern democracies are safeguarded by national constitutions, which are “ designed to prevent the accumulation of power and the abuse of office. This is done “ not by simply writing up a list of rights, but by constructing a system in which government will not violate those rights” (Zakaria 1997, p. 41). In other words, “ the people who in order to enjoy the liberty which suits them resort to the representative system, must exercise an active and constant surveillance over their representatives, the right to discard them if they betray their trust, and to revoke the powers which they might have abused” (Constant 1998, p. 326). Constitutionalism also “ seeks to protect an individual’s autonomy and dignity against coercion, whatever the source – state, church or society” (Zakaria 1997, p. 25-26).

The concept of democracy, however, according to the standards of the pre-modern, or even the ancient, world, differs significantly in many aspects. In ancient Greece where one initially identifies the first emergence of democracy according to Castoriadis (1997, p. 87) the idea of representation was unknown, and the idea of elections was considered an aristocratic principle, whereas among the moderns it is at the basis of their political

systems (Castoriadis 1997, p. 89-90). As Rousseau (2014, p. 114) stressed, “the idea of representatives is modern: it comes to us from feudal Government that iniquitous and absurd Government in which the human species is degraded, and the name of man dishonored”. Further, for the ancients, politics was synonymous with the public sphere, characterized by openness and voluntary participation in the common world of public life, in the making of decisions that determine the function and course of a community (Arendt 1961, p. 149). According to the Athenian experience “freedom itself needed a place where people could come together – the agora, the market-place, or the polis, the political space proper” (Arendt 1990, p. 31). The polis, for both Castoriadis and Arendt was also the self-governed body of active citizens who through open discussions could take upon themselves the creation of institutions “that regulate their own active participation in the running of society” (Straume 2012, p. 3).

Summarizing: there is, on one hand, the modern approach on democracy that is based on the principle of consent and representation (id est the acting and deciding on behalf of the demos), focusing at the same time on the institutions that regulate governments from abuse of office, protecting minorities and civil freedoms. On the other, the definition provided by Castoriadis and Arendt who have thoroughly elucidated on the Greek and Roman antiquity, focuses on direct participation (rather than elections), on common appearance and, above all, on the ability of questioning laws, norms and institutions (Castoriadis 1997, p. 87). Which among the two definitions, however, could be considered as more accurate, is about to be discussed in the next section, which also aims to examine whether a modern

state, such as the United Kingdom, can be classified as democratic. This process will reveal major deficiencies in the modern understanding of democracy.

Which democracy? The UK as a case study

“ Britain, along with most states in the modern world, and many others elsewhere, claims to be a democracy” (Leach & Coxall 2011, p. 4). At prima facie one could argue that this statement is valid up to an extent. In fact, a brief study on the political institutions of modern Britain shows that all the perquisites that must be met in order for a state to be classified as democratic are perfectly followed by the British political establishment. There is equality before the law, respect for individual rights and restrictions of the powers of the royal families, free elections and freedom of speech, which are also guaranteed by British legal documents, court judgments, treaties and constitutional conventions (Kavanagh 2000; Norton 2013; Wright 2013). However, “ do elected politicians make the real decisions that affect the British people?” ask Leach and Coxall (2011, p. 5-6). In other words, does the majoritarian consent and the voice of the demos predominate or is it exercised only formally?

“ More real power and influence may be exercised by individuals who are not part of the formal political process at all” say Leach and Coxall (2011, p. 5-6). Such individuals are “ businessmen ... bankers, or owners of newspapers, television companies and other media, some of whom may not even be British” (Leach & Coxall 2011, p. 5-6). As also Roy Greenslade (2011) has argued, newspapers, despite their steady decline during the past few years, still have the capacity to influence the political process. Thus, on one hand

the mass media (owned by powerful entrepreneurs) obstruct independent public commentary by shaping certain opinions (Leach & Coxall 2011, p. 5) while on the other “ the civil service, the City of London, or multi-national corporations exercise far more effective power and influence in the British political process than any single personality” claim Leach and Coxall (2011, p. 6).

At this point it would be important to acknowledge the following well known quote by Rousseau: “ the English people think it is free; it is greatly mistaken, it is free only during the election of Members of Parliament; as soon as they are elected, it is enslaved, it is nothing” (Rousseau2014, p. 114). This quote comes from his book *The Social Contract* (1762) where he exposes the impossibility of the representative system, claiming that only through an ancient model of democracy, popular sovereignty and, therefore, freedom could be achieved. Hence, since the English representative system cannot safeguard popular sovereignty it cannot also sustain freedom, except from the day of the elections, where the public can exercise its vote. After the end of this process the English citizen becomes again a subject to the decisions taken by their representatives. Further, since public consciousness in Britain is shaped by powerful media (whose role, as stated above, is contradictory), and most of the decisions of elected politicians is not as influential as those coming from non-accountable institutions according to Leach and Coxall (2015), then it could arguably be said that the British people are not free even during parliamentary elections, since legislations and laws are influenced by non-political individuals.

Consequently, only formally Britain might be considered as a democratic state. It would be more accurate to classify it as a liberal constitutional regime, since freedom of speech and respect for individual rights alone do not entail democracy. But Britain is not an isolated example of a representative democracy that appears to be insufficient in implementing the will of the people and safeguarding the consent of the majority.

Castoriadis who has thoroughly observed the modern occidental world, came to the following conclusion: no western society, including Britain, should be called democratic. Instead they are liberal oligarchies (Castoriadis 2007, p. 122). In his words, modern western societies are “ oligarchies since they are dominated by a specific stratum of people [and] liberal because that stratum consents a number of negative or defensive liberties to citizens” (Castoriadis 2007, p. 126).

Since, however, direct democracy, as Castoriadis and Arendt visualized it (according to the ancient model) could not be easily implemented under the current circumstances, a study on the Swiss paradigm would inspire alternative ideas. The political system of Switzerland allows its citizens to broadly participate in the decision making (Kriesi & Trechsel 2008; Huber 1968). This is happening through referendums and open assemblies in many cantons (creating, thus, a public sphere). More precisely, over 30 referendums held every year by popular initiative, thus limiting the power of the parliament whilst parties and governments have often been forced to abandon their policies under the pressure of the popular vote (Kriesi & Trechsel 2008, p. 34; Huber 1968, p. 24-25). Through such procedures power partly remains in the hands of the citizens (as it is seen in the ancient types

of democratic participation), and this power cannot be bypassed by representatives or by non-political institutions which may hijack the role of the elected representatives. The Swiss paradigm, therefore, being closer to the ancient model of democracy seems preferable in order to safeguard the majoritarian consent. It appears closer to the initial definition of democracy that is “ the power of the people”.

Conclusion

This essay has highlighted the significant differences between the modern and ancient definitions of democracy. By examining the United Kingdom and the way political representation becomes easily taken over by strong powerful centers that invade the domain of politics, influencing important decisions and legislations, one understands the fragility of the modern model. Nonetheless, it could not be argued that Britain is an isolated case. In other words, the UK should not be understood as a unique example of ineffective representation. Although individual rights, freedom of speech and protection from abuse of power are important prerequisites for a democratic state, the same state, in order to be classified as truly democratic has to fulfill also an area of other demands, such as effective participation and public consent, which appears marginalized not only in the UK but almost everywhere in the occidental world, with Switzerland being a notable example. The theoretical observations conducted above, relying both the work of Castoriadis as well as on the Swiss paradigm, not only confirm this reasoning, but at the same time provide vital alternatives of how open participation (close to the ancient model) can safeguard the majoritarian

consent, preventing officials and political personnel to bypass the will of the citizens.

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