

A Critique of Athenian and Modern Liberal Democracy

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Abstract

Since democracy was first begotten in ancient Athens, democracy, unlike all other systems of governance (i.e., monarchy, aristocracy, plutocracy, etc.), has come to be perceived as a unique political system, which places individual liberty as the foundational value of society. In other words, democracy is a political system that upholds individual freedom as the essence of what a civil society ought to be. This article examines the history of democracy and provides an in-depth analysis of the shortcomings of both Athenian democracy and modern liberal democracy. Specifically, this paper argues that the ideal political system is an egalitarian system which commits to the idea of inclusiveness. Thus, endorses equality as the core value of civil society.

Introduction

What is a good life? How is it achieved? What sort of principles and values are required to achieve a good life? From time immemorial these are some of the perennial questions in the history of political thoughts that political scientists have struggled to address. Using the above questions as a guide to understand the essence of democracy, this paper critically reviews the strengths and the weaknesses of both Athenian democracy and modern liberal democracy. The paper is divided into three sections. Section one provides a theory of human nature and a historical analysis of democratic theory from the classics (ancient Greece) to the contemporary period (of liberal democracy). Drawing upon ideas of some major thinkers like Locke and Mill, section two focuses on contemporary democracy; which is also known as *liberal democracy*. Drawing upon Rawls' theory of ignorance, the idea of liberal democracy from an egalitarian perspective is explored in section three. Finally, the paper concludes with an argument that although a modern liberal democratic system places freedom as the foundational value of a civil society, a liberal democratic state is nevertheless vulnerable to inequalities of power, wealth, income, and opportunity in our modern society.

The History of Democracy

Human Nature

Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good- Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics

Since political philosophy is concerned with basic principles and values of society, and how society can be best organized in a way to allow individual citizens to flourish. Thus, in order to analyse the political system of democracy, it is important that one understands the nature of human nature. The theory of human nature begins with the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. According to Aristotle, “human beings are by nature political animals”, (Aristotle, *Politics* in Jowett 2004, p.7) and in order for individuals to flourish and live the good life, they ought to come together and live in a civil society. This is the job of political science, in which the aim is to “legislate as to what individuals are to do and what they are to abstain from” (Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, in Ross 1998, p.2). If Aristotle’s analysis of human nature is accurate, and human nature is rooted in politics, then it necessary follows that political systems are not an end in themselves, but only a means to an end, and that end is the collective happiness of humanity.

The Rise of Athenian Democracy

To critically review modern liberal democratic system with some clarity, it is useful to discuss the Athenian democracy as a historical context. Discussing how ancient Athenians operated their democracy will shed light on the modern notion of and perception about equality and liberty embedded in a modern democratic system.

Democracy was first originated by ancient Greeks who coined the term ‘demos’ meaning “people” and ‘kratos’ meaning ruler to introduce the idea of democracy. When translated into English, democracy has come to mean “the rule of the people”. This ancient type of Greek democracy is what has been referred to as Athenian democracy.

Historically, Athenian democracy was the first known democracy that developed in a small size city-state which according to Rein and Brodie (2009) provided its citizens with a sense of active engagement in public affairs. According to Held (2006), the ancient democratic city-state was considered as a unique political community because its development “as a whole prided itself on a free and open political life in which citizens could develop and realize their

capacities and skills” (15). Another reason for its uniqueness as Rein and Brodie (2009) observed, was that Athenian democracy was a “direct democracy which held the most participatory form of politics that Western civilization has ever seen” (50). Also, it attempted to enable “men of different background to express and transform their understanding of the good through political interaction and participation” (Held, 2006, p.15). Such political participation consisted of direct voting wherein in-group citizens freely voted on executive bills and legislation without being categorised into economic class. This meant that the Athenian political system constituted no form of political representatives on behalf of the citizen population. Rather, citizens directly voted for bills and legislation as they saw appropriate to their community.

Despite its free and open political life, Athenian democracy however, has many shortcomings. In permitting only citizens to participate in political affairs, Athenian democracy, on the contrary, discriminated against women and slaves by not allowing them to take part in politics; which therefore eliminated the bulk of the population from political participation. Secondly, only those who were educated and wealthy (upper-class male citizens) were qualified to participate. At its height there were about “some 300 000 people in Athens, but only 40,000 out of 300 000 were considered as citizens” (Rein and Brodie, 2009, p.50). The “rest of the population- women, children, foreign residents, and slaves were excluded from the ranks of citizens and from political life” (Rein and Brodie, 2009, p.50). This meant that Athenian democracy did not live up to its definition and purpose, but rather it was a system in which a minority ruled the political sphere.

The demise of Athenian Democracy and the Rise of Modern democracy

A few years into the height of Athenian democracy, Athens was overthrown by its allies Sparta. The defeat of Athens gave rise to a “strange silence in the history of democratic thought that ends with the early renaissance. This period overlaps significantly with the medieval period which marks the period between the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the beginning of the renaissance in the fourteenth century” (Rein and Brodie, 2009, p.50). Also, this period marked “the ascendancy of the Christian faith as well as the rise of feudal forms of social organization in the Western World” (Rein and Brodie, 2009, p.51). In this period Christianity was at the center of every sphere of life; with human evolution seen as a product of God’s

foreknowledge. In other words, life was thought to be pre-determined by God. Also, in the medieval period, feudalism was the dominant economic organization. In a feudal society there was a “deeply held belief that people were fundamentally unequal; those who held power did so because they were essentially better” (Rein and Brodie, 2009, p.51). With this deeply held ideology, kings and rulers in feudal state were regarded as divine rulers whose authority on earth was derived directly from God. For this reason, the “Christian world-view transformed the rationale political action to a theological framework in which the good lay in submission to God’s will. How the will of God was to be interpreted, preoccupied Christian Europe for centuries, until the reformation” (Held, 2006, p.28).

Locke, Mill, and the Liberal Movement

With the inception of Athenian democracy, as Rein and Brodies observed, “democracy has been a source of inspiration for modern political thought ... and the modern ideals of equality before the law, liberty, and respect” (Rein and Brodie, 2009).

The events that took place in Christian Europe paved way for a new movement that was to put individual freedom at the centre of life. This movement was known as the liberal revolution, which brought about a dramatic change in politics and also the rebirth of democracy. Liberalism was inspired by the philosophy of John Locke and John Stuart Mill. In his “Second Treatise of Government”, Locke critiques proponents of divine rulers by providing good sound evidence and reasoning with the argument:

That Adam had not, either by natural right of fatherhood, or positive donation from God, any such authority over his children, or dominion over the world, as is pretended. That if he had, his heirs yet, had no right to it. That if his heirs had, there being no law of nature that determines which is the right heir in all cases that may arise, the right of succession could not have been certainly determined. And even if determined, there is no knowledge of the eldest line of Adam’s posterity. (Locke, 1980, p. 7)

Locke’s critique of divine kingship was derived from the idea that it is impossible or unknowable as to who is the eldest line of Adam. That is because all human beings are the children of God, with all having equal rights bestowed upon them by their creator. Hence according to Locke, the idea of divine king is rooted in ignorance and illogical reasoning. After the critique of monarchism, Locke sets out to establish his liberal political system by attempting to give a theory of politics, and what ideology best constitute the ideal political system through a

hypothetical experiment in which civil society is scientifically seen as the natural outgrowth of a pre-social setting. This pre-social setting is what he calls “the state of nature”. The state of nature according to Locke is a state of perfect freedom and equality. However, “the state of nature is governed by the laws of nature which obliges every one: and reason teaches all mankind, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his/her life, health, liberty, or possessions” (Locke, 1980, p.9). Thus, these natural rights (intrinsic values) Locke argues, are not to be violated by anyone. On the contrary, in a state where everyone had a right to the fruits that nature has provided; such a state is vulnerable to chaos, because having a right to self-preservation, an individual is more likely to come into conflict with other individuals over resources. Hence to prevent chaos and to protect their properties and fruits that they have appropriated in the state of nature, individuals create a government that is begotten by the consent of the collect. For this reason, Locke argues, governments are created by the consensus of individuals, and the role of government is to protect individuals’ natural properties and rights. Therefore, the authority of the government over the individual according to Locke is limited by the natural rights of the individual.

As a proponent of liberal democratic theory and Lockean political philosophy, John Stuart Mill, a 19th century English utilitarian philosopher, advocated for a government that allows maximum liberty for the individual, such that every citizen will have a right to freedom of speech and expression. However, for Mill, “the liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; one must not make himself/herself a nuisance to other people; but must refrain from molesting others in what concerns them” (Mill, 1978, p.53). This is what is known as the *harm principle*. For Mill this is the role of governments which is to protect the freedom of the people from direct harm, discrimination, torture, slavery, arbitrary arrest, etc... while simultaneously protecting one’s freedom to fair employment, basic physical needs, education, the right to vote, and the right to protection against unemployment. Also, more importantly, he argues that in a liberal democratic society, if a person’s action or conduct “does not directly harm others, society has no right to prohibit such action and behavior and, the person should be free from government interference” (Rein and Brodie, 2008, p.38).

Modern Liberal Democracy: A Critical Review

Today, the political writings of Locke and Mill have come to dominate our modern political system. In fact, the influence of Locke and Mill has brought about a revival in democratic thought since ancient Athens. However, unlike Athenian democracy which placed aristocrats and philosophers at the center of the city-state while demoting women and slaves to the role of instruments, modern democracy took a liberal form and viewed individual liberty as the backbone to having a healthy society. That is, a liberal democratic system put emphasis on the principle that since all human beings are creatures of one creator (God), then an ideal society is one that upholds the intrinsic value of every person through the protection of individual freedom and equality. With these principles and values, one can argue that a modern liberal democratic system is one that strives to maintain political and economic freedom for its citizens, such as the protection of private property and interest, the right to vote, freedom of speech and expression, equal opportunity, and equal rights.

Since liberal democracy is perceived as the dominant system in contemporary politics, the rest of the essay sets out to give a critique of modern liberal democracy. To rectify the past defects in our political evolution, it is important that as political philosophers, one continues to investigate the effects of liberalism on today's democracy. The utilitarian philosophy of Bentham and Mill has come to shape how our present political institutions and systems ought to be organized and functioned. That is, with utilitarianism (the idea that it is a law of nature that humans ought to maximize happiness over pain), modern democracy has come to be encircled in a calculus ideology of maximizing the overall happiness for the greatest number of people. With this embedded ideology in modern democracy, politics in contemporary Western society has come to take root in a majoritarian and representative system of governance, wherein governments are seen as the mouth-piece and the executor of the will and desires of the majority (the greatest number).

Consequently, this ideology means that the purpose of government is to be the leviathan that represents the majority of the populace. For, since the majority of the populace are defined in different ways based on the identification of the people, it follows that a liberal democratic government is susceptible to representing only the views of a racial, ethnic or religious majority group. In the economic sphere, however, the principle of utility in liberal democracy requires

that society generates and maximizes wealth and income for its citizens. To maximize wealth, utilitarians and political libertarians (advocates of freedom and liberty) argue that it is imperative that governments ought not to interfere with the labour market. The reason being that if individuals (capitalists) are allowed to freely pursue their economic goals, the assertion that the greatest material goods for the greatest number will be achieved.

John Rawls' Egalitarian System

To evaluate the idea as to whether the principles that constitute a liberal democratic system are just, we ought to locate human beings in the state of nature. In this sense human beings should be perceived as what Rawls referred to as a veil of ignorance. Presumably, the idea of veil of ignorance “temporarily prevents people from knowing anything about who they are and how to choose the principles to govern their collective lives. The question then arises as to what principles would they choose?” (Sandel, 2009, p.141). John Rawls, an American political philosopher, offers this thought experiment to illuminate an answer to this question.

According to Rawls, human beings in their original position behind a veil of ignorance would not choose a utilitarian political system in which majority rule. Rawls' idea of the veil of ignorance implies that people will eventually be oppressed in a utilitarian political system. This idea was recast by Sandel in the following expression: “For all I know, I might wind up being a member of an oppressed minority” (Rawls, cited by Sandel, 2009, p.141).

Further, Rawls argues that human beings would not choose a system that would give capitalist the economic freedom to produce goods and keep all the capital. This will create a huge unequal gap between the rich and the poor. Rather, according to Rawls, they would choose an egalitarian system that promotes equality for all. An egalitarian system according to Rawls is based on two principles of justice. “The first principle provides equal basic liberties for all citizens, such as freedom of speech and religion. The second principle concerns social and economic equality that work to the advantage of the least well-off members of society” (Sandel, 2009, p.142).

The two principles of justice offered by Rawls refute the Lockean notion of innate individual property in which “every man has a property in his own person, and where the labour

of his body, and work of his hand becomes properly his” (Locke, 1980, p.9). For we know that some people are naturally more gifted than others, and these natural assets can put one at an advantage in appropriating property. Thus, examining Locke’s theory of property, it is plausible to assume that Locke had an apathetic feeling toward inequality. For Locke, liberalism is about people having their natural rights. Similarly, Mill (1978) is indifferent toward inequality in society; so long as liberalism promotes the greatest happiness in society.

But with his two principles of justice, Rawls has showed us that the traditional liberals have a narrow view of freedom and equality. In as much as liberal democratic society may promote economic freedom for its citizens in their quest for capital accumulation, a liberal democratic state can be vulnerable to inequalities that result from maximizing wealth and opportunities. That is to say liberal democracy can also lead to structural inequalities.

As rational animals, human beings behind the veil of ignorance will choose a democratic system that is egalitarian in nature and which aims to promote parity. An egalitarian democratic system will distribute societal resources to meet the needs of its citizens not according to individual citizens’ natural assets or merit. Rather, it will adopt the principles of justice to treat everyone as equal regardless of their race, culture, birth position, or their ability to contribute in society. Thus, an ideal political system is an egalitarian system whose commitment to inclusiveness upholds equity for everyone regardless of one’s natural gift. This allows for the possibility that social and economic activities are arranged in a way that benefits the least well-off members of society.

Conclusion

In conclusion this paper has provided an in-depth analysis of the defects in both Athenian democracy and modern liberal democracy by arguing that both systems fall short of being the ideal political system. The paper has demonstrated that Athenian democracy’s detrimental policy of exclusion toward both slaves and women created structural inequalities and unequal opportunities within society. By same token the economic policies in modern liberal democratic system that maximize power; wealth, income, and opportunity also generate inequalities in our modern society. Thus, both systems of governances support those favored by nature with good fortune over those unable to compete due to physical and existential impediments. Further, through a historical analysis of democracy from ancient Athens to contemporary politics, this

paper has been able to demonstrate the defects in both Athenian democracy and modern liberal democracy, and claim that, based on the principles of justice and fairness, an ideal political system is an egalitarian system that places equality at the core of society while benefiting the least well-off members of society.

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