"The history of democratic theory"

Overview

As has often been remarked, the first thinkers to theorize about democracy are ancient Greek philosophers. Many of their ideas are developed in the Roman republic, especially the idea of civic virtue – the obligation to act for the good of the political association, and to adopt a political ethics in which that collective good is put ahead of one’s personal interest – although usually in more aristocratic than democratic forms. In Roman thought, democracy comes to be analyzed as one part of a ‘mixed constitution’ rather than as a separate government. This framing of the question of democracy persists until the late 18th and early 19th century, when, for the first time since the ancient Greeks, thinkers and politicians willingly accept the label of ‘democrat’ and the specific features of a democratic form of governance emerges.

Modern political discourse tends to take the virtue of democracy for granted. The word's connotations have been broadened to include: 1) a constitutional form or set of institutional arrangements; 2) an ideology; 3) an ethos (a 'democratic way of living') in which one is to act towards others with respect for their dignity as persons, to seek out common values, and to value equality and freedom.

Greek and classical democratic theory

In Greece, democracy emerges as one form of government, rivaling others. Forth and Fifth century BC Athens, especially, developed a democratic form of government (‘demos’ = people; ‘kratos’ = rule). Democracy essentially arose as a struggle by the poorer and middle strata of citizens, who found themselves in debt to wealthier citizens, putting them at a disadvantage and subjecting them to sanctions when they could not pay back the debts. In establishing a government suited to their interests, democrats established a new form of ruling the implications of which went far beyond specific laws and policies. The institution of democracy transformed ideas about authority, justice, the self, and ethics. Democratic government involved both institutional arrangements (what Aristotle described in terms of ‘distributive justice’ – the schema for distributing offices and power in a city-state, and citizenship (expectations of loyalty, obligations to participate in governing, and privileges of membership in the demos).

The mainstream of Greek political theory – especially as expressed by Plato and Aristotle – was hostile to democracy (Aristotle somewhat less so than Plato). Their criticism was, essentially, that democracies could not produce justice because they were guided by opinion, not knowledge, and because all citizens were to be treated as equals, whether they merited such treatment or not. To them, democracy amounted to an anarchy of desires which, they believed, would eventually eat away at both the political association and the individual soul of the citizen.

On the other side, advocates of democracy considered freedom and civic virtue (the way a democracy encouraged the allegiance of citizens to the political association and the homeland) to be its virtues. They defended practical deliberation and discussion among a wide range of citizens as producing good judgments (Aristotle echoed this view as well), arguing that public opinion, so long as citizens were free to participate, could overcome the risk of demagoguery.
Both the Greek critics and advocates of democracy remain relevant to contemporary democratic theory.

**Medieval political thought**

Medieval political thought – an amalgam of classical, Christian, and Germanic ideas – added little explicitly to democratic thought. While the Christian idea of equality and (at least its early) reverence for the poor and humble as morally better than the rich and ambitious, might bear some affinities to the modern democratic ethos, there was nothing political about this equality. As St. Augustine first articulated, politics was about the power to order the human world as God intended, and this had to be left to those ordained in the different realms (the Church in the spiritual, and the strong and noble in the secular) to do this. Ordinary people needed guidance to reach spiritual truth and redemption, just as they needed strong political rulers to keep order among them. Equality was elevated by Christianity, but only as it was interiorized in the self as faith (the doctrine of original sin and redemption through faith and grace), and exiled to God (it was God who would judge all as equals).

The extent to which elements of the modern state emerge in late Medieval and early modern kingdoms a full history of Western democratic theory would have to discuss this period. One development is of particular importance – the emergence of modern conceptions of sovereignty. Classical thought, especially Aristotle, refers to sovereignty in terms of the pinnacle in chains of authority. The sovereign is the highest authority. The political order, he argues, is the sovereign because it is the only association of human beings which is self-sufficient, providing the necessary conditions for life (security, institutions of justice, etc…) and the sufficient conditions for living a good life (citizenship).

In late medieval and early modern Europe, sovereignty begins to take on an additional meaning as a representation. The king is the sovereign in the sense of the highest authority (although the Aristotelian idea of self-sufficiency largely drops out of medieval theories of kingship), but, it is increasingly argued, he is the representative of the people (this view appears already in St. Thomas Aquinas in the first part of the 11th century, who argues, following Aristotle, that a king is only legitimate if he acts for the good of the people). The idea of a 'state' that embodies and represents the people living within it begins to emerge. This is spurred on both by the king's struggles to establish his legitimate rule against both the Church and the empire (the remnants of the Holy Roman Empire) and by the development of parliaments in which the representatives of different orders of medieval society met to give advice to the king and to consent to taxes. None of these were democratic. Early modern theories of sovereignty saw the king as the representation of the 'nation', beholden to and constrained by 'fundamental laws', but not as a representation of a people. Early modern sovereignty did not entail a 'demos'. Yet, the idea of sovereignty as a representation of a people in a territory could be said to have made possible the modern democratic state. One could say it provided a political aesthetic, lodged within institutions that could be transformed into elements of a modern democracy, that made democratic thought possible.

**Renaissance republicanism**

More directly connected to the development of modern democratic theory was the republican political thought in renaissance Italian city-states. A republic is a self-governing community. Whereas kings cared about their own power, republics cared about the durability of the republic over time. The most distinctive element of republican political thought is its sense of political time. This leads to the development in the Italian city-states to a new genre of city histories,
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which sought to establish a continuous identity. Machiavelli wrote one on his native Florence. These followed the classical definition of a state (found in Aristotle) as a people. What defined a state was not the territory it ruled over, or the extent of the king's estate, but the existence of a people that shared customs, values, and practices. This 'people' was not defined democratically – the people that mattered to 'the people' were those who carried that history and, more practically, whose families had a stake in the continuity of the city over several generations. This 'populo' as Machiavelli referred to the people who comprised the city, were largely drawn from the propertied and merchant classes who opposed the nobility. The growth of commerce had created a class of people with a spirit of independence that gave them a claim on political power. This claim would be further justified by the articulation of a commercial ethic of competitiveness linked to moderation in theories of commercial republics. First and foremost, continuity of the city over time required independence; it required not being absorbed into another state and independence from foreign predators who, Machiavelli recognized, were always trying to do so. Republicanism depends upon the existence of others as enemies. This required a virtuous citizenry who took pride in the city and was willing to take up arms to defend it. Hence, an active citizenry as was a strong, unified central government that could organize the army. The need for both caused tensions.

In order to deal with the tensions, Machiavelli introduces, or reintroduces, a version of the classical idea of a mixed constitution. But he does so not in institutional terms, but in terms of a constant balancing of power among the classes. Conflict is a good thing, for it animates the people to check the ambitions of the nobility, and prevents the excesses of the people from weakening the republic. Conflicts of interests keeps both parties in check and in balance, preventing any one group from believing it can rule without the other for any length of time. The danger is when one faction wins out and oppresses the other, producing resentment and eventually armed revolt.

Republics are not democracies, but they involve principles of citizenship drawn from democracy, as they involve a continual, agonistic struggle, between different groups. In short, republics, are deeply political in ways we have come to associate with democracy.

Liberalism

It is important to distinguish democracy, republicanism, and liberalism. Liberalism emerges first in reaction against religious intolerance and in assertion of individual rights by the rising middle classes in European states in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century liberalism becomes allied with enlightenment rationalism. In the early nineteenth century, liberalism comes to be allied further with defenses of capitalism. Three components have come to inform liberalism, often in uneasy relation: tolerance and respect for rights, especially the right to individual conscience; rationalism, the belief in reason and science to promote progress (material, political and moral); and capitalism, a belief that free trade is universally beneficial, and that it encourages individual initiative, protecting both progress and tolerance - hence the liberal preference for a limited state.

Liberalism is not necessarily democratic. It does come to inform the revival of democratic theory in the 19th and 20th centuries (more on this next week). Liberalism does contribute important components to modern democratic thought, most significantly its theory of individual rights. Individual rights are democratic, so long as these are allied to a commitment to social and political equality (the extent to which social and political equality require levels of economic equality is one of the controversies of liberal political thought). Controversies within liberal
political theory can also inform conceptions of democracy, such as controversies over the proper balance of equality and freedom, or the priority of justice in liberal theory, which seems at times to contradict its other main principles.

Another difficulty in the relation of liberal and democracy is its presumption of an underlying universalism. This universalism entails both that all individuals are, essentially the same (at least as far as accruing and enjoying rights are concerned), and a preference is given to rationality in composing the self. The problem, from a democratic point of view, is that liberal assumptions of universality can, and often have, justify exclusions of classes of people from the full enjoyment of rights and full participation in citizenship. Initially, they justified property qualifications, as well as the exclusion of women and slaves (in the US). They continue to promote prejudices that deflect obligations to people who do not live up to the standard of universal rationality. As we will see, in foreign policy, this presumption often leads to policies that defend interventions under the presumption that the only community capable of promoting justice is one consisting of well-educated individuals acting rationally in their interests.