

Lecture 1

The Idea of Democracy

Objectives: By the end of the lecture, students should have been introduced to the many meanings of the concept of Democracy, its philosophical and historical origins, complexities, and its diverse manifestations in the Western social world. This lecture paves the way for further thinking about US Democracy and how it takes shape in the US public space.

1. Introduction

Democracy is not a simple concept. It can be defined from different perspectives and may refer to various political and social kinds of human organizations. Basically, it refers to any form of government or political and social system that emanates from the will of the people. A democratic system of government or a democratic society implies that people are sovereign and can freely elect those who shall govern them. They are also free to choose the economic, social, and societal institutions and regimes that shall govern the nation. In democratic political and social systems, those in power are accountable before the people who have elected them and can be removed and replaced if they fail to guarantee the very principles they have been elected for.

2. Philosophical Origins

The idea of democracy goes back to Antiquity and more precisely to **Greek Civilization**. The Greeks can be considered as the inventors of democracy, though that kind of democracy lacked many of present day principles. Basically, Greeks raised the idea that citizens of the “Polis” (the city or the body of citizens) have the right to choose – and thus elect – the people who are to be in charge of the government i.e. in charge of the affairs of the city. These chosen or elected people will decide on the behalf of the “Polis.” **Direct democracy** – one man, one vote – was the basis of the Greek political structures. The aim of Greek democracy was the establishment of a government for the common good of the “polis.”

Greek societies were ruled in the form of city-states. Athens, Sparta, Mycenae, and Corinth were simultaneously cities and independent states. Their size and limited number of “free” men made the implementation of direct democracy possible.

The Romans created **Representative Democracy**. The Roman Senate was seen as representing Roman citizens. Additionally, Romans introduced written laws that governed the life of citizens (who had to be free men to enjoy that status).

During the **Age of Enlightenment** (17th and 18th centuries), some European thinkers and philosophers relied on their observations of the tumultuous events that shook some their countries to establish some principles that should dominate the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. Among those philosophers, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke (1632–1704) were prominent theoreticians of modern Western systems of government.

English Philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was a close witness of the English Civil War (1642–1651), a war for political and religious supremacy between King Charles I and the English Parliament. From the series of political quarrels and the armed conflicts that tore England apart in the 17th century, he concluded that the well-being of society and individuals could not be preserved unless a strong state exercised full powers and political prerogatives on the country and its people. To him security and stability were the *raison d'être* of any form of government. He outlined his ideas in his philosophical oeuvre *Leviathan* (1651).

For his part, English philosopher **John Locke** introduced other basic notions such as those of “**natural rights**” of life, liberty, and property. Locke introduced another basic principle in democracy: the “**consent of the governed.**” To Locke, the *raison d'être* of the state and the people who shall govern is the preservation of human basic rights such as life, liberty, and property. He argued that the governed have the right to rebel and dissolve the consent they give to the ruler(s) if their rights to life, liberty, and property are not guaranteed by those who govern.

Another philosophical contribution to present day concept of democracy is that of French thinker **Le Baron de Montesquieu** (1689-1755). in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Montesquieu introduced the notion of “**Separation of Powers.**” To him, powers should not be concentrated in the hands of one body (individual or

collective), but should be fragmented and separated, distributed among more than one body. **Voltaire** (1694-1778), in his turn, defended **freedoms of speech, thought, and belief**. Swiss philosopher **Jean Jacques Rousseau** (1712-1778) developed the idea of “**social contract**.” Of course, democracy and individual freedoms cannot evolve and operate in a vacuum. The idea of strong unifying state that guarantees order and security was defended by philosophers such as English **Thomas Hobbes** and Florentine political thinker **N. Machiavelli** (1469-1527).

As for American Democracy, it has been heavily influenced by the thinkers mentioned above. Many of its principles were shaped by the ideas of Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and others.

3. Philosophical Contributions to American Democracy

The ideas argued for by European philosophers influenced the development of democracy in American colonies. Other ideas were implemented by colonists even before those thinkers suggested them. For example, Rousseau’s concept of “social contract” can be found in the **Mayflower Compact** (1620). That compact was the covenant that laid the foundations of the right to form self-governments as shown in Massachusetts Bay Colony. Another example of social contract that took a political form was the General Assembly of Virginia (1619) and then the **House of Burgesses** (1642-1776), the elective body that would govern the Virginia Colony.

Additionally, Locke’s ideas became justifications and bases for the American colonists’ rebellion against the British crown. His concept of the “**Consent of the Governed**” influenced the *US Declaration of Independence* (1776).

Moreover, Montesquieu’s ideas can be perceived through the first the *Articles of Confederation* (1781-1787) and then the *US Constitution* (since 1787), and the creation of the three branches of the US government, and the Federal system of government.

Voltaire’s ideas related to freedoms of speech and religion are outlined in the **Bill of Rights**, the first ten amendments to the US Constitution.

The ideas of Hobbes and Machiavelli became the basis of a stronger central government as shown in the federal system of government.

American democracy is embodied in its **Constitution** (drafted in 1787) which is itself the product of historical events that shaped early American society.

Useful terms:

A government may be defined as an agency through which the purposes of a state or nation are formulated and carried out. This agency develops where men live in groups. One of the chief objects of government is to adjust individual interests, or, to say the same thing in slightly different words, to control members of the group in their social relations.

The republic is a form of government in which ultimate power or sovereignty resides with the people as a whole rather than with a single individual. Instead of a monarch there is generally an elective president, with varying powers. The republic is a very old form of government, but in the republics of Greece, Rome and Venice the powers of government were exercised by a class composed of a small minority of the people. In modern republics a larger proportion of the adult population participates in government.

References

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