

# Theories of Democracy

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Everybody claims to be a democrat. Every political decision and action is justified in the name of democracy. Democracy is obviously a “trump card”, which can be utilised in any constellation and situation. Indeed, democracy is one of the key concepts of the theory and practice of politics. But is the concept of democracy really so vague or are there some certain ideas behind it? Democracy is one of many political systems that deal with planning and running the affairs of society. It is, however, from historical point of view, the latest and the most modern political formation. In last few years, in the light of new developments in world politics it has been explored, criticised and attacked. The most recent political developments throughout the world provoked interests in the theory of democracy. There might, therefore, be a growing interest and concern in the general public for a short introductory essay to some of the major theoretical issues about democracy. The aim of this short paper is to trace and delineate the concepts and the implementation of democracy.

The term *democracy* originates from ancient Greek and means rule by the people (demos). Traditionally, political theorists begin their considerations about democracy with aristocratic philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and deduce from there that ancient Greek philosophers opposed the concept of democracy. This is true in one way or another as far as these two philosophers concerned. But there were many other philosophers who were critical of Athenian democracy from a humanist perspective—just because it rested upon slavery and excluded women and foreigners from decision making. Epicurus’s anti-political position, for example, might be read as a search for a much more comprehensive concept of democracy to include all subordinate classes and sections of society in decision making.

The development of the concept of democracy was not solely due to the ancient Greeks. Democracy as an institution to run general affairs of society is an innovation of much earlier period. What we read in Plato’s and Aristotle’s writings is in fact an explanation of why in Athens the implementation of earlier form of democracy became problematic. It has to do with the division of society into social classes with contradictory material interests, which also throws some light on the modern problems of democracy. A society with social classes like ancient Greek societies could no longer assimilate the earlier form of democracy that allowed all male and female adults to participate in decision making.

In modern political thought, traditionally the theories of democracy are categorised on how they conceptualise the people, citizenship, majority, and minority. This approach touches

one of the most crucial problems of the theory of democracy only on the surface because it takes the division of society into the majority and minority for granted or it leads to a distorted presentation of the problems involved if it accounts merely for elections and issues in parliaments and governments. Political manipulation and distorted presentations may result in misperceptions of the issues in question; this manipulation may result in elections that may reverse what is the majority and the minority in reality. This may be seen from that what gave originally rise to considerations about the majority and the minority. In Aristotle's political thought the majority referred to the poor—that is, expropriated sections of society—and the minority is described as propertied nobility. John Stuart Mill's consideration about the tyranny of the majority has to do with the question of what might be the result if subordinate classes, the vast majority of population, are franchised. Provided they are conscious of their real interests, they could easily vote aside propertied classes and expropriate the expropriator. This worry motivates Aristotle in antiquity, as well as Mill in modernity, in their construction of what might be the best form of government. It is this worry that gave also rise to the elitist theory of democracy; for example, the work of Peter Schumpeter. With Mill's proposal to weight votes in favour of richer and the better-educated, the bourgeois democratic thought gives up one of the most essential concepts of democracy: the concept of equality which is a contribution of Protestant Reformation to modern theory of democracy. This may also explain what Norberto Bobbio observed; namely, that liberal democracies tend to restrict the rights of the people if they express their will to participate in decision making rather than leaving it to the elites in parliaments and governments.

Unlike the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois democratic thought, however, the 18<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois democratic thought has a comprehensive view of democracy, both contractual (Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Rousseau) and historical approach (Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Hume, A. Smith, J. Millar). It takes into account the problems arising from the structural problems of civil society, as well as those of the state. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, it comes more and more to confine to governmental realm. This is valid as well as for Ronald Dworkin's theory of procedural democracy and Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy. Permanently changing structural power relations in civil society in favour of monopolies and monopoly bourgeoisie are no longer problematic. Among classical liberal thinkers Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and among contemporary political philosophers David Held and Peter Singer are perhaps the only ones to refer to the growing power of monopolies in civil society and to the dangerous arising from it.

The concept of both representative and direct democracy are creations of 18<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois democratic thought. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it has come to assume representative democracy. Even contemporary bourgeois thought, despite the fact that modern communications and computers removed many obstacles to direct democracy, accepts Schumpeter's hardly justifiable argument that direct democracy is not compatible with responsible government. But at least since Condorcet's establishment of Jury Theorem it is

almost a common sense that a decision of a large number of only moderately competent people may be more reliable than few hundred experts in parliaments and governments.

Classical Marxist theory of democracy draws primarily on the study of the broad history of humanity, more particularly on the analysis of the structures in civil/bourgeois society, as well as institutional development of the capitalist state and government. But it inherits also all bourgeois and utopian socialist progressive democratic thought and profits from Paris Commune experiments. Marxist theory of democracy is not about establishment and strengthening of the state against society as opposed to bourgeois democratic thought. On the contrary, it is above all concerned about finding ways to abolish the state and bring back the administration/management of general social affairs into society. It wants to democratise all aspects of social life. It is, in other words, foremost concerned about establishing a direct democracy. The socialist state, which is thought to be necessary in the transitory society from capitalism to fully developed communism, is thought to be no longer a state in its classical sense; namely, to be an instrument to suppress the majority by a handful minority of property owners. It is rather envisaged to be a state of the majority to suppress the minority of property owners if (and only if) they act against the establishment of socialism and eventually communism. This aim leads Marxist democratic thought to the historical investigation of the origins of the state. Like many 18<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois social and political philosophies, it explains the origins of the state by referring to the establishment of private property and contradictions in civil/bourgeois society. But unlike these philosophies, Marxism does not want to justify private property but substitute it for a common ownership; therefore it focuses on the question of how private property may be turned into common ownership.

In the light of the experience of Soviet Union, many contemporary Marxists philosophers suggest that some aspects of Marx's democratic thought needs to be reconsidered, because in the Soviet Union the abolishment of private property in the means of production has not lead to the weakening of the state. They suggest to develop further Marxist democratic thought based on the socialist experiences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and on the democratic thought of Lenin, Gramsci and Luxemburg.

The most interesting and new aspect of contemporary debates of democracy is about cosmopolitan or world democracy and ecological democracy. David Held's theory of cosmopolitan democracy draws on a revision of the Kantian notion of perpetual peace. But it could perhaps be more appropriately and comprehensively developed on the basis of what Marx worked out about Paris commune. The theory of ecological democracy is relatively new and needs still to be worked out in many respects in detail. Here Marx's conception of production may be a useful starting point.