

Response Paper: Week One

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*Plus ça change – On Democratic Continuity*

Despite dramatic differences in the regimes that have adopted it, the concept of democracy appears to exhibit remarkable continuity. This is not to deny Robert Dahl's exposition of democratic evolution over time, but rather to assert that this evolution has occurred within recognizable bounds. What we call democracy would doubtless be difficult for an ancient Greek to recognize as such. But the disjunction is not apparent in the other direction. To us, both the Greek *poleis* and modern representative governments are recognizably democratic, despite significant imperfections. Indeed, the story told by Swift, Dahl, Dunn and others of a dynamic concept evolving over time obscures a deeper current of continuity: the concept of self-rule.

According to Dahl, Greek democracy differed from contemporary democratic practice in three central respects – citizenship was highly exclusive, citizens did not acknowledge universal political or human rights, and Greek democracy was therefore “inherently limited to small-scale systems”.<sup>1</sup> As a result, for two millennia the notion of representation “remained mainly outside the theory and practice of democratic or republican government.”<sup>2</sup> This began to change, on his telling, when the debate between radical and democratic republicans resulted in the replacement of the ideal of mixed government (on the Roman or Spartan model, c.f. Polybius, *The Histories*) with the concept of the separation of powers.<sup>3</sup> Rather than balance conflicting private interests among the various factions in society, the new model would ensure “a proper balance among the three main functions or “powers” of government. This is dependent on what Dahl calls the Strong Principle of Equality – that individuals are sufficiently similar<sup>4</sup> to one another as to make it implausible that any one or any group of them is better-qualified to rule than the group as a whole. The strong principle, according to Dahl, “need not be applied very broadly.” He

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<sup>1</sup> Dahl, Robert “Democracy and its Critics”. Ch. 1. Yale University Press , 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Dahl, Robert “Democracy and its Critics”. Ch. 2. Yale University Press , 1991.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Compare the Spartan habit of calling one another “*homoi*” (similar). See Xenophon, *A History of My Times*.

describes the “democracy” that results as “democratic with respect to its own demos, but not necessarily democratic with respect to all persons subject to the collective decisions of the demos.”<sup>5</sup>

Dahl (and others) make much of the large size permitted by the transition to representative democracy. But Alexander’s conquests had already made the *polis* obsolete even as Aristotle was lionizing it as the only proper abode for a free man. The critical background for the republican model came not in the eighteenth century but during the *Pax Augusta* and the slightly earlier *oecumene*, or world-community created by Alexander’s successors. To resist Macedon, the Greek *poleis* formed federal leagues (c.f. the Achean league, the Aetolian league, and so on), and representatives from each state made policy in official league councils. In addition, most of the major religious centers in the Greek world were governed by councils made up of representatives from nearby states (c.f. the Amphyctyonic League). Representation was not so foreign to the ancients as Dahl supposes.

Despite this continuity, it is arguable that the concept of democracy acquired pejorative connotations in the ancient world that it did not manage to shake off until the modern era. John Dunn argues that while the concept of democracy once connoted generalized equality, it is now limited merely to “equality of the franchise”. He credits this change in part to the Russian revolution and the subsequent development of the USSR, which pursued equal outcomes while emphatically rejecting equal representation. This semantic shift resulted in the discovery by elites that they no longer needed to “confine electoral representation”, and that it was “on balance advantageous, both to ruling politicians and to those they ruled, to extend it...as far as it would go.” The Second World War provided additional impetus to rehabilitate democratic rhetoric, as “...in the face of intense suffering, [governments] needed it above all to focus their citizens' allegiance, and to define a cause worth fighting to the death for.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dahl, Robert “Democracy and its Critics”. Ch. 2. Yale University Press , 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Dunn, John “Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy”. Atlantic Books, 2005.

Adam Swift frames the issue as a question of tradeoffs. He writes that “the key democratic principles are those of popular control and political equality.”<sup>7</sup> He further acknowledges that there is an inherent tradeoff between precise specification of democratic principles and allowing scope for democratic decisions.<sup>8</sup> As he puts it, “we are inevitably balancing different kinds of value: fair procedures against wise decisions, deliberation against the aggregation of preferences.”<sup>9</sup> All these tradeoffs emerge from concerns about self-rule. We are willing to accept some loss of procedural efficiency as long as citizens get to be involved in their own government. We hope that deliberation will result in greater consensus about the direction our self-rule should take. And we prefer a large, chaotic democracy with minimal constitutional specifications to a polity that infantilizes its citizens by diminishing the scope for their own self-government.

Dahl and Swift both contend that the large, diverse states enabled by representative government have a much more tenuous claim on anything that might be called “the public good.”<sup>10</sup> I respectfully dissent from this consensus. Core elements of the public good include (and have always included) the survival and prosperity of the state, its victory in competition with its neighbors, and the flourishing of the many individuals and elements within it. The undeniable existence of this common core is comforting, because it allays Dahl’s concern that republican governments in heterogeneous states might lack a clearly-defined public good and consequently be unsuited to democracy.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, it allows us to adopt a middle position between mere preference aggregation and the *polis*-centered life advocated by Aristotle. There is a large penumbra of non-core issues which do not touch on the public good. In times of peace and prosperity, it may feel as though a state has no “public good” at all, because the core common interests shared by its citizens are not remotely threatened. But all states share a fundamental interest in

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<sup>7</sup> Beetham, Carvalho, Landman and Weir, “Assessing the Quality of Democracy, A Practical Guide”. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> “the more content we build into our specification of democratic procedures, the less we leave open to democratic decision.” Swift, Adam “Political Philosophy: A Beginner’s Guide for Students and Politicians”.

<sup>9</sup> Swift, Adam “Political Philosophy: A Beginner’s Guide for Students and Politicians” pp.210-211.

<sup>10</sup> Dahl, Robert “Democracy and its Critics”. Ch. 15. Yale University Press , 1991.

<sup>11</sup> Dahl, Robert “Democracy and its Critics”. Ch. 2. Yale University Press , 1991.

their own survival and prosperity, and as such there will always be a common public good around which to organize democracy.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, the concepts discussed above share a common thread – they are all concerned with the rule of a political unit by the people comprising it. The sovereign, in Locke’s terms, is still the people – representation is simply the engagement of agents to carry out a hitherto-personal civic duty. As we saw, democratic decisions are beneficial because they “tend to produce less extreme decisions, rather than because each individual has an influence on the decision per se.”<sup>13</sup> Representation properly understood recalls Rawls’ reflective equilibrium, as individuals detach themselves from their personal circumstances and attempt to act in the best interests of their constituents. It is true that representatives will sometimes find this difficult, and that their self-interest will atavistically reassert itself, but the Athenians assembled on the Pnyx doubtless felt the same way. The government of a state by the people who make it up may take many different forms, but the evolutionary account of the various forms this process has taken obscure the central thread of self-rule.

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<sup>12</sup> Until the advent of a world state, though as its arrival hardly seems imminent we will not discuss it here.

<sup>13</sup> “7 Examples of Animal Democracy” <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/photos/7-examples-of-animal-democracy/red-deer> citing Conradt and Roper “Group decision-making in animals”, *Nature* Vol. 421, pp.–158 (09 January 2003). <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v421/n6919/full/nature01294.html>