

REFLECTIONS ON DEMOCRACY IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Kajetan GORNIG¹, Aleksandra KUZIOR^{2*}

¹ kajgornig@gmail.com

² Silesian University of Technology; aleksandra.kuzior@polsl.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-9764-5320

* Correspondence author

Purpose: The purpose of the article is to present issues related to the formation of a democratic system.

Methodology: The research was based on a systematic review of the literature.

Findings: In the development of the democratic system, its ancient roots are of great importance. Athenian democracy and the development of Roman democracy (although imperfect) are the foundations of the formation of the modern democratic system or rather democratic systems in its various manifestations.

Practical implications: Currently, despite many references to democratic values, despite the existence of a common opinion on what democracy is, concepts are emerging that have democratic features, but their selective application is not identical to the term "democratic system". There are votes and decisions based on democratic principles, but the effects they produce are not democratic.

Originality: The article presents the historical foundations of the formation of the democratic system.

Keywords: Athenian democracy, Roman democracy, democratic system.

Category of the paper: Theoretical paper.

Introduction

Currently, despite many references to democratic values, despite the existence of a common opinion about what democracy is, concepts are emerging that have democratic features, but their selective application is not identical to the term "democratic system". There are votes and decisions based on democratic principles, but the effects they produce are not democratic. The aim of this study is a historical review showing selected aspects thanks to which the term "democratic system" can be reached by deduction.

1. Needs of free citizens, acceptance of decisions

In the European cultural sphere, the term "democracy" is uttered practically without any need to explain how it works and what values it represents. It is a common tool of social communication, thanks to which an unquestionable decision is made, and it is precisely the acceptance of this decision that is a key element of democracy. It is the acceptance and reconciliation with the fact that a minority or an individual will not force their position.

Historically, in the cradle of democracy, i.e. in ancient Athens, the power was originally held by the owners of the land, who benefited from granting "permissions" to use its benefits. The appropriate climate and fertility of the soil made it possible to produce food surpluses, which on the one hand were beneficial - the population could devote time to other activities than obtaining food, but on the other hand were a curse, because the excessive number of people generated social problems. The solution to these difficulties was the widespread colonization of the Greeks, the signs of which are still visible today in the farthest corners of Eurasia and Africa (Everitt, 2020).

Food surpluses gave the Greeks the comfort of spending their free time in many ways, thanks to which culture, art, sports and democracy (i.e., politics) developed. Without resources in the form of free time, it would not have been possible for the people to participate in long hours of discussions and court hearings – at that time in the form of meetings in the squares. The gathered listened attentively to the arguments that were conducted quite freely at the time. Without this freedom and liberty, the judgment of the famous philosopher Socrates would probably not have taken place. He was sentenced to death for a relatively trivial offense – that is, spreading falsehoods and corrupting the youth.

Therefore, free time, generated by the economic system of ancient Greece, was undoubtedly the driving force not only for the idea of managing the city – state, but also for exporting these ideas to other corners of the world.

Another factor for the development of the spirit of democracy was the free. The existence of free citizens conditions the development of democracy. This fact was not at all obvious in ancient Athens. In Greece itself, things were not "ideal". The economic system of city-states was largely based on the work of slaves and visitors, but it was known that "bearded" men voted, and women and children were excluded from participating in decision-making, although the system itself was absolutely unique, as for the world of that time. Democracy is not just voting. In order for a decision to be finally accepted, it must go through a series of institutions and procedures necessary to make it credible. There must be a social conviction that these institutions are necessary and properly respected. In this way, something was created that today can be called a constitution, or the principles of functioning of democracy. The key to this mechanism is the creation of a decision that is acceptable to the community. It should be mentioned here that in the Athenian system, the beliefs of the population in the Oracle of Delphi

played a significant role. Today, it is difficult to call it an element of a democratic system, but in ancient times there was a need to rely on space, boundlessness, apeiron - as Anaximander called it, a border that no one will question, a moment ending a dispute. Socrates himself, arguing in the streets with the inhabitants of Athens, did not fail to ask the Oracle of Delphi a question. What is more, he accepted the answer and it became the basis for many further considerations. Today we would not call the Oracle of Delphi an institution of a democratic system, but it can illustrate a certain parallel to democracy. In earlier systems, due to the way tribal communities gathered, the basis for the decision accepted by the community was the king - as was the case with the peoples living in the Fertile Moon. The tribal ruler was the final lawmaker and judge. In the legal system introduced in ancient Babylon, there were specific ways of resolving disputes. One such example is the river test in Babylon, in which the participants of the dispute (after taking an oath) were thrown into the water (Saggs, 1973). The result was one winner who stayed on the surface of the water. The decision may have been accidental, but accepted by the community. Similarly to the Oracle of Delphi. It can be assumed that the ruler relinquished his full power in favor of a solution – quite random – but acceptable to the local population.

2. Democracy as a goal of authority

Ideas borrowed from antiquity found their way onto the fertile ground of the fall of absolute power in France and quickly germinated, as there was an urgent need to find a way to manage the state efficiently and at the same time acceptably. The very fall of royal power had its causes analogous to those in ancient Athens. Surpluses of goods and services produced by society, which released the desire of the population for self-determination. And unfortunately for the king and the aristocracy, in the case of fluctuations in the economic situation, when hunger occurred, the people's anger was directed at the authorities. Dramatic food shortages combined with growing social awareness led to the overthrow of the authorities. It was done, generally speaking, in an undemocratic way and resulted in the takeover of power by a rickety democracy not devoid of caricatural features. This attempt was too early even for modern France, social awareness too immature for this uprising to end in success.

It is impossible not to mention our native noble democracy here. It is hard to resist the impression that it had the features described by Aristotle in "Politics". It fulfilled the basic task of democracy, determining the adoption of a decision acceptable to the majority. Its form in the Nihil Novi Constitution of 1505 became a certain complication. The democratic people, i.e. in this case the nobility, ensured themselves the possibility of opposition in every matter (the so-called free opposition or liberum veto) and this episode became the most famous element of noble democracy, so it is worth mentioning its many merits. After all, it was as

a result of democratic elections that it was determined who would be the king of the Republic and more than once a quite good choice was made, in the form of King Stefan Batory or Jan Sobieski.

The Republic developed in a spectacular way, and the source of this progress was a democratic decision, although completely distant from the standards of its current understanding.

The modern mode of decision-making required constant improvement. Democracy, the so-called mature one, must be subject to constant corrections, changes and reforms, thus inscribing it into the current level of social awareness.

This was lacking in the then Republic of Poland, decisions were made for short-term benefits, and the democratic group was not supplemented by new social classes. Meetings were held during evening feasts, which, when mead was replaced with aquavit, was one of the factors in the loss of authority for democratic proceedings.

The ancient Greeks, in their fears, repeatedly drew attention to the fact that there was a significant risk of a tyrant taking power in a democratic manner. A social decision without appropriate protective tools is the fastest and cheapest way to dictatorship. One can easily provide such examples of phenomena in the 20th and 21st centuries. Manipulation of emotions has been the greatest threat to democracy from the very beginning. Just 20 years ago, television and radio were the leaders, now they are specialized social media tools using AI. Election campaigns consist of examining social expectations and matching the candidate to them. Today, the candidate is not a leader who attracts the crowd, today the candidate becomes the resultant of the views of the winning majority. The goal of an exemplary candidate seeking voters is not to convince, but to find a group of views that will be supported by 50% and one more vote. In the case of voting for the president of the United States, the procedure is more complicated, but the effect remains the same. The absolute standard now is to vote not "for" but "against". The voter says: I don't have my candidate in the elections, but I know who I don't want. The speed of information and artificial intelligence are factors that can be a real threat to modern democracy. Because wouldn't artificial intelligence do all the work for the voter?

3. Ways of making decisions

3.1. Making a Choice and Philip II

It is worth considering here the question of how and why democracy was "used" to make difficult decisions. There is a general belief that in a situation where a given unit did not have sufficient military power to impose its will, it had to give way and submit to the will of the dominant group. The group (i.e. voters) was tasked with either helping the government make

a decision (then the concept of a strictly façade institution was created) or to consult in a real way on the proposals submitted by a given unit. When Philip II brought his troops to the gates of Athens, then in this society based on democratic values, two factions clashed. One were supporters of reconciliation with the Macedonians - which could mean submission and acceptance of Philip II's rule (this faction was represented by Isocrates). The other, gathered under the leadership of the orator Demosthenes and constituted the opposing party, completely rejecting the option of reconciliation. Demosthenes' faction was ready to form an alliance with Persia, so as not to hand the city over to Philip II. The decision was ultimately made by democratic vote: war was declared on the Macedonians. Considering the fact that the Athenian army was largely composed of free citizens, it can be assumed that the decision was made in an extremely mature way, although reaching for fiction, one can encounter various scenarios of how this matter was handled. Nevertheless, the key issue was still who voted - because it is known that not all the city's inhabitants had the right to vote. Today, one could say that "public consultations were held", but for the Greeks, who did not know indirect democracy, it was the right decision (Everitt, 2020).

3.2. Pontius Pilate's Public Consultation

The figure of the Prefect of Judea exists primarily in parables and the New Testament, including the Gospel of John, but since an inscription with his name was found in Caesarea (in ancient Palestine) in 1961 (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pontius-Pilate>), it has been recognized that Pontius Pilate was a historical figure. This implication that the Prefect of Judea was an authentic individual does not bring any groundbreaking values on a religious basis (in any denomination), but it does not exclude interest in the story written by the Evangelist John (Ewangelia św. Jana J. 19 1-12, J 19 13-16), concerning the trial of Jesus Christ. The appearance of this thread in the Gospel of John is extremely important for a completely different reason. The socio-political analysis of this story is as follows: Pontius Pilate, in order to maintain social peace, took into account the voice of the people. From the point of view of a representative of Caesar, he did not want to interfere in local affairs. However, he could not afford to be accused by the Jewish aristocracy of ignoring the problem and challenging the authority of Caesar. Nevertheless, his main task was to supervise the tax collection process, build aqueducts, maintain combat power and avoid social rebellions. In order to properly carry out these tasks, local affairs had to be managed in such a way that it was not necessary to maintain a garrison of legionaries in Jerusalem, nor a long and expensive expedition of the army from another corner of the empire to tame possible social unrest. Therefore, the leaders of the Jewish social organizations, (a term for the purposes of this study), had to construct an indictment in such a way that it concerned challenging the authority of Caesar and thus could be brought before the prefect. Pontius Pilate, in this story, saw that he was being manipulated into local political games, which he could not afford. Therefore, he based his decision on "social consultations", the result of which is widely known (Goldworthy, 2000). Why did the Jews "not

want” to judge Jesus of Nazareth? According to the Gospel, Christ was tried by the highest-ranking representative of the government, and this fit the whole story perfectly, as a coherent explanation. From the point of view of the history of democratically conducted disputes, it is worth returning to the decision-making process itself. In the given content, one can find elements that are still important in modern democracy today. This is the jurisdiction of the court, reliance on higher values (in this case Caesar), social consultations, counting votes. Then – a decision accepted by society. As for the decision itself, it is worth mentioning Barabbas, a man who escaped with his life as a result of social consultations. Similarly to the previous considerations, the issue of the historicity of this figure will not in any way affect the substantive value of this study and has no impact on the issues analyzed. The assessment concerns only the life attitudes referred to, which are given as an example of social coexistence and ground social behavior. Therefore, to convey the full scale of the situation, it should be said that perhaps in this story Barabbas is not a criminal, a hypostasis of evil. In Joseph Ratzinger's opinion (Ratzinger, 1997), he could even be the second messiah. According to the Evangelist Matthew, he was certainly "someone important", which could mean a Jewish rebel opposing Caesar's rule. The choice did not have to be so obvious.

By deduction, we can therefore conclude that Pilate was somehow forced to accept a decision that was unfavourable to him, resulting from social consultations. This is the quintessence of democratic conduct. The procedure for this judgment shaped, to some extent, the views of European thinkers and society, who often referred to Christianity.

However, the issue is seen differently from the side of the Jews themselves - if we "gave them a voice". In order to remain objective, other opinions and views should also be mentioned. Judaism assesses the situation in a completely different way than Christianity. Ha-Nozri, as Jesus Christ of Nazareth was most likely called in Jewish tradition, is the man mentioned by the Talmud, who was a common troublemaker, executed for lying by stoning. And here, without a doubt, both versions of events have their religious foundations, not very democratic. In Jewish tradition, the dispute with Pontius Pilate was not mentioned.

4. In response to changing needs

Democracy in ancient times required constant changes, but the very fact of considering the system was phenomenal. It is difficult to imagine a discussion about managing a city in totalitarian systems or absolute monarchies, while in the case of democracy, discussion was and still is the foundation of its "call into life". Therefore, work on the system could only take place in centers that were extremely socially mature. Pericles, Cleisthenes, Solon - reformers of the Athenian system knew that voting alone does not make a civic state. Only the introduction of numerous regulations, principles and legal norms shapes the way problems are dealt with and

results in an acceptable decision. Ancient thinkers were excellent at recognizing the weaknesses of popular government. Aristotle's proposals for wise and responsible politicians to rule, taking care of citizens with views that would not receive the approval of the majority were simply "ideal". This expression seems to be the most appropriate, because such an "ideal" state governed by wise men was proposed by Plato. Although from our point of view it would be more like a totalitarian system. Fear of a tyrant – an individual with concentrated power in their hands – was a vexation for the Hellenes. Reforms and term limits were therefore intended to curb any desire for absolute power. It is worth noting that democracy did not in any way hinder the unprecedented flourishing of Athens' culture and economy. Greek colonies stretched from the Indus River to central Africa and Europe. It was openness, tolerance and participation in social life that created the foundations of the civilization of ancient Rome, and later of all of Europe (Everitt, 2020). Despite great tensions and rivalries, visible in the example of the dispute between landowners and craftsmen, revealed in the times of Solon (5th century BC), society maintained a high level of development in a conciliatory manner. Later – already in the Roman era – Athens, as the leader of Hellenic democracy, was the informal capital of culture, a place visited by tourists of the time, the cradle of democracy and republican ideas. Why then was democracy subject to criticism? This system sprouted in the rapidly developing world of the Apennine Peninsula, after a period of weak kings and it was the Roman people who took power. Democracy in Rome, much more sophisticated, generated a socio-political system with senators and factions of plebeians and patricians, possessing some features of today's political parties. The institutions of tribunes, praetors, prefects, aediles, quaestors, consuls, proconsuls and, of course, the senate. Public life was becoming, one might say, a "profession" for many citizens, and social functions were increasingly associated with financial privileges. It can therefore be said that democracy was moving into a phase of professionalism. On the one hand, the system became more and more stable, but on the other hand, it implied various abuses in voting. Rome grew richer and the republic absorbed more and more lands around it. Nevertheless, the goal itself was not to convince the inhabitants of the conquered territories to its ideas, but to obtain financial resources. This increase in resources, unlimited enrichment was the driving force. Therefore, the peoples of the conquered lands, in exchange for a certain security and legal stability, willingly accepted the imposed Roman law, which seemed more rational and objective than the managerial methods represented by local leaders with exuberant fantasies. Rome grew stronger, richer, and with the growth of the empire, individuals grew richer. Great appetite fueled the successive conquests of Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar, and it was only a matter of time before these powerful personalities clashed. The latter won, but – interestingly from the point of view of social changes – did not eliminate democratic institutions. The conclusion is that Julius Caesar took over the most important functions, but did not declare himself a ruler, he only took over the most important positions as a single person. We can say, like Brutus, that it comes down to one thing, but from the perspective of social life it had its significance and was something else after all.

The Senate and state institutions survived, unfortunately the senators themselves contributed to its later downfall. The Senate became a place of prestige, not service to Roman citizens. Many compromising events occurred. An example is an episode from the life of the emperor Caligula, who decided to appoint his horse consul. To this day, mainly thanks to fiction, this irrational act is evidence of the emperor's madness. But can't it also be evidence of the ruler's sense of humor and the desire to compromise the caricatured "chosen ones" of the nation? Many facts from Caesar's life are not described objectively enough. Therefore, it is impossible to unequivocally deny the position that it was a suggestive act aimed at characterizing the imperfections of democratic institutions.

Over the centuries, democracy has not been a popular method of electing authorities or making decisions. Associations were formed – congregations, orders, which often took advantage of the opportunity to make decisions in a democratic way (Puziak). The election of the Pope in the Catholic Church is the result of a democratic election, although this thesis should be put very carefully. However, it is worth paying attention to the numerous Councils, which were nothing more than gatherings, resembling modern “conferences”. During these, a position was jointly established, which was then binding in the entire Universal Church. The very possibility of discussion was democratic in nature, and the decisions made were monumental for the entire Christian world.

5. Institutionalization

The search for a properly functioning system of social management in the face of the growing importance of the people – as the Hellenes would call it, the “demos” – took place during the approaching social changes in the modern era, which began in the 13th century.

The inevitable social changes led to the strengthening of the middle class, which wanted to assert its influence on the management of the state. The growing need to speak out found its outlet in the discussion on how to manage the community, so that the decisions made were “just” and “socially acceptable”. Taking power itself was always easier than proposing a system that would meet the above-mentioned two conditions.

There would be no modern democracy without Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, known as Montesquieu. In his most important work “On the Spirit of the Laws”, the thinker formed a view that is still widely present in the consciousness of society today. Repeated attempts to change this order ended in failure. Montesquieu, in his critique of French absolutism, under the influence of emerging British parliamentarism, postulated a separation of powers, which later became the foundation of the Constitution of the United States of America. The Founding Fathers, strongly influenced by the philosopher, created a new state structure. It turned out to be durable and acceptable to the majority of society.

The separation of powers exists in democratic systems all over the world. Although individual institutions may be called differently, the basic character should remain intact. It is the features of each power that determine its belonging to a specific type. It turns out that without institutions, democracy itself does not exist, cannot function and is not supported by the sense of justice of society.

Conclusion

Over the centuries, democratic decision-making has taken various forms. There were cases where voting was intended to make a decision already made credible, there were cases where the ruler wanted to free himself from responsibility for the decisions made, but there were also cases where conscious citizens made conscious, sometimes unpopular decisions. Over time, in addition to the rules that defined the way of democratic procedure and making balanced decisions, institutions emerged. The aim of institutionalization was to stabilize the decisions made, so that a mature society could accept a joint choice between existing options. This concept was extended to religious congregations, associations, confederations and entrepreneurial communities. The democratic decision, although corrected to an economic form, also became the basis for codes and capital companies - economic influence determines the weight of the vote, in most cases capital involvement or other forms countable for accountants. Democratic procedure must have rules and institutions that define per se, the key humanistic goals of democracy. Currently, the democratic concepts known in the world are subjected to philosophical, social and legal analysis to see if they meet the conditions of the "European standards of a democratic state". This in turn is of fundamental importance for the economy of the assessed country, its creditworthiness, currency strength or investment security.

References

1. Everitt, A. (2020). *Chwała Aten*. Poznań: Rebis.
2. Ewangelia św. Jana J. 19 1-12, J 19 13-16.
3. Goldworthy, A. (2000). *PAX ROMANA Wojny, pokój i podboje w świecie rzymskim*. Poznań: Rebis.
4. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pontius-Pilate>
5. Puziak, M. *Lista przeorów karmelitów gdańskich” w XVIII i XIX wieku*. Wyższe Seminarium Duchowne Diecezji Bydgoskiej.
6. Ratzinger, J. (1997). *Jezus z Nazaretu*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo M.
7. Saggs, H.W.F. (1973). *Wielkość i upadek Babilonii*. Warszawa: PIW.