

DEMOCRACY: A Note

Democracy is a confusing word if ever there was one.

Democracy is the word that was applied to the Communist dictatorship in East Germany between 1949 and its collapse in 1990.¹ Indeed, many a tyrant during the twentieth century called his regime: democratic. However, the idea of ‘democratic dictatorship’ is not so much of a bizarre oxymoron as it might seem. The ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ has often been thought of as *objectively* democratic because it embraces the mass of the population, and it serves the interests of the people. Dictatorships like that of the Castro brothers in Cuba is conceived of by many people as democratic because there are elaborate consultative arrangements administered through a network of consultative institutions, supported by the election of representatives and delegates at a number of different levels. These arrangements undoubtedly assist the island’s rulers in making decisions and in formulating policy.

In many ways these sorts of democratic dictatorships echo the arrangements common in many kinds of pre-capitalist societies where *consultative assemblies* of men at the level of the village, the clan, the tribe, were organised to make local decisions, to settle disputes or, at the level of large territorial assemblies like parliaments or *grand councils*, to advise princes, monarchs, or rulers of other sorts. Such assemblies provided rulers with vital information regarding popular opinion and potential sources of conflict; they gave warning of dangers to the state, raised revenue for national and regional coffers, and helped rulers to develop policy in a coherent and sustainable manner.

There were also the elite democracies of the ancient world – democracy in Athens – was the political arrangement under which an oligarchy of wealthy slave owning men consulted each other and ruled according to the best of their ability in what they took to be the best interests of their city and society. In the Roman Republic there were similar democratic arrangements where an oligarchy of enormously wealthy land owners managed a system of elite consultation in which poor free men participated, but were unable to exert influence without threats of riot and disorder.

¹ DDR Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic).

And there were also elective monarchies, principalities, and republics, like that of the Holy Roman Empire, or the Venetian Republic. In these kinds of state an elite of princes, cardinals, prince-bishops, or merchants, and ancient families, were able to participate in the election of rulers. A contemporary survival of these old arrangements is the periodic election of the Pope as the absolute monarch of the Vatican City and of the Roman Catholic Church by the College of Cardinals; the College not only elects the Pope, but is also an advisory and consultative body designed to help the ruler make wise decisions.

The kind of democracy that has arisen in wealthy, stable, and successful capitalist societies, on the other hand, is of a fundamentally different character. Liberal democracy or ‘bourgeois democracy’ or ‘modern democracy’, call it what you will, is rooted in two fundamental principles:

1. Private property.
2. The sovereignty of the Individual.

As what Adam Smith called “commercial society” – what we now call “capitalism” – developed there emerged a realisation that in order to flourish this kind of society required the inviolability of private property, and a labour force free of the constraints and servitude associated with slavery, serfdom, feudal ties, caste, race, and bonded labour. Throughout the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in those societies where capitalism really took root, all forms of servile labour were steadily squeezed out of the system.² Of course, elements of servitude remained in some places well into the middle of the twentieth century, but the defining characteristic of economically successful and stable capitalist states was the establishment of the rule of law in which contracts and the rights of the person are protected from the arbitrary actions of powerful individuals, and from arbitrary actions by the police and other state officials.

Such democracies are recognised by the emergence of religious freedom; the eventual extension of the right to vote to all men and women; the freedom of publication and speech, and

² Capitalist commercial enterprise actually generated slavery on a vast scale in colonial territories, and in the South of the United States, during the opening stages of its development. However, through the actions of the US Federal government and the British Navy, first the trade in slaves was abolished, and subsequently the institution itself was suppressed.

the freedom to assemble in public meetings and demonstrations, and to form independent organizations of all kinds.

Consequently, wealthy and stable capitalist societies have developed dense civil societies in which these rights and freedoms are exercised to check the arbitrary actions of the state, of local authorities, and of private capitalist companies and enterprises. The result has been government and legal systems, which enjoy high levels of consent and consequently, the minimal use of force and violence, in the maintenance of order and state power. Even in countries like the United States with its vast prison estate, capital punishment, and armed police, order is maintained, by and large, by consent. Networks of secret police and political detention camps, extra-judicial killings, the suppression of free speech and the press, are not employed by the Federal Government to maintain order within the United States, or by governments in France, Holland, Germany, or Britain.³

So bourgeois democracy, liberal democracy, modern democracy, call it what you will, is characterised by:

- The rule of law
- Defence of private property
- The sovereignty of the individual
- Free wage-labour
- Religious freedom
- Elected government
- Universal suffrage
- Freedom of speech
- Freedom of assembly
- Freedom of organization
- A robust civil society composed of non-state voluntary organizations of all kinds.

This sort of democracy has only arisen within the context of highly developed capitalist societies. Consequently, it does appear to be the case that while capitalism does not automatically produce modern democracy, it has a *tendency* to do so. Capitalism appears to be a *necessary* but not a *sufficient* condition for the emergence of modern democracy.

³ The existence of Guantanamo Bay, the criminal violation of democratic rights, or the formal abrogation of many democratic rights, by modern democracies in the context of wars throughout the twentieth century, and during the first decade of this century, does not undermine or cancel out the democratic character of such states. Democracy, not 'the truth', is the first casualty of war.