

### **Is Democracy a universal human value?**

The political evolution of mankind has not been a strictly uniform one. Although Marxism cherishes the notion of each stage of human political development moving, via an easily identifiable revolution, clearly onto the next, there cannot be said to be one, recognisably and distinctly human, way of governing a populace. The diversity of political systems that are present in the world today demonstrates that there is not a single, universal way by which humans govern themselves.

Bearing this in mind, it is hard to see democracy as a truly universal human value. In fact, 'democracy' itself is not easily definable and can create problems. A universal human value must, by its very nature, transcend the barriers of time and location. This suggests an engrained human state of mind that has existed from the first Homo sapiens down to the present day. This is clearly a difficulty because, not only are there numerous historical examples where mankind has rejected democracy but there is also the insurmountable problem of our inability to directly and truly connect with the past. This quandary means that we simply cannot tell whether the humans of the past, particularly the distant past, held democracy to be universal value. How can we know what form of democracy our earliest ancestors envisaged as they wandered the Ethiopian plains? We cannot know whether they had notions of a direct democratic format or plans for a representative system. Truthfully, we cannot know whether democracy even occurred to them at all. We do know, however, that a brute (even animalistic) characteristic of humans is to survive. This instinct for survival can manifest itself in a number of ways, ways in which the noble notions of democracy are often swept aside. This survival instinct can lead, in extreme and arguably dangerous cases, to a belief in a form of Nietzsche style 'ubermensch' or superman, who shows little or no concern for his fellow man. Alternatively there can be such a great desire for stability that there is an almost blind following of a leader who promises this stability and, more importantly, survival. However to blithely categorise mankind into leaders or followers is not correct. This survival instinct merely demonstrates that humans have some basic, universal values that come over and above democracy, these instincts, it can be argued if followed in the ways described above, make for a profoundly undemocratic environment. It seems that democracy only becomes a human concern when various, more primeval, cares have been dealt with. This accounts for the great European push for democracy that occurred from the Enlightenment and continued through to the twentieth century. It is only once a group has obtained a degree of comfort, education and, of course, basic amenity that they begin to consider the idea of a democracy. This was true of the British factory owning class who campaigned for the Great Reform Act of 1832, it is true of the American colonists, rich from the profits of tobacco and slaves, who revolted in 1776 and it is true today of the educated and exiled Zimbabweans, who continue to campaign for democracy. Therefore for a nation or group to even take an interest in democracy it requires a combination of factors; there must be a sizeable social grouping with enough material or intellectual wealth to want to protect their own possessions and this group must be excluded from the political process. This is essential. Lord Hailsham wrote:

"Democracies have done little more than capture control of an existing political apparatus which they have contrived to use in the manner of their former master, but with different purposes".

This is perhaps an extreme evaluation of democracy but it supports the idea that democracies are only wanted by those who are outside the political system and once they are inside they spend time and effort trying to exclude others from it. Overall this analysis does not suggest that democracy is a

universal value, it instead suggests that democracy is a way of acquiring power for one particular group (often the mercantile or industrial middle classes) and is only desired when certain social and economic circumstances prevail.

Humanity, it can be claimed, also has an inherent desire for what is just. Churchill famously said that, "Democracy is the worst system, apart from all the others". This view of democracy fits in with the 'higher' human desire for justice. In fact this view portrays democracy as the ideal which, due to this uniquely human plane of thought (where what is fair counts for something), humans adopt in a desire for justice. It suggests a sort of 'inbuilt preference' for the democratic system. This fits with the extremely favourable view of human nature, as expressed by Aquinas and Plato (who I paraphrase now), where, "no man would do what he knew to be wrong". Yet this does not necessarily mean that democracy itself is a universal human value, the desire to do what is right may be, but this to means so many different things to so many different people that a universal idea of right and wrong is also difficult to actually implement. This preference for justice of course does not result in an automatic adherence to democracy, the regime of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy was widely recognised to be 'just' and yet Burgundy was not by any means a democratic state. Similarly there are often miscarriages of justice in Western democracies. Consequently the preference for justice does not equal a universal desire for democracy. The situation of the present day gives weight to this assertion. The great outburst of Chinese patriotic sentiment surrounding the Beijing Olympic Games indicates that there is no desire, at least among those who partook in the many pro-China demonstrations, that China adopts democracy. The fact is that many around the world do not live in democracies and it is doubtless that they are happy in their lives, the worry of democracy is not apparent to them. The current state of affairs suggests that not even today, in a world which has been through most types of government in one country or another, is there a universal value of democracy. Many today would propose that current hegemony of democracy, at least among 'Western' states shows that a thirst for democracy is part of every human and eventually it will burst forth. This thought leads onto the notion that democracy is ultimately the 'destination' for a political entity, and that each country is at varying stages of that journey. This however is simply conventional thought, the fact that for centuries monarchy was viewed as the *de facto* political system for humanity demonstrates that there is no continuous democratic 'journey' that is universal to human beings. Democracy may well be the fairest system that humans can devise, but it does not mean that it is applicable in all times and in all places. At this juncture there must be a return to the definition of democracy, even within democracies there is no uniform way of even voting, let alone actually implementing a form of democratic government. Democracy, it is true, has often the most noble of intentions- to give political sovereignty to the people through enfranchisement. The results, however, do not always give the noblest ends and this is largely through human intentions. It is therefore very hard to justify a statement that does not take into account the fact that humans often work against democracy and that democracy itself can result in inhuman results that go against most other universal human values, the election of Adolf Hitler to the German Chancellorship in 1933 being the most obvious example. This embodies the problems of 'the tyranny of the majority' against which J. S. Mill warned.

History offers a wealth of examples that give examples of the fact that democracy is organic, rather than an inherent and universal human value. The growth of democracy in a series of societies can be charted, and numerous examples give evidence that a democratic value is not a universal human one. The ancient world was full of monarchies, plutocracies and even the occasional theocracy, the democracies were few and far between. Athens has been seen by many in the post-Classical world as a paradigm of the directly democratic system. This 'cradle of democracy' was not what we

would deem democratic today. The franchise was extremely limited with many in society, not least women, discriminated against. Athens, the ancient world's foremost example of democracy, was not a truly democratic state in the modern sense (i.e. sovereignty was not with the people it was with men of a certain age and class). Yet it was the closest humans had got after the growth of civilisation to democracy and therefore democracy cannot be seen as a universal human value if the first even quasi-democratic state took so long to come about. Nonetheless we owe much of our current ideas about democracy (not least the etymology) to the Classical world. This itself gives more evidence to suggest that democracy is not a universal value, it is arguable that, whilst the seeds of democracy (in the form of a desire for fairness and justice) are present in all humans, the refining of this into a system of government is largely an Athenian innovation, with the idea being refined as history has progressed. The past suggests that democracy does not exist as a 'default' option, it seems to only come about as a result of some sort of overthrowing of a previous order (often as a result of social or economic change). The story of the French revolution, which arguably caused the world to wake up to the idea of democracy, was one of a discontented, skilled 'labour aristocracy' wanting to seize power, with the implication of democracy the most convenient way of justifying it. Taking the French revolution as a case in point, it is clear to see that far from every human has democratic zeal imbedded in them. The revolution, which did probably begin with a welling up of popular feeling, was soon 'hijacked' by the *sans-culottes*, artisan class as a vehicle for gaining personal power, by the time Napoleon had been made first consul, there was little or no appetite for democracy in France. This somewhat tragic and bloody sequence of events is an example of the impermanence of political systems, a rule to which democracy cannot be exempt. In short, political systems and ideologies are always changing, both officially and unofficially, and there is therefore no single political system which can claim to be for all humans, at every time and in all parts of the world.

It is thus that the original point is returned to. The very nature of humans and the differences between individuals (who, it is important to remember, actually make up the populace and are governed) make it impossible to define a strictly universal human political value. Humans may all have the inherent desire to survive, to love or to achieve their goals, but it cannot be said that each human strives for a part in democracy or is born with the value of democracy embedded within them. Because of the lack of uniformity in terms of human governance, democracy cannot be seen as a universal human value. Alongside the Athenian assembly and the Roman Senate, the British Parliament has been viewed by many thinkers (such as Robert Lowe and J. S. Mill) as one of the most democratising influences of all time. If it was ever doubted that humans have no real democratic sentiment built in then surely the electoral turnouts seen in Britain today are the only evidence needed to prove that.

1,950 words

## **Bibliography**

J. S. Mill- 'On Liberty'

Lord Hailsham- 'The Dilemma of Democracy'

Plato- Dialogues

Robert Lowe- Speech to the House of Commons 26 April 1866