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PAUL'S FINAL ESSAY

CLASSICS

'Athens was a model for democracy' To what extent do you agree? Consider both sides of the question.

Athens has been regarded by many people as one of the first democracies of the world and thus has been viewed as a model of democracy. Democracy in this context refers to the rule of the people, that is when the people are able to exercise their will to be able to rule a country. Athens here refers to Classical Athens, and a model democracy means a democracy that serves as a leading model to which other democracies today should try and aspire to and reach a similar democracy to Athens. This essay will question whether this assumption of classifying Classical Athens as a model of democracy is necessarily correct, and whether in reality Classical Athens was nothing else but an inherently flawed democracy that enforced and supported many anti-democratic values. Overall, I believe that the institutionalised exclusion of certain groups of people in Athens and its attitudes towards these groups of people in regarding them as non-citizens, as well as the inherent flaw within its Constitution that it fails to stop Demagogues from gaining power makes it impossible to classify Athens as a model of democracy for countries today.

Athens was very much entrenched into democratic principles and this was reflected in its constitution and political structure. Those who held citizenship and were over twenty years old were eligible to vote and were able to participate in the 'ecclesia' – the Greek term for the assembly that could hold up to 6000 people – which played legislative, executive and judicial roles. It over sought the creation of new laws that would be proposed by the people there in attendance, and after discussion from both sides in favour and against the motion a final vote would decide whether it would pass through or not by a simple show of hands. Thus, the people were able to propose, amend, object and pass laws. The almost radical nature of this democracy was very much more direct than many modern democracies and thus it was the actual people and not elected officials who decided on what laws to legislate. There was a clear representation of the people who definitely had a say by allowing Athenian citizens to attend the assembly in person without having to elect representatives – who might not always represent the opinions and ideas of the citizens which voted him in power – and discuss current political issues. Therefore, Athens was very much under the power of the people and thus serves as a prime model for a successful direct democracy in which the people were able to exercise their political will.

That being said, we must address one of the important issues that grapples the moral side of the Athenian democracy, and that is who the 'electorate' were, comprised of 'the people' and in its turn looking at who the 'citizens' were and how representative were they in relation to the overall population of Athens. Democracy is defined as the rule of the people, and the people were the masses that live within the borders of Athens, those that are its residents. The right to vote and be part of the electorate was only granted to those that held Athenian citizenship, which is a legitimate reason. The problem here lies in the fact that it was very limited and very hard to acquire if you were not born to Athenian parents and impossible if you were either a slave or a woman regardless of whether you were the wife of an Athenian man. Citizenship was thus impossible to be taken by foreigners even if their families had resided in Athens for multiple generations, because the law was applied to a very strict *jus sanguinis* in which both parents of someone desiring citizenship had to be Athenian in order for one to become a citizen. This raises the question of whether such an anti-immigrant and anti-foreign stance can be accepted in our more tolerable, western democracies. What Athens deemed as the Athenian 'people' were thus in fact no other than a select group of the Athenian men that numbered around a fifth of its population, a clear minority within the population. So, if we take into account that the people are the whole population of Athens, majority rule was not achieved because only a minority could vote

– only Athenian men over the age of twenty – and exercise power and decide to a large extent the fate of others. Therefore, although Athens still had a democratic process of allowing people to vote and pass laws without the need for representation (direct democracy) it was only granted to a small minority who possessed an extremely limited citizenship. Thus, it is only fair to say that Athens was a partial democracy and did not represent the rule of the people but only a portion of the people ruling. Therefore, Athens cannot serve as a model for democracy because with the direct exclusion of women, immigrants and slaves from citizens' rights and in particular political rights, it would be promoting values that are antagonistic to our modern society such as the clear rule of the minority that in itself could come under the label of institutional elitism and raise the existential question of whether Athens really even was a Democracy.

Athens still serves as a model for democracy. Although its citizenship was limited to a certain group of people this is unimportant and fails in trying to disclaim the thought that Athens is democratic. Democracies are still defined as the rule of the people, but the people is a very loose term and who the people are and to whom citizenship belongs to has evolved over time for good or bad. Are we to disclaim every other democracy that existed prior to the introduction of women being allowed to vote solely because of a social prejudice that existed amongst all democracies and thus turn a blind eye to all the other benefits of its system. The very essence of democracy does not state that to be a democracy you have to include such and such people, that is a whole other discussion, but it is about the rule of the people. If the people, as in Athenian citizens, those that were officially the people of Athens, were restricted to native Athenian men, so be it – Athens viewed them as the people and based on that, they institutionalised a system in which what they deemed as the 'people' were able to vote and have the power to rule. Thus, what we must look at when we are talking about whether Athens classifies itself as a democracy that is good enough to become a model for other aspiring democracies, is its political structure and whether that was democratic. On this question we may answer that Athens was a model democracy, because it not only involved direct democracy but there was also a level of representative democracy, electing officials to govern in the name of the people within what was known as the Boule. The Boule was a council of five hundred members elected by lot each year from ten 'tribes' based on ten areas of Athens. Each 'tribe' – like our modern-day constituencies – would present fifty councillors who had to be over the age of thirty. Their main purpose resided in the administrative role of enacting the will of the Ecclesia, and although not having the power to create its own laws it still held numerous political power distinct to those of the Ecclesia and one of their main roles was to present deliberations to the Ecclesia. As such, Athens ensured that the people were able to vote and pass their own laws and rule in the Ecclesia, whilst nonetheless acknowledging that the people would not always be right or might be misguided by demagogues and thus by keeping a separate political entity that served an administrative and advisory role it guaranteed a distribution of power to limit the descent into tyranny. This is another prime example of the complex political structure of Athens that reflected its striving dedication in its purpose of implementing a successful democracy. Therefore, Athens definitely does serve as a model of democracy for we should not forget that it was one of the first proponents of such a notion of the rule of the people and that at its essence, although its notion of who the people were goes against our modern values, it does have a conviction in striving to attain a prosperous government where the rule of the people is enforced.

It is fair to say that one must look more at the political structure of the Athenian constitution rather than who the people are and whether it is morally right of the particularities of Athenian citizenship. One must not claim that Athens is a model for democracy by solely looking at the theoretical goodness of its constitution because there is a difference between what is written on paper and by how much it is implemented into action. What is written on paper does not necessarily reflect the distortions made on the practical side, and this is the key point that will be emphasised in disproving Athens as a model for democracy. All democracies that wish to be a model must be successful, and in Athens this was not always the case.

The main flaw within Athenian Democracy is the emergence of demagogues. Plato warns that this can happen due to the very nature of Direct Democracy in which excessive freedom will not only let individual people do as they wish and thus lead to the abuse and excess of freedom and ensuing chaos and anarchy.

But also, that due to any person being able to qualify if they have the ability to speak persuasively and use charisma to their advantage, power may be assumed by people who could be elected not based on their political experience, soundness of mind or attributes such as wisdom, prudence and moderation, but by attributes that do not necessarily reflect the virtues for leadership. Furthermore, this danger of demagogues and the rise of incapable and even dangerous leaders within the form of direct democracy that Athens embodied makes it fall short of being a model for democracy due to the clear political instability that wavers within the confines of the popular vote. One key example of the dangers of the naïveté and ignorance of the people being manipulated by the persuasive demagogic leaders to rouse the sentiments of the masses and to end up in ultimate failure is the Sicilian Expedition as recorded by Thucydides. The Sicilian Expedition won the fervent support of the Athenians who, brimming with patriotic pride, wished to amass glory, wealth and power. Thus, with the incompetence of the moderate non-interventionist General Nicias, Alcibiades was able to persuade him to launch a full-scale invasion. Alcibiades' charismatic persona helped him win the support of the masses serves as a key reminder of a demagogue's power, as Alcibiades employed a strong rhetoric that appealed to the passions of the masses, and thus the expedition was launched, but ended in an utter failure and disaster as the Athenian army lost and were subsequently slaughtered. This is a prime example of the dangers of demagogues within Athenian Democracy and how the rule of the people unchecked in a rather radical style of direct democracy sometimes is the cause of great ills. Therefore, Athens cannot be called a model for democracy, because although it might have a sound and brilliant constitution, the reality was sometimes bitter and effected the rises of demagogues who were key in exploiting the ignorance of the masses and thus led a country not by the wisdom of some leaders but by the oratory skills of self-interested power-seeking individuals.

To conclude, I believe that although Athens had one of the first democratic constitutions that still serves as a basis of relevance today, the failure of implementing it successfully ousts Athens to serve as a model for democracy. We may call Athens a model for democracy in terms of its constitution, but the main argument that tilts the balance is as aforementioned the dangers of demagoguery that lies within the heart of Athenian Democracy. Let us assume that the argument is whether Athens is a model of democracy in relation to our modern world. That being said, we may already point out the ethical side of Athens and state that it cannot function within our society. It has flagrantly violated our cultural norms and beliefs, in particular going against such values as non-exclusion, a more open society to foreigners, and the belief in the equal opportunities for everybody, including women. In contrast to these values, Athens is based upon a belief of a highly selective, hereditary, and limited citizenship that is reserved solely to Athenian-born men. Furthermore, although you had a legislative assembly that allowed any citizen of Athens to participate politically and a Boule that was able to review laws and administratively enforce laws, the incapability to successfully restrain powerful demagogues from deliberately using the people's ignorance and lack of expertise in politics to further their own interests makes it a deeply flawed democracy. A system tampered by political turmoil and instability in the face of such powerful figures such as Alcibiades who, although he was ultimately exiled, still managed to use his moment of power to topple internal stability for Athens and lead to a serious diplomatic deterioration with other fellow Greek city-states. Therefore, with such people who would be able to exercise more power than is usual and with opposition that would be blatantly shut down by the roused and overwhelmed followers devoid of reason, Athens cannot claim to be a model for democracy, especially not today.

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