

**TWO DIFFERENT IDEAS OF FREEDOM:  
DEMOCRACY IN THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT  
OF GREEK POLEIS  
AND FREEDOM OF MODERN TIMES**

**SUMMARY**

In ancient Greece, the *polis* is the dimension in which the individual is fully realized. People's rights are recognized only when they participate in the political life of their community and contribute to produce the common good: the *polis* is considered the horizon of the moral life, the basis of the relationship with oneself and with others.

The *polis* was born in a period between 850 and 750 BC, during the Greek colonial expansion in the Mediterranean, such as political, economic and military independent, with its own laws and characterized by its own form of government.

The fall of the archaic tyrants and the contemporary come forward of a class of "new men" is the starting point for the development of the *polis*. Power is gradually transferred to the city and its institutions.

In the *polis*, citizenship and the consequent allocation of political rights are recognized only to free men, called *politai*, while are still excluded women, slaves, children under the age of eighteen and foreigners. Aristotle argues that "citizen" is one who can be not only ruled, but it can also rule over others, and this ability is attributed only to those who, not being forced to work (as they are slave-owners), have enough free time to devote to management of public affairs.

The people shall exercise political functions through three bodies: the *Ekklesia*, the *Bulè* and the judiciary organs.

The progressive loss of importance of the judiciary organs and of the Council sees the administration of justice exercised directly by citizens chosen at random and gathered in the Assembly. The term *isonomy*, which indicates the equality of all citizens before the law, is thus replaced by *demokratia*, "power of the people", which now governs directly through collective bodies.

The age of Pericles is considered to be the happiest and most glorious period in the history of Athens. Pericles held the position of strategist for the first time in 460 BC, which remains virtually unbroken until 429, the year of his death.

The age of Pericles is characterized by a remarkable development of individual freedom and a high regard for the dignity of men.

Pericles is considered to be the advocate of Athenian democracy, a term that appears for the first time during his own government.

After the death of Pericles, however, there is a progressive degeneration of the democratic regime in demagoguery. The claim by the people, especially of violent wing, of the right to place themselves above the law, leads to an "involution" of the term demagogue, which now acquires a negative and approaches to the figure of the tyrant.

The word "democracy" has, however, originally, a very different meaning from that given to it today. It was born as controversial and derogatory expression, coined by political opponents of Pericles, to indicate a form of government characterized by the exclusive domain, and often violent, of people. The concept of "government" is in fact better indicated by the term *archy*, while *kratos* means, more properly, "power", "material force". Greek democracy, rather than the government of all, it is the dominance of one side (the majority), on the other; it is true that all citizens are treated as equals, but it is also true that there is great disparity between the category of free men and the slaves. The democratic government of Athens is founded on its inequality between these categories, and the abuse of power

by the demo against all those who are excluded. *Demokratia*, ancient Greek, means "dictatorship of the people".

The term democracy, though, shows only one of the possible forms of "government of the most".

Various classic authors attempt, in fact, to overcome the contradictions that characterize the political scene of the time by introducing a classification of constitutions, which provides, for each of them, a good and bad form.

Democracy, in particular, takes positive value, or a negative one, depending on the different meanings that the authors choose to give to it.

The term evolved from a largely neutral-negative connotation, taking in the thought of the historian **Herodotus** of Halicarnassus the name of *isonomy*.

In his *Logos Tripolitikòs*, a box inserted in Book III of his Histories, Herodotus relies on the description of the different political regimes, monarchy, aristocracy and isonomy, three characters who discuss about which government should be given to Persia after the death of King Cambyses. Otane, which proposes the isonomy, presents it as a people's government in which all men are equal before the law, and in which every

decision is subject to the control of the citizens. On the principle of equality of men rests the institution of the draw of the charges.

But we must keep in mind that the isonomy mentioned by Herodotus corresponds to the democratic regime established in the fifth century in Athens by Pericles. The Athenian democracy is reflected in the prevalence, even violent, of the people and as such was often similar to tyranny: the demo, as well as the tyrant, is considered to be above the law, and the law itself is to introduce a large inequality social, foreseeing categories of free men and slaves of men. The isonomy mentioned by Herodotus, paradoxically, is also founded on inequality and the abuse of those who are part of the demo against those which are excluded by law, and hence the term demokratia can only assume therefore a strong valence negative.

**Plato.** Athenian philosopher of aristocratic family, nurtures a spontaneous contempt for democracy. The concept of democracy, however, is taken up, and in part re-evaluated, by Plato in the *Politicus*.

The criticism that Plato moves to democracy is mainly focused on the concept of equality as a leveling mechanic, and the fact that freedom is understood by the mass popular sovereignty as unlimited, not likely to be hampered. But if the mass does not act as a despot, and obey the laws that

it itself, through the Popular Assembly passed a resolution, democracy proves to be a viable political form and able to stand properly.

**Aristotle**, in his *Politics*, uses two terms to describe two different forms of democracy: *demokratia* for a "bad" government of the people, irrespective of liberty, *politia* for a "good" government of the many, in fact, similar to the "mixed constitution" of his teacher. What Aristotle calls *demokratia* does not correspond to the modern meaning of democracy, but rather in what today is known as "demagoguery" a government that, neglecting the good of all, puts the town meeting above the law itself, select the judges by lottery and not on an accrual basis, and ends up creating conditions that cause the city to sink into chaos. It is based on a blind egalitarianism, which holds that all those who are free to be the same in all points of view.

Should be noted, however, that the *demokratia* is considered by Aristotle as the less severe among the forms of government diverted, because it differs only slightly from *politia*, that is, in fact, the shape more similar to the positive real modern democracy. The first classical author to explicitly assign a positive meaning to the term "democracy" is **Polybius**, historian of Greek origin who spent many years of his life in Rome, whose political system will have a decisive influence on the thinking of the author.

In Book VI of the Histories, Polybius called a democracy what Aristotle called polity, a good form of popular government. Ochlocracy also coined the word to describe the degenerate form, corresponding to that which has hitherto been the demokratia, a form of government in which decisions are taken by the "mass", a term used here in its pejorative sense.

"Democracy of the ancient" through the different meanings attributed to it in the classical era, is the basis of subsequent historical developments that lead to today's concept of democratic form. It is clear, however, that the "modern democracy" differs greatly, context and structure, from the old, which provided for the direct exercise of power by the people, the ability to legislate on all matters belonging to any field, marginalization and exclusion of entire sectors of the population from political life, and the use of violence as a means to maintain order and make compliance with the law.

The ancient democracy is based on direct and equal participation of all citizens (excluding, therefore, slaves, foreigners and women) in political activity, which occurs through mechanisms draw and rotation; modern times, however, is based on the competition between candidates who, through free elections, is delegated the power management policy.

The equality of the Athenian democracy, however, is, in fact, a direct denial of that considered "natural."

The inevitable contradiction between these two fundamental principles of democracy occurs because, on the one hand the equality of conditions requires that we rely on will of the majority, delegating to its own sovereignty, on the other individualism weakens social cohesion and drives men to resist the political power.

If democracy is just an empty assertion of equality, you are likely to create a standardized and conformist society, where the minority must conform without question the will of the majority, and at the same time atomist, because individuals are isolated and do not participate actively in the political life.

The solution to this paradox, for **Tocqueville**, is the formation of associations: the creation of intermediary bodies that strengthen social bonds, allow the individual the power to delegate and outsource part of their freedom to the state, and ensure at the same time, control of the majority of the opposition, as well as in liberal democracy USA.

Tocqueville's reflections on equality and freedom, and the modern conception of democracy as opposed to the old one, are reproduced and extended by **Benjamin Constant**, author of liberal orientation in the speech *De la liberté des anciens comparée à celle des modernes*: in this essay Constant outlines the essential features of the "Liberty of the Ancients" and the "Liberty of the Moderns," showing how a society cannot really be called free if it is not able to provide individuals not only political rights, but also the full power on themselves and on their way of life.

The Liberty of the Ancients, Constant says, is based on the direct participation of citizens in politics, through debates and votes in public meetings: to engage in these activities, the citizens have, however, need a class of slaves, to take care of those manufacturing jobs that they do not have the time nor the energy to perform. Also, since it is necessary to gather all in one place to discuss political issues, Liberty of the Ancients is bordered to the small and homogeneous society, composed of a small number of individuals.

The ancient democracy is therefore the prevalence of certain social classes over others, the total oppression by the political existence of the individual: where there is a maximum of democracy, there is little freedom.

Modern democracy is to be seen as representative, based on the participation of everyone in the management of public affairs through the free election of representatives, and liberal, based on the principle of separation of powers, universal suffrage, on respect for the Constitution as a limit authority government and guarantee the rule of law, and recognition and guarantee of fundamental rights and individual freedoms.

In conclusion, therefore, there is no doubt that the introduction of democracy in Athens represents a revolution in political and socio-cultural of tremendous historical importance; However, we must consider that the Greek notion of *demokratia*, which expresses the sovereignty of the people on the others, has very different values (and in some cases diametrically opposing) to those that characterize democracy today.

The actual meaning ascribed to this term refers to a political system based on tolerance and mutual acceptance, and thus has completely lost the connotations of violence and abuse that characterized the ancient democracy.