

The Strange History of the Word “Democracy”

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Surprisingly, the Founding Fathers of the United States were anti-democrats. Democracy is supposed to be a regime where the people rule themselves directly. Such a system was thought to be favourable to the poor, who would easily have the majority at assembly. Writers and politicians who used the word “democracy” shared a quite negative opinion of the political value of such a regime.

The first speakers of English who settled in America were the Puritans who arrived in Massachusetts in 1629. For the majority of them, “democracy” had a major flaw: it is not a type of regime mentioned in the Bible. In the Puritan mind, democracy generally referred to chaos, irrationality and meanness. The founders of the US were self-proclaimed anti-democrats.

During the War of Independence, in order to distinguish themselves from the radical fringe, mainstream Patriot leaders and members of colonial assemblies—such as John Adams—opposed “democracy” to “republic”: “I was always for a free, republic,” claimed Adams, “not a democracy, which is [an] arbitrary, tyrannical, bloody, cruel, and intolerable ... government.”

The goal of the “revolution” against the United Kingdom was not to give more power to the people but to increase the power of the institution they were members of, and consequently, their own power. As noted Alexander Hamilton, “Our separation from the mother country cannot be called a revolution ... There have been no changes in the laws, no one’s interests have been interfered with, everyone remains in his place, and all that is altered is that the seat of government is changed.”

Assemblymen were openly against “democracy,” but they referred, however, to the fiction of the representation of the people’s sovereignty so as to gain popular legitimacy for their Struggle. Representation and (direct) democracy were then two opposite concepts. Thus, no Americans understood that “democracy” was what motivated them to embrace the Patriotic cause. “Democracy” was neither the dream of mainstream Patriots nor the name they gave to their dream.

A few Americans took the opportunity of the War of Independence to advocate economic equality, and some openly referred to their program as the embodiment of the “democratic” ideal. For instance, the radicals of Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, instructed their elected delegates in November 1776 to write a Constitution for the State, that it was to be a “simple democracy, or as near it is possible.” Moreover, they must “oppose everything that leans to aristocracy or power in the hands of the rich and chief men exercised to the oppression of the poor.” However, after Independence, a number of Patriot leaders shared the feeling that a too “democratic” spirit had blossomed up on American soil. A constitutional convention in Philadelphia, mainly determined by a drive to get rid of the democratic spirit, resulted in the drafting of the federal constitution and the official creation of the “United States.” James Madison wrote of Alexander Hamilton, “He sees evils operating in the States which must soon cure the people of their fondness for democracies.” Other delegates talked of “the excess of democracy,” of “the turbulence and follies of democracy,” of the “vices of democracy,” of democracy as “evil.”

The Convention of Philadelphia was followed by a public debate opposing the so-called “Federalists” and the so-called “anti-Federalists.” The “Federalists” clearly distinguished their project—a “republic”—from their opponents’

ideal—"democracy." "Democracy" was for the Federalists an object of contempt. For one of them, for instance, "A simple democracy, or an unbalanced republic, is one of the greatest evils."

While blaming the poor and "democracy" on the one hand, the delegates in Philadelphia praised the people on the other. The myth of popular sovereignty was used to establish the legitimacy of the new political system. Yet, no serious debates dealt with the rule of the people. Delegates did not intend to offer the people any real means to rule. Pompous declarations about the sovereignty of the people were uttered simultaneously with statements about keeping the people out of the decision-making process. James Belknap, father of New England, declared: "Let it stand as a principle that government originates from the people; but let the people be taught that they are not able to govern themselves."

It is only around 1830 that political actors discovered it was easier to get elected when they identified themselves with "democracy." Then the term became broadly used in a laudatory fashion as another tool to manufacture consent by making the masses think that the system is ruled by and for the people.

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