

*Democracy:
Starting with Solon*

In the present day, the term “democracy” is well known. In any democracy, the common people have power. However, each democratic government has a unique way of implementing this concept of common rule. There arises the difficulty in designating what exactly constitutes a democracy, and at which point a non-democratic government crosses the boundary into democracy. The political reforms implemented by Solon around the beginning of the sixth century B.C. demonstrate some revolutionary democratic aspects, but also contradict many democratic ideals, representing an ongoing dilemma concerning the implementation of the contract between a democratic government and its people. Although not necessarily democratic by modern standards, Solon’s reforms are frequently considered democratic in the context of the time period in which he was politically active because they were the first motions towards what would later become the basis for democracy.

One of the most basic elements of democracy is the distribution of power throughout the people. Prior to Solon, power had generally been centralized in one man, or within a small aristocratic class. Control was often hereditary, and Solon’s shift away from this traditional class system was a huge step for democracy. A huge component of Solon’s reforms was the restructuring of the social system into economic classes, as “Wealth brings worth and prestige (Hesiod, 46)¹”, according to Hesiod. At first glance, this change to monetary distinction doesn’t seem to improve the stratification of the people. However, since it was possible to accumulate wealth through trade and good business ventures, the new economic system allowed social mobility. This was in direct contrast to the pre-existing aristocratic system, in which newly wealthy people were not allowed to hold the same official positions as those who had inherited their wealth and therefore their political influence. The reform went so far as to draw office holders by lots, so that there was strict equality within a given class. Solon also accounted for the reality that economic gain, while possible, was not always a simple task by providing an

¹ Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*. Trans. M. L. West. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

opportunity for any member of the top three of the four tiers he had just created to hold political office.

To the lowest economic class, which was denied the right to hold any official office, Solon gave the right to act as jurors. Both Plutarch and Aristotle claimed this to be “absolutely critical (Plutarch, 62)²” because “when people are masters of the vote they are masters of the state (Aristotle, 50)³”. The jury is clearly important in deciding the cases that come before them, but the law granting the right of appeal to a popular court meant that there was the possibility for any case, even one that was originally tried by office-holders, to come before a jury of the bottom class. This gave the “hired hands (Plutarch, 61)”, as the lowest class was called, a method with which to affect the government of Athens. There was speculation that Solon went so far as to write his laws in vague words, so that they were open to interpretation and required the services of the popular jury to make any final decisions concerning their intentions, and ensure that the hired hands had influence. The flexibility of the economic system democratized Athenian culture by eliminating the emphasis on familial status and background, and by allowing all citizens to participate in some manner of the government regardless of their social position.

Solon satisfied other requirements for the democratic title as well, by introducing the concept of individual rights to the people. Encompassed in the idea of individual rights is the belief that an individual has inherent worth and that all individuals are equal. Individual rights also include the right of a person to make his or her own choices, and most importantly, the protection of these rights by law. Solon’s law prohibiting the use of a person as collateral indicates a sentiment that an individual is something more than a bargaining chip, fulfilling the first aspect of individual rights. All people, including Solon himself, were subject to the same set of laws, which were written down on the Kyrbeis and posted in the Portico of the Basileus (Aristotle, 48) for all to see. An example where the right to make choices entered into Solon’s reforms is in his laws on inheritances. Under Solon’s laws, a man could decide, within a set of regulations, who

² Plutarch, Greek Lives. Trans. Robin Waterfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

³ Aristotle, The Athenian Constitution. Trans. P. J. Rhodes. London: Penguin Books, 2002.

was to receive his money and land after his death. Previously, the inheritance had automatically gone to surviving family members.

Almost more important than legislation on individual rights is the ability to protect those rights for all people by law. Solon accounted for this by allowing “anyone who wished to seek retribution for those who were wronged (Aristotle, 50)” to do so. This law prevented people from taking advantage of the poorer classes, because another citizen with adequate funding could step up to make the case. Solon also instituted more generalized protections, such as making it a crime to rape a free woman (Plutarch, 67) and ensuring that decisions were made independently of any influences that might be responsible for “undermining a person’s powers of reason (Plutarch, 65)”.

His socio-economic reforms and his institution of individual rights as described above make a decent case for the democracy of Solon’s policies. However, by the same definitions of democracy as were used to demonstrate the opposite, some of Solon’s legislation is considered severely anti-democratic.

Solon’s reorganization of the class system helped to alleviate restrictions based on heritage, but still reserved positions for each class. The higher classes held the more important offices. For example, election to the Archonship and therefore the Areopagus was limited to only the top class. The Areopagus “administered most and the greatest of the city’s affairs (Aristotle, 44)” and were consequently more powerful. While Solon’s system was much more compliant than the one he overrode, it was still a far cry from democracies of today. In the United States, any citizen of adequate age may hold any office if they receive the majority of votes, regardless of their social or economic class. Practically, it may be prove extremely difficult for any US citizen to gain that majority vote, but it was legally possible. Similarly there was an opportunity to move upwards within the class structure of Solon’s system, but the required economic gain was also not a simple task to accomplish.

Additionally, Solon’s class system limited citizenship. Therefore office holding was limited as well, excluding women for example, and only allowing exiles and those with families as well as a profession to become naturalized citizens. Likewise, the US government initially excluded blacks and women from voting and office holding privileges. As time progressed, these groups fought for their rights to do so, recognizing

that those privileges are a central part of being a member in a democracy. Currently, there is a general sentiment that a democracy cannot exclude people based on race and color. Individual rights were indirectly affected by a lack of citizenship, as well. Without citizenship and the right to participate in the legal process it becomes difficult to implement and protect personal rights. Women had restrictions on what they could wear, what they could carry, and how they could travel, for example.

Solon infringed on individual rights in other ways, as well. He created laws on marriage, mourning, and trade. The presence and restrictions of the laws eliminated the need for the individual to make the decision that is appropriate for them. Solon required that everyone participate in a political dispute, or be punished (Plutarch, 63 and Aristotle, 50). This eradicates the right of a person to make the choice to remain outside of the dispute. However, it is nearly impossible to write a code of laws that looks to protect both the government as a whole and its individual citizens at the same time. Solon implemented the “law of denunciation” in which it was legal to try “those charged with conspiring to dissolve the democracy (Aristotle, 49)”. The freedom of expression that is a key element of a democracy does not go so far as to allow people to express oneself in a manner contrary to the democracy. This is not unique to Solon’s reforms, however; the US has similar laws governing treason and conspiracy, and additionally refuses to allow people to remove themselves from the democracy, as was demonstrated by the Civil War. The reforms of Solon were therefore not always entirely democratic, but closely reflect the origins of democracy in the US.

Furthermore, when deciding whether Solon’s reforms can accurately be termed democratic, one must consider the fact that Solon did not have previous democracies to examine. Because of this, it is fair to bear in mind Solon’s intentions when he implemented his policies, regardless of their current standing as democratic or not.

The main proof indicating that Solon’s intentions were democratic was his refusal to take up the position of tyrant when it was freely offered to him (Plutarch, 44). Both of the disputing factions that drove his policies were unhappy with his reforms but “he preferred to incur the hatred of both by saving his country and legislating for the best (Aristotle, 51)”. He recognized that democracy is unfavorable as an immediate solution, but much preferable in the long run, and therefore “secured the laws against alteration for

a hundred years (Aristotle, 48)” so that the people had time to grow accustomed to them. Many of Solon’s reforms, seemingly anti-democratic, were founded in a desire to protect the people from themselves. For example, he instituted restrictive laws on marriage to ensure that unions were being made for mutual affection, rather than “mercenary and commercial (Plutarch, 64)” reasons. Of his own laws, Solon admits they were not ideal, but “They were the best [the Athenians] would accept (Plutarch 58)”. This implies that Solon was even more democratically minded than his legislation demonstrated, but he was intelligent enough to realize that the people weren’t ready to receive such novel ideas. Indeed, upon Solon’s self-imposed exile, Athens crept back towards tyranny under Pisistratus.

People consider Solon democratic not only because his reforms were democratic by modern terms, but rather that, placed within the context of his time, his reforms were exceptionally democratic and paved the way for increasing democracy in the future. Solon implemented a new class system that allowed social mobility, and also gave each class a role within the democracy. He began to develop the concept of individual rights, while instituting legislation to protect those rights for all people. Solon overcame popular discontent with his reforms, and demonstrated his devotion to the democratic movement by rejecting offers to become a tyrant. He attempted to define the relationship between the government and the people through his laws while recognizing that the people were not ready to accept his ideals. Many of his policies would fit well in democratic institutions of modern times, and many of those that would be rejected by today’s standards have been adapted from his original ideas. Solon’s commitment and innovation paved the way for democracy as we see it today.