

Rethinking Democracy



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Book Reviews: Meaning of Democracy

Rethinking Democracy. By Carol C. Gould.
New York: Cambridge University Press,
1988. 363p. \$39.50.

Few ideas in recent philosophy and political theory have had the staying power of Isaiah Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberty. Two decades ago Gerald MacCallum received widespread attention and support for his claim that the negative freedom-positive freedom distinction is misleading on the grounds that freedom is a single concept with three distinct components (actors, goals, and possible limitations on the realization of goals). Yet the dispute between advocates of negative and positive freedom has remained very much alive. Richard Flathman recently argued for the analytical and political superiority of negative freedom and the liberal polity that it recommends. In *Rethinking Democracy*, Carol Gould offers an important and ambitious defense of equal positive freedom as the proper normative grounding for the primacy of democracy in social and political life.

Neither Gould nor others argue as if they were simply emphasizing one element in the concept of freedom. Clearly, there is more at stake. And the stakes in this intensified philosophical debate have become greater because there is growing uncertainty about whether settled liberal principles are by themselves a sufficient guide to a politics of freedom. As impressively shown by Gould, there is also a strong belief that a viable theory of positive freedom can be constructed incorporating the strengths and rejecting the basic deficiencies in liberal (negative) conceptions of freedom, while avoiding the authoritarian impulses that Berlin and others have argued necessarily follow in the wake of positive theories of freedom.

Gould acknowledges that a strength of negative liberty lies in its respect for the freedom of individuals as individuals, reflected in the insistence that political and civil liberties are essential if individuals are to be protected from outside interference. Yet she argues that liberal individualism is flawed because it cannot adequately account for the social character of certain of our choices: the formal freedom to choose offered by negative liberty is too narrowly individualistic. Perhaps more importantly, theories of negative freedom and liberal democracy are too little concerned with pro-

viding the resources that give individuals genuine opportunities to act on the basis of their choices. Liberal theories have focused on the institutions and political processes of government, ignoring the need to foster freedom and democracy in social, economic, and cultural institutions.

At the same time Gould is aware of the dangers traditionally identified with positive conceptions of freedom—most notably, that ideas such as self-realization or self-development have often led to organic conceptions of society whereby individual “development” means being forced to accept values that are imposed by more “enlightened” elites. She constructs a theory of democracy—grounded in freedom as self-development—that carefully charts a path between the isolated freedom of liberal individualism and the authoritarian dangers associated with holistic socialism. Thus the task she sets for herself is as important as it is difficult.

Her primary claim, following Gewirth, is that the fact of human agency leads to equal positive freedom as the basic moral principle of political life. Support for this principle means that we must be as concerned with providing the resources (enabling conditions) needed to develop and pursue individual purposes as with the negative rights (constraining conditions) that protect us from interference by others. Gould's normative argument offers a theory that requires democratic participation to reach beyond the realm of government into social, economic, and cultural institutions. In particular, she offers a normative grounding for workers' self-management within the context of firms—a grounding that is explicitly meant to extend the right of democratic participation to those who work in all social institutions. Thus, her conception of democracy has a firmer normative basis and a far wider range than most contemporary democratic theory.

Gould draws from an impressive array of contemporary philosophy and social theory as she carries out her project. She develops a more thorough conception of positive freedom as self-development; constructs a social ontology of individuals-in-relations as the basis for positive freedom and democracy, building on the Kantian ideal of autonomy and Habermas' notion of undistorted communication; expands important conceptions of distributive justice; extends ideas about human rights,

especially, the right to property; revises claims about the formation of the democratic personality; assesses the potential for achieving democratic control of technology; and even offers new arguments about the obligation to promote individuals' self-development through support for human rights within the context of international relations.

This book makes an important contribution to our understanding of freedom and its implications for democracy within the context of contemporary social and political life. The important project of constructing a more adequate theory of freedom and democracy for the circumstances we face is far from complete, however. Gould's autonomous agents, empowered as they may be, are poorly connected to the social and historical context that informs their choices. Her conception of positive freedom as self-development is still too ambiguous, and I doubt her confidence as to the meaning of self-development and as to what resources are needed to provide equal positive freedom will be widely shared. Without greater clarity and persuasiveness on these issues and the moral and political principles that support them, the controversy about positive and negative freedom will continue unabated. Advocates of positive freedom will continue their quest for a politics that supports individuals' self-development, and liberal individualists will continue to construct theories of the limited state. But Gould's book offers a powerful criticism of, and alternative to, prevailing theories of liberal democracy grounded in negative liberty. Her aggressively democratic theory will challenge liberals to make more of freedom than noninterference and to extend democracy beyond the realm of government.

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Democracy and Participation in Athens. By R. K. Sinclair. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. 253p. \$42.50.

Perhaps in reaction to the uncritical romanticizing of Athenian democracy and to the "democratic excesses" of the 1960s, a literature has emerged that in the name of historical realism and accuracy aims to demythologize the vision of a participatory polity. Athens was

less democratic than we think not only because of its subordination of women and its dependence on slaves, metics, and an empire but also because of the role wealth, social standing, and geography played in the unequal distribution of power among the male population who were full citizens. It is partly in response to this controversy that Sinclair has written a book on citizen participation in Athens from 450 to 322 B.C. He wants to determine the possibilities and realities, the means and extent, the cost and consequences, and the institutional forum and forums of such participation. Why was politics so central for Athenian citizens? What responsibilities and obligations did it entail? Who did and who did not participate, in what ways, for what ends, and in what degree? How much was political participation a matter of "compulsion," and how much was it based on the willing enthusiasm of those insistent on determining their collective lives?

Sinclair's focus is institutional, which for him means the lot and leadership, the council assembly, and juries. The lot was significant not only because its use presupposed that politics was a matter of general competence and shared wisdom rather than a matter of expertise but also because it limited the opportunities for the emergence of powerful state officials, mitigated what would have been intense political rivalries and, with its rotation in office and principle of collegiality, provided an experience of power and participation for every citizen. Political leadership was crucial because there was an "inherent" need in Athens for "individuals whose standing or expertise or experience or ability enabled them to play an active role and take initiative" (p. 37). Two of the eight chapters and part of a third are devoted to the "hazards" and "rewards" of leadership, to how and why individuals sought positions of power despite the stringent accountability demanded of them and occasional ruthlessness directed at them by the demos. Three chapters discuss the council assembly and juries. Sinclair emphasizes how the council's large membership's changing composition and range of functions gave extensive opportunities for, and placed considerable responsibility on, Athenian citizens to become familiar with the part in debates and the formulation of policy and reminds us that each year several thousand Athenian citizens were selected by lot as dicasts or heliasts. Given such institutions, as