
The author presents his work as a therapeutic response to a series of delusions that he believes grips the modern American mind. The dominating delusion is that democratic government as understood in the contemporary United States is a good in itself; this condition is seen as being related to secondary delusions concerning the democratic status of representative government in the United States, the capacity of majority rule to produce good outcomes, and the extent to which it may be legitimated by appeals to a democratic tradition that has its origins in classical Greece. Despite the author's agenda, the balance of Professor Samons' account is weighted heavily towards his interpretation of Athenian democracy, returning to contemporary issues only in the last dozen pages of the seventh chapter.

In the course of his discussion of ancient democracy, Professor Samons ranges widely over the history of Athenian government, concentrating, however, on the period when Athenian imperial ambitions precipitated a prolonged conflict with Sparta and her allies. He considers the structure and practice of Athenian democracy and related issues such as the qualifications for citizenship, and the relationship between the citizen body and demagogues and more ambivalent figures such as Pericles and Socrates. There are extensive discussions of issues of public finance in relation to the changing aspirations of the demos, and of the foreign and imperial policy of democratic Athens.

Professor Samons' treatment of these themes is given a distinctive edge by the thesis of his book. He thus dwells at considerable length on the propensity of Athenian democracy to produce vicious outcomes. It is identified with fervent nationalism, a cynical disregard for the rights and interests of allies, and an increasingly
sharp appetite for living off the property of others. The demos is also seen as being prone to bouts of extreme irrationality that frustrated the efficient pursuit of these ignoble goals. Although Samons presents these criticisms with considerable verve, they do not appear to be strikingly original. More serious for his thesis however, is the failure to forge plausible links between the deliberative outcomes of Athenian government and the political culture to which it related. Thus while Professor Samons at times acknowledges that Athenian nationalism predated democratic government, and recognizes that the latter did not have a monopoly on wrongdoing, he does not show how attitudes and values that were characteristic of Athenian democracy necessarily gave rise to the outcomes that he deplores. What is missing here is an account of relationship between social forms, individual attitudes, political structures and policy outcomes. Consequently, the author is driven to rest his case on weak claims that democracy exacerbated the vices of earlier regimes, or to lay the blame for some of Pericles's errors at the feet of those who were unwise enough to elect him to high office.

Although Professor Samons' analysis of Athenian democracy is generally hostile to its subject matter, in a couple of asides he signals that despite its shortcomings it was not as bad as modern American democracy. The Athenians had a clear view of the duties attached to citizenship and refrained from funding current expenditure by mortgaging the labour of future generations. Moreover, despite the manifold shortcomings of Athenian democracy, its supporters never saw it as an end in itself. They continued to view politics in light of the religious value of Athenian society and this had a moderating effect on the outcomes of democratic decision making.

Having largely ignored modern issues in most of the substantive chapters of his book, Professor Samons returns to them with a vengeance in the latter part of the penultimate chapter. One theme here is that defenders of American democracy regard democracy itself as a supreme value, but the author extends his assault to include values such as freedom, choice and diversity which he sees as being integral to contemporary American democracy. This...
polemic bristles with fervent but underdeveloped references to the moral basis of political communities and is premised on a view of natural sociability that would not be out of place in a tract by Joseph de Maistre.

While Professor Samons' statements of a political philosophy never move beyond the level of assertion, his portrayal of the underpinnings of modern American democracy is a caricature that has no purchase on scholarly discussions of this topic. It is indicative of the weakness of his case that the notes to this section of his work provide commentary on his own statements rather than on the literature, and that he confuses discussions concerning the preconditions of democracy with considerations of its ethical basis and justification.

Professor Samons' expertise in ancient history means that while readers may resist the conclusions which he reaches on the character and practice of Athenian democracy, they may derive benefit from parts of his detailed analysis. The same cannot be said of his claims about modern American democracy. Having strongly held views does not compensate for a failure to engage with the large and sophisticated body of philosophical, theoretical and empirical literature on this subject. As a result, the lessons for modern democracy that Professor Samons draws in the concluding pages of his book—the need for courage, piety and disinterestedness in democratic leaders and their willingness to upbraid the citizen body when this becomes necessary—remain firmly lodged in the realm of moralizing rhetoric, lacking substance or any philosophical interest.

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