

THE MODERN RELEVANCE OF ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHERS' GUIDELINES FOR A GOOD-FUNCTIONING DEMOCRACY

RELEVANȚA MODERNĂ A GHIDURILOR FILOSOFILOR GRECI ANTICI PENTRU O DEMOCRAȚIE DE SUCCES

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Abstract: Această lucrare explorează relevanța principiilor filosofilor greci antici pentru o democrație bine funcționantă. Se examinează idealurile democratice ale lui Herodot, Platon și Aristotel, cum ar fi egalitatea drepturilor, libertatea de exprimare, responsabilitatea, educația, distribuția moderată a bogăției și respectul pentru statul de drept. Acestor principii li se atribuie indici moderni precum Indicele Drepturilor Omului, Indicele Libertății de Expresie, Transparența Administrativă din Indicele de Integritate Publică, Indicele Educației, Indicele Gini pentru inegalitate și Indicele Statului de Drept, după care este măsurată prosperitatea unei națiuni folosind indicatori de satisfacție și calitate a vieții, inclusiv Sondajul Mondial Gallup, Indicele Stabilității Politice și Absența Violentei/Terrorismului, rata imigrației/emigrației permanente ca procent din populație, PIB-ul pe cap de locuitor în Paritatea Puterii de Cumpărare și Clasamentul Competitivității Globale. Sunt analizate zece democrații, inclusiv Japonia, Germania, Franța, Canada, Australia, SUA, Coreea de Sud, Italia, Elveția și Marea Britanie. Rezultatele arată o corelație strânsă între principiile inspirate de filosofi greci și stabilitatea pe termen lung și succesul unei națiuni.

Keywords: Democracy, Ancient Greece, good governance, form of government, wellbeing

JEL CLASSIFICATION: B11, H11

INTRODUCTION

The concept of democracy as we know it today is closely tied with the modern concepts of human rights. When we think of democracy, we cannot exclude human dignity, freedom, equality, rights of minorities, the rule of law and so on. This is of course, a natural result of the development of social consciousness over millennia, that brought more complex societies and new economic demands throughout all nations of the world. Yet we should not forget that democracy, along with many key concepts in science are not new concepts and have their roots in ancient civilisations. Ancient Greece gave birth to many concepts in astronomy, geography, mathematics and biology, that remain still relevant today. Social sciences are no exception from this list, as the concept of politics, forms of government and art of persuasion were thoroughly explored by Greek philosophers. Whether modern forms of government we have today have outgrown ancient wisdom still remains a topic of outmost interest. The purpose of this paper will be to contribute to the discussion by highlighting the core principles of democracy in the vision of the greatest minds of Ancient Greece, and compare their validity for democracies today by using modern economic and statistical indicators and tools.

To reach a scientific conclusion, this work combines a qualitative analysis of the works of Ancient Greek philosophers and those explaining them, and a quantitative analysis of country performance using indexes and statistical techniques.

BASE CONTENT

Like all societies, Ancient Greece underwent a period of growth, flourishing and decline. For Greece, this period of flourishing lasted around 200 years, between the 5th and 4th centuries BC and is commonly known as Classical period, with democratic Athens taking the centre stage as the peak of civilisation [1]. The main thinkers of this time - Herodotus, Plato and Aristotle, had very different approaches toward democracy, with the latter two even criticizing it on certain occasions. Of course, over two centuries you cannot expect a homogeneous political structure, law system or even societal demands. Consequently, it is important to remember that each of the philosophers' thoughts, as long as they are not contemporary to each other, can be said to have a comparative bias resulting from the period they lived in.

Herodotus, who wrote his Histories c. 450 to 420 B.C lived in the early period of Classical Greece. His work is more similar to a collection of events of his time intertwined with an assessment of the political atmosphere in Athens. Even so, he managed to identify two main forms of government - democracy and tyranny. By underlining the main characteristics of each of these, he creates a conceptual description of democracies, based on three main characteristics: equality, freedom of speech and accountability. For Herodotus, equality of rights was the most important characteristic of democracies and foundation for good government. His justification is that men working under a master are cowardly, but when freed they have the eagerness to achieve for themselves [2, p.47]. Freedom of speech, was also a key characteristic of democracy and a vision held by every Greek, as the fear to speak one's mind was a characteristic of a tyranny, like the rule of the Persian emperor Xerxes [2, p.46]. Lastly, he mentions accountability for ones actions, which especially in the context of rulers was seen as a vital tool for preventing corruption. While Herodotus didn't have an explicit criticism of democracy, one passage in Histories hints at the mob not having enough wisdom to rule [2, p.48].

While Herodotus' work mainly focused on description of current and past events, those who came after him focused their attention on theory. Plato, who lived in the middle period of Classical Greece and published his Republic around 375 BC, was much more eager to find the correct forms and versions of governments and is considered to be the first philosophical critic of democracy. His criticism is similar to the one presented by Herodotus, but he expands it by describing the relationship between orators, demagogues, and the mostly politically incompetent general public. In his description of a perfectly functioning democracy, he employs the principle of specialization, and shows contempt with the fact the Athenians made an exception when it came to politics [3, p.7]. He firmly believed that one must train specifically to be a statesman by cultivating love for learning, love for truths and hate of falsehoods, and a gentle and orderly nature through education. Plato says that decision by popular vote is only valid if people don't follow a hedonistic mindset and in Laws 3 he finally gives the answer for this problem - a strict rule of law which people need to learn to live with and use. The skill of people must become citizenship itself [3, p.21]. Another important feature is equal levels of wealth. Plato makes the point that this is necessary to avoid abuse. He sets the limit of the richest class to at maximum 4 times richer than the poorest.

Lastly, Aristotle, was born the latest out of these three philosophers, living around 384-322 BC, with his death being one year after the end of the Classical era. His analysis of governments in Politics is the most detailed, while also showing the greatest criticism towards democracy. He makes a distinction between politeia, the correct form of constitution and democracy as the wrong form. [4, p.115] He says that a constitution can be considered faulty if it doesn't serve the common good, and democracy, which usually serves the poor, is just as incorrect as an oligarchy which serves only the interests of the rich. [4, p.116] The conclusion that he reaches is that to pursue the happiness of the city, both the masses and the best men should have certain says in the governing of cities, where the more skilled officials should take care of daily activity, but important decisions must still be made by popular vote. Aristotle puts "liberty" as the core of a true democracy and divides that into two sub-principles. The first is "to rule and be ruled in turn" which can be explained as the authority of

the majority decision, the equal allotment of offices and participation of citizens in making laws. The second is the ability of citizens to live as they wish.

Collectively, these three philosophers have contributed by generating a list of parameters for a good-functioning democracy, more exactly: Equality of rights, freedom of speech, accountability of officials, proper education, a moderate distribution of wealth, respect for the rule of law. Each of these guidelines, have in one form or another, an attributable index in the modern world. These are respectively: the Human Rights Index by V-Dem and processed by Our World in Data, the Freedom of Expression Index by the same authors, the Administrative Transparency from the Index of Public Integrity (IPI), the Education Index by UNDP, the Gini Index for inequality, and the Rule of Law Index by World Justice Project (WJP). By comparatively analysing democracies using this set of criterions, in theory it is expected to see a direct relation between a higher index score, and a higher performance of that nation. For the prosperity of a nation I chose a set of narrow individual satisfaction and quality-of-life related points. One of them is the results of the Gallup World Poll - which uses the "Cantril Ladder" to measure perceived satisfaction of life on a 0-10 scale. Another one is Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism Index which measures likeliness of government destabilisation on a -2.5 to 2.5 scale, with 2.5 as lowest possible. The third one is the rate of permanent immigration/emigration as share of population. The fourth one is GDP per capita in Purchasing Power Parity.

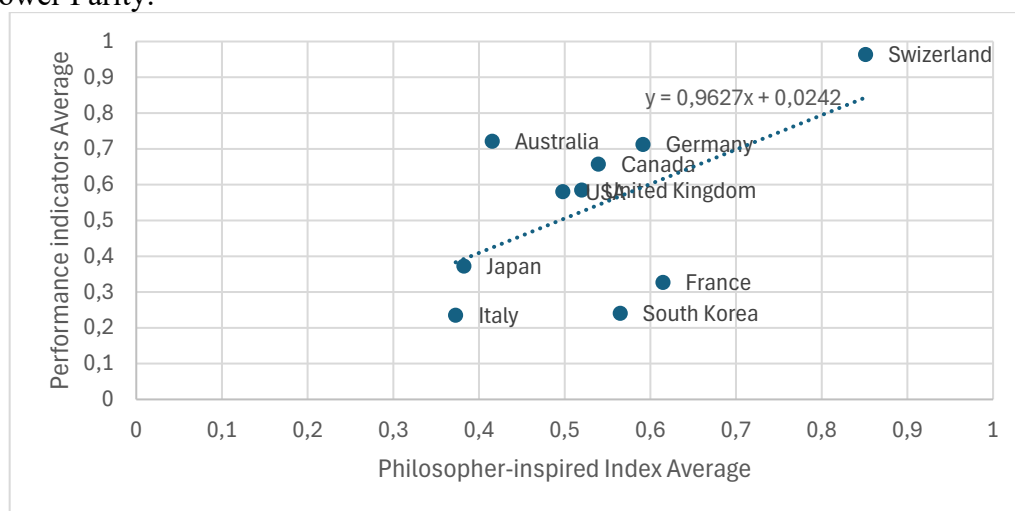


Figure 1. Successful democracies in the vision of Greek philosophers vs satisfaction and wealth of nationals.

Source: Elaborated by Author based on data from various sources mentioned

The last one is the Global Competitiveness Ranking. For the democracies analysed, I chose a list of 10, including Japan, Germany, France, Canada, Australia, USA, South Korea, Italy, Switzerland, and UK. Also, because some of these indexes are renewed at different intervals, and because in 2020 the Covid Pandemic changed the natural development of states, I will use 2019 as year of reference. For Gini the formula '1-(Gini score)' was used to transform it into an equality indicator. As some criterions have different scales and measurement units, each underwent a Min-Max standardization, and countries received a 0-1 score based on the sample, then an average per category was calculated and used to plot a scatter graph. The results can be seen in Figure 1. The trendline multiplier of 0.96 for x, which is very close to what would be a 1:1 ratio, shows that while democracies can vary, a select set of criteria as those inspired from Greek philosophers, can predict the long-term stability and success of a nation, even without an in-depth analysis of the political atmosphere within a country.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECCOMANDATIONS

The assessment done in this paper requires further development and is limited by the techniques employed. If, for example, a larger sample would be used, the Min-Max normalisation could show very volatile trendlines based on whether the countries introduced had best or worst scores in any index. This is thankfully mitigated slightly by the decent number of indicators used for the average in each category. Other criticism may include the indicators used. However, the neither of these would severely affect the results of this paper.

It is apparent that ancient philosophy still has a lot to offer in terms of guiding our society towards a better government. The ideas themselves may be simple but the core principles behind them remain as vibrant today as ever. More attention and respect in schools and universities should be dedicated to the study of the life of past societies and schools of thought, as even though the same practices may not be solely able to create a powerful society in the modern world, they can become an important base for resilience and long-term success. While none of the guidelines of Herodotus, Plato and Aristotle like equality of rights, education, freedom of speech, etc. may seem newfound to developed nations, it is important to underline one more time their importance and see that those countries which especially focus on these basic democratic principles reap higher rewards in terms of economic and social wellness.

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