

*Freedom is Political: Rise of Democracy in Ancient Athens (Summarized Version)*

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Political philosopher Hannah Arendt claims, "Freedom is the *raison d'être* [purpose of existence] of politics" (Arendt 153). Mankind needs government in order to establish security and safeguard people's personal freedoms. Yet, for the majority of recorded history, mankind has been governed by autocracies, in which the few control the lives of the many and restrict the freedom of the poor to expand the freedom of the wealthy. To resolve this disparity, there must be an integration of all citizenry into government, for people cannot be free if they are forced to obey laws that they had no say in making. This is the importance of having a public sphere, where the people can make their voices heard and play a role in politics. Democracy is founded on this principle of equality among men—a principle which also explains the nearly universal appeal of democracy since its appearance in the eighteenth century in the American Revolution. Yet, that enlightened and novel concept of democracy was discovered nearly two thousand years earlier by ancient Athens, the first democracy. Why did the *original* idea of democracy develop here, and how did it function in its nascent context?

Ancient Athens is regarded as the quintessential direct democracy, but this did not happen instantly; rather, it was the result of gradual political reforms that extended over hundreds of years. At the turn of the sixth century BC, Athens was recovering from a period of internal conflict caused by class warfare that led to succession of tyrannical rulers for half a century. In this primarily agricultural and merchant Athens, the people were in a state of general serfdom. The Athenian working class was outraged; they were being forced to pay exorbitant taxes, and those who could not pay were enslaved to pay off their debt to the upper class. They had no representation and no power in government whatsoever. The Athenians realized that this lack of political representation violated their freedom, and that balance of power among classes was necessary to allow for the liberty of the public. This was a founding democratic principle that Solon (590-561 BC), the premier archon in 590 BC, enforced when the Athenian *polis* protested and reached out to him for change, ultimately laying the foundation for the first democracy. The Athenian Assembly was the voice of the citizenry and in it laid the majority of the political power of Athens, but it took a considerable amount of time for Athens to fully integrate their lower class into the government. The Assembly consisted of the first 6,000 men to show up that day, and originally more men would have to be gathered each morning to fill up the seats, but when pay was instituted this ceased to be a problem. Athens was able to recognize that at the time, only the rich could work in government because they had the leisure time to do so, whereas the working class could not afford to involve itself in government without any compensation. Until pay was introduced, the *thetes* could never experience the freedom of being a full citizen because "without a politically guaranteed public realm, freedom lacks the worldly space to make its appearance" (Arendt 147). The lower class could not afford to attend Assembly prior to these reforms, and thus they did not have the freedom to contribute to their own government; they had no voice in the policymaking, but were subject to the policy regardless. The addition of pay for civil service, especially in the Assembly, dissolved these barriers and allowed for true democracy to stand in Athens.

The Assembly is the icon of Athenian democracy, but the existence of an assembly was common in ancient Greece even preceding early democracy. Most of these assemblies voted on policy, but voting in and of itself is not democratic by nature. What was unique

about Athens was the freedom of speech and proposition. In Athens, any adult male citizen could speak at the Assembly, unlike Sparta's pseudo-democracy where the assembly could only vote on matters presented by the kings and magistrates who reserved the right to speak. Voting in Sparta could not be considered democratic because the citizens had no say over what would be put up to a vote, and had no control over the policies they were given. If a tyrant tells a group that they must vote between all being slaves for him or all being killed, he cannot afterwards say that the people democratically decided to be his slaves.

Freedom of speech in the Assembly was a vital instrument for democracy and freedom to in Athens because "freedom needed, in addition to mere liberation, the company of other men who were in the same state, and it needed a common public space to meet them—a politically organized world, in other words, into which each of the free men could insert himself by word and deed" (Arendt 147). It was necessary for the everyday Athenian to have the opportunity to contribute to government because democracy *is* power in the hands of the people. People create governments in order to have security, but moreover, "freedom...is actually the reason that men live together in political organization at all" because we need security to go about our everyday lives freely (Arendt 145). When a government becomes despotic we say less government equals more freedom, but similarly, no government equals no freedom because amidst anarchy there is no security and no one to see to the preservation of freedom.

Hannah Arendt wrote, "Freedom as a demonstrable fact and politics coincide and are related to each other like two sides of the same matter" and it is evident the Athenians were the first to realize this (Arendt 147). Athenian democracy was the first to prioritize the freedom of the public and acknowledge that for this to be a reality there must be equal representation and distribution of power among the population. Only when everyone can participate in governing can a government truly guarantee freedom for all its citizens. Now, it is overtly hypocritical that the Athenians fought so ardently for political freedom while blatantly denying that same freedom and representation to slaves, women, and immigrants; in denying them these rights they were themselves tyrants, subjecting a people to their rules while refusing to give them any representation or power in the government under which they lived. It took over two thousand years, however, for this flaw to be addressed by *any* major government throughout the world, so it is hard to say that they should have known better, especially since it took almost as long for mankind to rediscover democracy after the fall of Athens.

Athenian democracy even at its peak was not perfect, not that any democracy ever has been. What Athens got right, however, were the ideas of *demokratia* and *isonomia*, concepts thousands of years ahead of their time. In a world where autocracy was the prevailing form of government, Athens realized the self-evident truths of liberty and equality and challenged the power imbalance of their oppressive regime. Athenian democracy was the birth of the public sphere and political freedom for the people, the same freedom that Americans fought for, crying, "give me liberty or give me death!" In his *Rights of Man*, Thomas Paine even acknowledges hopefully, "What Athens was in miniature America will be in magnitude" (23). Political freedom can only truly be realized in a government by the people and for the people; it was Athens that gave life to this democratic ideal, and it was with Athens in mind that this ideal was reborn and thrives to this day.