

To What Extent has the View of ‘The People’ Changed Through the History of Political Thought?

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‘The people’ is a term that is used frequently in political thought. It tends to be used as a reference to the population of a country, especially those who are not in government, and that is the interpretation which this assignment will employ. This assignment will examine the extent to which the view of ‘the people’ has changed through the history of political thought. **It will argue that the view of ‘the people’ has changed to a great extent, as the perceptions of human nature, freedom, sovereignty and the ideal form of governing have evolved.** To do so, the assignment will examine the beliefs and works of Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and John Stuart Mill. These scholars have been chosen because they all deal with the concept of ‘the people’ in relatively great detail, and they present a range of different views, which are representative of different periods of political history. Even though Rousseau and Locke are both liberals from the Enlightenment period, they are still both included as they present relatively different views on the matter of ‘the people’. Furthermore, Rousseau’s thoughts about the general will of the people, have become particularly relevant in recent years with the recent surge in populism. Had it not been for assignment limitations, the assignment would also have included more recent scholars, for instance representing populist and fascist views on the concept of ‘the people’. After considering the views of these scholars, an argument for why the view of ‘the people’ has not changed as much as it might seem will be presented.

Aristotle, one of the main scholars from the Antiquity, was one of the first political scholars to deal with the issue of ‘the people’ in great detail. He argued that man was fundamentally a social creature, and that men would therefore always live together in communities (Burns, 2003, p. 76). ‘The people’ consisted of individuals who were dependent on society in order to live a moral, and therefore fulfilling life (Burns, 2003, p. 76). Aristotle also claimed that there were natural hierarchies and patterns of subordination in nature (Burns, 2003, p.80). Thus, he argued that not all humans had a natural right to be treated as equals; a reasoning Aristotle amongst other employed to justify slavery and gender inequality (Burns, 2003, p.80). From this logic, Aristotle also argued that opportunities for political participation and power should not be distributed equally in society. Ideally most members of ‘the people’ should not be involved in governing; this should rather be limited to a small subsection of ‘the people’ who were the most ‘educated, wise and virtuous’(Burns, 2003, p.82). Thus, Aristotle promoted what he referred to as an aristocracy.

Compared to many later political scholars on the issue, Aristotle presents a rather nuanced view on the matter of to what extent 'the people' are truly free in a state. On one hand, he does not believe freedom is the most important political value, and he explicitly states that in some cases the state ought to use coercion in order to 'morally improve citizens' (Johnson, 2013, p.30). Many scholars, such as John Stuart Mill, would perhaps see this as an intrusion on the freedom of individuals. Aristotle on the other hand, argues that man indeed can be free whilst living in such a society, as long as there is a certain level of popular participation, and society is not led by a single ruler, as it would be in a monarchy (Johnson, 2013, p.30-57). However, he argues that man cannot be free unless he possesses certain personality traits, acquired through a process of learning, that enable him to be truly happy, and thus free (Johnson, 2013, p.30). The idea of this final condition as a requirement for freedom however, was not shared by many later scholars.

In order to fully understand how the role of 'the people' is viewed in society, one needs to consider the concept of sovereignty, which was at the centre of the works of the 17th century Renaissance scholar Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes argued that the ruler had unlimited sovereignty, and was outside of the social contract (McClelland, 1996, p.196). This implies that the ruler can never lose his authority, and is unaccountable to 'the people', who must always obey the ruler. Hobbes argued that under such a sovereign ruler, 'the people' had no freedom, as they had exchanged this for the security provided by the ruler (McClelland, 1996, p.195). Thus, it seems that Hobbes promoted authoritarianism, suggesting he did not believe that 'the people' ought to partake in governing. This is a change from the ideas of Aristotle, who championed a system of government where at least a small portion of 'the people' governed. Without such a sovereign, absolute ruler, Hobbes argued there would be anarchy and a complete absence of security, in what he referred to as the 'State of Nature' (McClelland, 1996, p.193). Hobbes justifies this in his view of humans as rational, yet inherently selfish, who would act aggressively in order to protect themselves if there was no ruler to make and consequently enforce laws (McClelland, 1996, p.193). This pessimistic view on the chaos that would arise if there was not an absolute sovereign, is likely a product of the great instability of the 17th century. Hobbes wrote the Leviathan during the chaos of the English Civil war, during which Hobbes allegedly thought England had returned to the State of Nature (McClelland, 1996, p.203). This likely enforced his view of the chaos and violence that would arise amongst 'the people' if there was no sovereign ruler to ensure order and security.

The 17th century British Enlightenment scholar John Locke completely reversed Hobbes ideas about human nature and sovereignty. Whilst Hobbes presented a view of humans as inherently selfish, Locke presented a more positive view of human nature. He saw ‘the people’ as consisting of social individuals, and believed humans were inherently rational, as was common in the Enlightenment period. (Parry, 2004, p.39). Locke also believed that humans were born equal and free, which was a fundamental assumption in his works (Waldron, 2003, p.188). For this reason, humans could not be put under the political authority of another, unless one consented (Waldron, 2003, p.188). Locke claimed, that it was in this agreement each individual’s political obligation was grounded, and ‘the people’ were therefore sovereign (Waldron, 2003, p.186). Hence, the social contract was written between the people and the ruler. Rather than believing ‘the people’ sacrificed their freedom by electing a ruler, as Hobbes did, Locke believed this social contract enabled the people to secure both their freedom and their security in civil society with a ruler (Lund, 2020a). It also implied that ‘the people’ were sovereign, a significant change from the beliefs of earlier scholars, such as Hobbes.

As he believed sovereignty originates in the people, it followed that Locke believed the people ought to be involved in the process of governing; a drastic change from the authoritarian model fronted by Hobbes. These ideas of Locke were perhaps also a consequence of the period in which he lived; all his major works were written in the decade after the so-called “Glorious Revolution”, which established the supremacy of the British parliament, as an organ of ‘the people’, over the monarch (Waldron, 2003, p.181; Vallance, 2011). Locke advocated a system of government where the king, or another form of government, retained the executive powers, and there was a law-making assembly, elected by ‘the people’ (Ritchie, 1981). However, as the government was only legitimate as long as it had the support of the sovereign people, the king could be dismissed if there was a majority for this amongst ‘the people’ (Ritchie, 1981). Even though there certainly were democratic elements in Locke’s ideal model of government, he was not a proponent of a democracy with the levels of popular participation of ‘the people’ that we see today. Amongst other things, he claimed that groups of ‘the people’ should be entitled to different amounts of political power based on their intellectual capacity (Waldron, 2003, p.189). This would be considered highly anti-democratic today, as one believes a representative distribution of political power is

crucial in ensuring that political outcomes truly reflect the views of 'the people'. However, Locke can still be seen as a pioneer within liberal constitutionalism. Liberal constitutionalism

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introduced some of the fundamental concepts of liberal democracy in the sense that we know it today, such as the rule of law, executive accountability to 'the people', and equality amongst 'the people' (Ward, 2005). These concepts are still relevant in democracies today, highlighting the degree to which Locke's ideas influenced the views regarding democracy, and the role of 'the people' in relation to governing.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau further developed Locke's thoughts about the social contract as well as the ideal form of government, and the role of 'the people' in it. They were both inspired by the progressive ideas of the Enlightenment period, and therefore shared many of the same views on the concept of 'the people'. Similar to Locke, Rousseau directed extensive attention towards reason in his works, and he argued this was at the centre of natural law. He also agreed with Locke's beliefs that the people were sovereign, and that there was a social contract between the people and the ruler (Sorenson, 1990). However, Rousseau further extended Locke's views on this matter, and specified that the social contract had to reflect the general will of the people (Wade, 1976). It was the ruler's responsibility to ensure this will was upheld, a responsibility which was crucial for the ruler to be considered legitimate (Williams, 2014, pp1-25). This fixation with government representing the will of the people has resurged in recent years. This is largely due to populist movements, who frequently employ Rousseau's argument about representing the will of the people, in order to criticise the political establishment and liberal democracy in its current form for failing to accurately represent this (Garrard, 2021). In addition to upholding the will of the people, Rousseau argued that protecting the freedom of the people was one of the fundamental purposes of government, and if it did so one could achieve a level of freedom similar to the absolute freedom in the State of Nature (Wade, 1976). Rousseau therefore joined Locke in his opposition to Hobbes' idea that freedom and the security were irreconcilable (Wade, 1976).

Stemming from his views of the people's sovereignty, Rousseau also believed in democracy, and the importance of 'the people' participating in the governing process. This was perhaps inspired by the poverty and historic discontent with the monarchy in France in his lifetime, illustrating the faults of an authoritarian government with no real involvement of 'the people' (BBC, 2014). Contrary to Locke, Rousseau supported a very direct form of democracy, and

defined democratic government as one where the ruler may immediately deliver the power to all, or a majority of 'the people' (Wade, 1976). However, Rousseau did not advocate universal suffrage, and specified that he thought women were inferior to men (Shklar, 1978).

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Therefore, when referring to 'the people', it seems that he did not include women in this group, in stark contrast to the dominant ideological paradigm today.

John Stuart Mill was a social liberal, whose views have been highly influential in the history of political thought. Regarding his view of 'the people', he was a proponent of democracy and the participation of 'the people' in governing (Thilly, 1923). Mill believed a democracy would guarantee the freedom and liberty of the people (Thilly, 1923). Without a free people, Mill reasoned there would be no diversity, individuality or innovativeness in the population; prerequisites for progress (Thilly, 1923). Contrary to certain previous scholars, most notably Rousseau, Mill argued that an indirect democracy was the most effective form of governing (Wade, 1976). This represented a significant shift in the view of the optimal level of participation of 'the people' in government was. Indirect democracy remains the prevalent form of democracy today, long after Mill's death, reinforcing the validity of his argument that this is the ideal form of government. Mill was also one of the first scholars to argue for women's suffrage, thus extending the right to partake in the democracy to a considerably greater proportion of 'the people' (UK Parliament, 2021). This view is a reflection of Mill's wider views on equality and feminism. He thought that all humans were free and equal, and would be able to provide for themselves if provided with the necessary education and opportunities (Lund, 2020b). He extended these beliefs on equality to women, whom he argued would be able to shape their lives in the same way as men, if provided with equal education and opportunities (Mann and Spinner-Halev, 2010). At the time, Mill's ideas about gender equality, and his inclusion of women in his conception of 'the people' were groundbreaking. These views represented a big change from the views of earlier political thinkers, such as Rousseau, supporting the argument that there has indeed been a significant change in the view of 'the people' throughout the history of political thought.

In Mill's views on the ability of the individual to shape their own lives, his individualism clearly comes across. He advocated the idea that all ought to shape their own circumstances, and that the government should intervene in society to the smallest extent possible, which would enable 'the people' to prosper. He thought that all members of 'the people' were

sovereign over their own body and mind, and that the state only had jurisdiction over behaviour that infringes the rights of others (Thilly, 1923). Only if there was a risk that someone would be harmed, Mill argued the government could rightfully exercise their power (Thilly, 1923). This contrast to for example the ideas of Hobbes', who argued the ruler had

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unlimited sovereignty, and there should be no such restrictions on when he could rightfully exercise his power. However, what exactly constitutes 'harm' in Mill's definition is a question open for interpretation. Some would consider it to purely involve acts of aggression causing physical harm, however one could also interpret it as conditions jeopardising the health, safety or general wellbeing of 'the people'. There is no definite view of what extent of government intervention is ideal in order to best protect 'the people', whilst still enabling them to prosper, and this debate is still ongoing in modern day politics. In many countries, parties and individuals associated with left-wing politics argue for a greater level of state intervention in society, whilst those associated more with the right-wing believe 'the people' will prosper if there is a reduced level of government intervention in society. Therefore, Mill's discussion around to what extent the state should intervene in society in order to best enable 'the people' to prosper is still highly relevant, and constantly changing.

Whilst this assignment so far has illustrated how the view of 'the people' has developed through the history of political thought, one could also argue that there are aspects of the view of 'the people' that have remained unchanged. An example is the idea that 'the people' will always eventually find ways to live together in communities, as opposed living solitary lives without significant interaction with other humans. This idea was specifically articulated by for instance Aristotle and is also a fundamental assumption in the works of the other scholars discussed in this essay (Burns, 2003, p.76; McClelland, 1996, p.195; Wade, 1996). However, the views on what the characteristics of such communities which 'the people' form are, have varied greatly throughout the history of political thought. For instance, there has been a significant development on the view on whether or not all members of 'the people' ought to be considered equal members of the community. As already discussed in this assignment, Classical Antiquity scholars such as Aristotle believed that humans were by nature not equal members of the community, and should not be treated as such. As exemplified by the ideas of Locke, in the Enlightenment period discussions of equality between all members of 'the people' became more common, however the concept of equality was still usually not extended to women. It was not until even later scholars, such as Mill, raised this issue that the idea of

gender equality very gradually became a recognised value within political thought.

Furthermore, the view on why ‘the people’ form communities in the first place is another matter where there have been significant changes within the history of political thought. For example, Hobbes argued that communities are formed because they involves the election of a sovereign who could uphold security, whilst Rousseau believed the formation of a

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government who could protect the freedom of ‘the people’ was one of the fundamental purposes of the creation of communities (McClellan, 1996, p.195; Wade, 1976). Aristotle on the other hand, argues that communities are formed both in order to secure the material necessities of life, but also because humans are social beings and cannot achieve happiness if they live isolated lives (Johnson, 2013, p.32). Hence, it can be seen that whilst there has been little change in the view that ‘the people’ tend to live together in communities, there have been many more significant changes in the views regarding the characteristics of these communities that ‘the people’ live in. More aspects of overall view of the communities ‘the people’ live in have changed than remained constant, supporting the argument that the view of ‘the people’ has changed to a great extent through the history of political thought.

However, the notion that there should be a form of government which coexists with ‘the people’ in community and provides security is another idea that has remained unchanged through the history of political thought. This is an idea which lies at the fundament of all the scholars discussed in this assignment. However, the disagreement arises on how ‘the people’ and the ruler ought to interact. For instance, whilst no significant scholars suggest that the insecurity one would find in the State of Nature is desirable, the views on what methods the government can use to ensure security vary. On one hand, Hobbes would argue that the government can use all means at their disposal to keep the peace in society, regardless of the cost or opinions of ‘the people’ on their methods. Locke on the other hand, believed ‘the people’ had certain inalienable natural rights, such as the right to life(Waldron, 2003, p.189-190). The government did not have the right to intrude on these God-given rights, regardless of the circumstances(Waldron, 2003, p.189). A further disagreement on the view on the relationship between ‘the people’ and the government, is to what extent ‘the people’ should be involved in the process of governing. As already set out in this assignment, scholars such as Hobbes argued for communities where ‘the people’ were not involved, whilst later scholars supported the involvement of ‘the people’ in the process of governing and democracy. Even amongst those who believed that democracy was the optimal form of government, the view

on what the ideal kind of democracy has varied. Thus, it can again be seen that the differences in views on this issue far outweigh the consensus, supporting the argument that there has indeed been a great change in the view of 'the people' through the history of political thought.

This paper has examined the view of 'the people' throughout the history of political thought. It has found that one of the arguably most significant changes in the view of 'the people', is in

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relation to sovereignty. Whilst early political scholars, such as Hobbes, argued for an absolute sovereign ruler, later scholars completely reversed this and argued that 'the people' were sovereign. Largely as a result of this notion of 'the people' as sovereign, there was a shift in the view of the ideal form of government, from authoritarian governments and aristocracies, to systems of government where 'the people' were involved in the process of governing. Mill, in particular, also discussed to what extent the state should intervene in society, an issue that is still subject to contention today. A further matter where there has been significant change is the perception of the human nature of the individuals which constitute 'the people'. In the Classical Antiquity one saw humans as social creatures, in the Renaissance saw humans as of rational, yet primarily concerned with their own self-interest, and in the Enlightenment one retained the view of humans as rational, yet also reversed back to the view of humans as social beings. Furthermore, through the history of political thought there has been a vast change regarding the concept of equality, from Aristotle's ideas about a natural hierarchy, to Locke's preoccupation with the issue, and Mill's ideas about gender equality. Thus, there has been a big change in the view of whether 'the people' consists of fundamentally equal individuals, who ought to be granted the same rights. Finally, another part of the view of 'the people' that has changed is whether 'the people' are truly free. Aristotle argued that 'the people' were free, an idea which was reversed in the renaissance by scholars such as Hobbes, but then reintroduced in the Enlightenment, parallel to the idea of 'the people' as sovereign. In conclusion, it can therefore be seen that the view of 'the people' has changed to a great extent, as the beliefs on human nature, freedom, sovereignty and the ideal form of governing have evolved.

As aforementioned, this assignment was not able to consider how the view of 'the people' has changed in recent years. In a further paper, it would be highly interesting to investigate more modern conceptions of this term. In recent years, the concept of 'the people' has gained renewed relevance through the resurgence of populism. The idea of 'the people' lies at the fundament of populist theory, and it would be particularly interesting to examine the view of

‘the people’ in this context, seeing as it is such a crucial part of the theory.

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