

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 76: Democracy

The VSI Podcast Intro 00:07

Welcome back to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matters to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

Naomi Zack 00:27

Hello, my name is Naomi Zack. I'm Professor of Philosophy at Lehman College at the City University of New York. My areas of specialization are political philosophy, philosophy of race, and disaster. And today I want to talk to you about some of the ideas from my recent Very Short Introduction called Democracy: A Very Short Introduction.

Naomi Zack 00:53

Democracy is a very broad value that everybody shares, but it's a, it's a vague ideal. So what, this ideal that we share is that, under a democracy, the people have a say in their government. The ideal is a concept about, it has different conceptions. And I want to talk about both the different conceptions of democracy and the different divisions of democracy. So one conception of democracy, which goes back to the ancient world, is that democracy is a form of government. So you can have democracy as, for example, Aristotle discussed in his Politics, where there is equality and a change of ruling positions among an elite group, but everybody else in society is subject to their rule. So you would have limited democracy among leaders. As far as democracy throughout the whole of society, both Plato and Aristotle and other ancient political philosophers thought that democracy was the worst form of government because they believed that, in democracy, the least-informed elements of society would rule to the detriment of everybody else.

Naomi Zack 02:15

Now, the two different aspects of democracy that I think are really useful for us today, in order to understand contemporary politics, is democracy as a form and structure of government, for example, a three part form of government, where you have an executive, a legislature, and a judiciary, and various procedures for how laws are made, and how policies are carried out, but all with a focus on the government level. So that would be

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democratic government. And I think the writer who might have affected the idea of democratic government would have been John Stuart Mill in his writings on representative government.

Naomi Zack 02:59

However, what has happened over time, and you can see this in the progress of the great social movements of the 19th and 20th century, is that people who have a specific progressive conception of democracy do not only want democratic government, they also want democratic society. So you had the women's suffrage movement in the 19th century, which finally resolved in the early 20th century, and then you had the abolitionist movement, and then going into modernity, there are movements for indigenous peoples, there are movements for LGBTQ people, movements for people with disabilities. All of the progressive movements are an effort to create a democratic society or, as many like to term it in the United States, it's a perfection of what was originally in the Constitution.

Naomi Zack 04:01

Because in the American Constitution, although principles of democracy were generally set out, it was believed that only free, white, property-owning males could actually participate in the government. So now, most people thinking about democracy progressively, not only want a democratic society where there's some measure of equality throughout society outside of government, but they want everybody who's recognized in those terms to be able to participate in democracy.

Naomi Zack 04:35

So I got interested in democracy as a subject when I saw how the New Right in American politics was opposed to what we have taken to be democratic society. For example, we've recently had extreme curtailments, if not removals, of affirmative action, of, and reproductive rights, and the movements in response to that are movements to continually try to make society more democratic by making it more equal.

Naomi Zack 05:09

Now, the language that's used often for making society more democratic is the project of "perfecting" the Founding Documents, "perfecting" the Constitution. And I think you will

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find similar language in other parts of the world where there are not written constitutions, but greater reliance on precedent in definitive documents and prior laws. So, in the ancient world, the enemies of democracy, who are the founders and ultimate authorities of what we take to be political philosophy today, as I said, they, they thought that democracy was mob rule, and the worst form of government. But, actually, if you look at what's happening today, and my focus is on the United States, because that's where I'm probably best informed, although nobody can, can grasp everything that's going on, is that there's been a huge change in the Republican Party or the right side matching or opposing the left side of democratic movements and politics, and the change, it, I think, can be understood as proceeding from a different conception of democracy, so that, than progressives have.

Naomi Zack 06:30

So the conception of democracy that right-wing conservatives now seem to have seems to be a conception of democracy that goes back to only selected groups in society having full rights and access to participate in government. And, and of course, you know, this is seen as repressive, it's seen as retroactive, by repressive, repressive elements in society, but this return to the right stands on what they take to be fundamental principles of democracy; they have a different conception, and they have an older conception, and they have a conception that pre-dates the, really the great 19th century thinkers who started talking about politics (although they didn't always call it politics; sometimes I call it moral theory), in terms of societies. And those were Karl Marx, and John Stuart Mill, and also Jeremy Bentham in terms of utilitarianism, the leaders of the women's suffrage movement, and leaders of the abolitionist movement, these are our foundations for something later in the 20th century in the United States, such as the civil rights movement.

Naomi Zack 07:49

So I think that if you pull some of these ideas together, and you look at what's happening in the turn to the right, probably throughout the world, or at least, they are relatively new populist parties throughout the world, certain questions arise. Now, one question that I think is quite interesting is the use and promulgation of conspiracy theories on the right appears to be very undemocratic, and it is undemocratic contrasted with ideals on the left; however, the people who believe in these conspiracy theories, ill-informed as they are, constitute millions. So they are the base of something like the contemporary US Republican

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Party, and the views of this base are getting expressed by party leaders. It's as though there's already a parade, it's already groundswell, and what the party leaders have learned how to do is to make ideas and opinions that previously would have been suppressed, because they were ignorant, to make them part of an inchoate party platform. And it kind of raises a question, you know, have things really got worse in that sense, or do we see an opening up of, of democracy in a formal sense of allowing people to have a say in the government?

Naomi Zack 09:23

So if you allow everybody to have a say in the government, you can take two different perspectives on this. One is, well, speaking just formally, it's a good thing that a great mass of uninformed people at least get to, to be represented, to have their say. The other perspective you can take, and this is the perspective that most, most scholars would take, is to show how the opinions that are now rising to the surface in erstwhile, more progressive societies are, are not, they may formally be allowable given principles of democracy that hold that the people should have a say, but these principles actually undermine more fundamental principles of society. So, so we get back to the original vague definition of democracy, we all think democracy is good thing. Even countries that are not democratic in reality like to call themselves democracies. But it's not enough only to say that the people have to have a say, because as the ancient political philosophers I mentioned believed, that the mass of the people might be wrong.

Naomi Zack 10:43

So you actually have to qualify: the people need to have a say provided that their say, does not—and, basically, there are many different things that you can fill in here—does not trample on the rights of the people, does not violate fundamental principles of how government should work, and how there should be equality throughout society. So, now, I want to say something about society, which actually goes beyond talk about democracy, because democracy is, is a, is a form of government. Society, in terms of if we look at human society globally, society overflows any particular national government. We don't have, at this time, a world government. We have, through various coalitions and United Nations declarations, statements of principles that are supposed to apply over nations. We don't

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have a world government, but we do have human beings all over the world who we can recognize as part of human society.

Naomi Zack 11:51

So I think the question that those who are champions of democracy and theorists of democracy, the contemporary question that really needs to be considered is, how do we extend, or should we extend, the principles of democracy to societies outside of our borders, in which people are, are not enjoying a measure of either equal rights or even equal access to the fundamentals of life? And a very specific aspect of this might be refugees from climate change. How, what does democracy say, first, about how we should morally regard climate change refugees, some of whom have to flee because the places where they live are no longer inhabitable; they fall through the cracks in terms of refugee status, because they're not fleeing political prosecution. As a matter of fact, they may be, they may be excluded, because they seem to be benefiting economically, quite often, they're merely classified as migrants, but in democratic terms, we might ask ourselves, what do we owe them?

Naomi Zack 13:08

And I think democracy, even though things happen that people who have a progressive conception of it are strongly opposed to and opposed to it for good reason, I think that this democratic process has now taken on a life of its own. I think, I think democracy is well and good, in a general sense; I think we can always think with it, even though locally, there may be extreme disappointments. And as far as this issue of whether we have obligations to people in societies outside of our borders who may be in desperate situations, whether democracy requires that we somehow recognize their rights, this actually brings us into discussions of humanism.

Naomi Zack 14:03

Humanitarianism is word we're all familiar with; humanitarian aid is spontaneous aid for people in desperate situations. But the framework of humanism allows us to think of people who may not be immediately desperate, but to try to think of principles, which are derived from our democratic principles of human equality, try to think of principles that apply to

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them and create obligations for those of us who live in, in countries, within borders, who are better off.

Naomi Zack 14:40

Thank you for listening. I hope that this will spark further thought and discussion among the audience.

The VSI Podcast Outro 14:51

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