

BOOK REVIEWS

What Democracy Is For: On Freedom and Moral Government

Stein Ringen

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In common usage, democracy means roughly any state of affairs approved by the speaker. Given that tendency toward vagueness, any writing on democracy, even a book review, should begin by defining its subject. Democracy is a form of government in which sovereignty rests with the population at large and decisions are made by majority rule. Liberal democracy means that individual rights constrain the power of government. Social democracy, in contrast, offers few if any protections for private property though government remains limited on issues like civil liberties and social freedoms while redistributing wealth in the name of equality.

Stein Ringen offers an updated explication and defense of social democracy. His version differs from past conceptions. For one thing, Ringen's democracy is a means rather than an end; democracy should be judged by its contribution to individual freedom. The goal of politics is not some collective good, not even equality at least on the face of it. However, Ringen does not understand "individual freedom" in the way Robert Nozick or other libertarians do. His work aspires to follow the legacy of the British liberal Isaiah Berlin. This claim is contestable. Berlin is well known for his defense of negative liberty, a conception rather close to libertarian ideals. Ringen endorses negative liberty but makes a version of positive liberty central to his argument. (He sees himself as following Berlin's own acceptance of positive liberty late in life). Ringen also leans on the work of Joseph Raz and Immanuel Kant, though without mentioning the latter. In other words, Ringen understands "individual freedom" as autonomy rather than liberty; to be free is to be master of my life rather than to be at liberty to do what I wish within the side constraints formed by the rights of others. To be autonomous requires negative liberty and more: resources, arenas (institutions where relevant choices are available), deliberation with others, and in the end, reason itself. Resources and arenas, at least, are the bridge from autonomy to the welfare state.

Ringen's starting point is that "no man is an island." We depend on dealing with others and "we perforce live in community." This implies we have to cooperate in various ways. But cooperation is difficult and risky. It is difficult because everyone is tempted to free ride, to obtain the benefits of cooperation without paying its costs. It is dangerous because it creates "bonds of dependency" which the strong may use to harass the weak. So government is needed to "help people to cooperate" and "to regulate for fair and orderly cooperation." The power granted to government to achieve those ends, however, may be used by the governors for their own ends, another kind of risk. The problem is to how to attain a government "to be under *our* control to ensure that it governs precisely for *our* well-being and security and not against *our* interests" (p. 3, emphasis added). Ringen identifies himself as a methodological individualist because he sees democracy as a tool to achieve individual freedom as he understands it. But his account of government does not find its foundation in individual decisions. Saying we live in a community "perforce" both derives a normative conclusion from an empirical fact and precludes individuals creating (and controlling) their government. Ringen suggests that the isolated individual "detached from others" (pp. 212, 218) is the alternative to community. But defenders of liberty do not deny the necessity of social cooperation and communal ties. They do insist that such relationships among adults ranging from government to friendships reflect individual choices rather than coercion.

Ringen then turns to the meaning of individual freedom which turns out to be well-being, "the living of good lives." Here individual choice counts. There is "no recipe that tells everyone everything about what is good for them and for everyone else." Indeed, well-being can only be found "person by person in the realization of a life that is good for him or her in the phase of life where he or she happens to be" (p. 4). Well-being "is in the end something individuals must sort out for themselves." Governments are charged with fostering and protecting this "freedom of the individual" (p. 5).

However, some choices and ways of life are not compatible with the good life; he mentions "a life utterly devoted to doing evil or dominated by greed and egoism or one that is thoroughly frivolous and unreflective." So the good life is pluralistic but constrained. As it happens, Ringen believes that a life not worth living is a life lived in "the liberty to do as one wants without interference or coercion." He then cites Berlin that the liberty to do as one likes implies "an idea that freedom comes from more of everything, from ever more rights and ever more abundance." Such freedom is insatiable and destroys the individual that pursues it while "parading an ideology of greed and selfishness to a world of mass poverty, environmental depletion, and cultural antagonism" (p. 6). It turns out that individuals should be left to live their lives as they wish in pursuit of well being (an idea dear to liberals and friends of negative liberty) and that individuals pursue lives not compatible with well-being if they do as they like. Ringen self-consciously advocates a version (or

versions) of positive liberty. According to Berlin, advocates of positive liberty assert that true freedom requires choices compatible with a “higher self.” Doing as one likes falls short of that higher self. The dangers posed to negative liberty by a notion of the higher self were central to Berlin’s work and remain a staple of liberal concern about non-liberal political theory.

Ringgen many times identifies negative liberty with “doing as one likes.” That is not quite accurate. Negative liberty means doing as one likes within the side-constraints imposed by the rights of others. So the liberal individual is constrained but not as much as Ringgen might wish. He sets out, I believe, two notions of a “higher self” to criticize liberty as doing what one wants. The first is the autonomous self, the master of my life. To attain that higher self I must choose my desires. In contrast, doing what I want means acting on the desires I have even though they may be imposed on me. Ringgen sees the desires created by advertising as limiting autonomy. However, do we truly respect others and their autonomy by concluding that their choices show them to be hapless victims of consumerism? That said, I do not believe the autonomy ethic informs much of Ringgen’s concerns about modern society. He worries that people at liberty to do as they wish pursue insatiable desires, are egoistic and greedy, and make themselves miserable. This tradition of moral inquiry has more in common with Buddhism and the Stoics than with Kant as Ringgen notices (p. 198). As it happens, I share Ringgen’s sympathies on this point and more than a few of his concerns about modern life. However, my sympathies and my concerns are a private matter not an apt program for improvement of society through government. The rights of individuals include famously the right to pursue happiness, not a right to be happy. In the end, another person’s life belongs to them, and they have the right and the responsibility to make it their own. As Ringgen notes early in the book, these are matters for individuals to sort out and, indeed, their rights preclude others sorting things out for them.

The centrality of well-being and individual freedom in these pages points to another issue with the book. As a political matter, well-being has become the work of economists and particularly of economists who work in public finance within the welfare economics and public choice frameworks. Ringgen covers a lot of ground in this book, and perhaps it is unfair to suggest he range even more widely, but he might have said more about efficiency as well as redistribution. To his credit, Ringgen is aware of government failure and endorses both education vouchers and private pension accounts (with some minor qualifications). Yet much of this book expects a great deal from government, and Ringgen does set forth evidence he finds persuasive on controversial points (i.e., whether government can steeply reduce poverty). Nonetheless, Ringgen expects far more from government as a means to efficient and equitable outcomes than the public choice literature indicates is possible.

Ringgen creates an index of democracy. The Scandinavian countries top the index; the United States does poorly. This is not surprising. If you

define democracy and individual freedom as requiring a lot of redistribution of wealth and an active government that gives individuals the tools to be master of their lives, an index to measure these terms will produce the results found in these pages. The real question should be why comparing the small, communitarian nations of Scandinavia with the United States makes much sense. Alberto Alesina and Edward Glaeser in a recent comparison of the U.S. and European welfare states conclude that ethnic conflict reduces spending on social welfare. Given that, we would expect culturally homogenous nations to spend more on social welfare than large, diverse nations. The implication would appear to be that diverse nations should become more culturally homogenous, an unlikely and unwanted prospect. More generally, why should a nation like the United States whose citizens (save for rich leftists) do not care much about material equality be compared to Sweden whose citizens do care about “social justice”? The index tells us that the United States is not much of a social democracy compared to Sweden, but we knew that already, and in any case, Americans do not appear to want to live in a social democracy like Sweden. What Americans want might not matter if Ringen has set out a morally compelling idea of democracy to inform his index. But too much remains unsaid for his autonomy/positive liberty ideal to carry the day.

Take property rights. Ringen’s idea of democracy demands everyone have the resources and arenas they need to do what they wish (i.e., to exercise their negative liberty). Those resources will be redistributed from those who have more than they need to those who do not. Some philosophers, the most prominent being Nozick, have argued that individual rights include a right to private property that precludes such redistributions. Ringen does not show why such arguments for strong property rights are mistaken. Others argue for protections for property on the basis of social utility or efficiency. Ringen does take up this argument in a chapter on “economic democracy.” He concludes the prospects for redistribution are limited because the people who own property can exit, thereby reducing economic efficiency. We should take more from the rich but we cannot and thus will not. The fact of community implies the norm of positive liberty which itself is limited by the fact of exit by the rich. Still, Ringen suggests steep estate taxes (to be devoted to higher education) and precluding using private property for political activity.

The claim that the rich dominate politics appears several times in *What Democracy Is For*. Over the past three decades, a large and increasingly sophisticated scholarly literature has examined the influence of money on politics. Ringen does not engage that literature at all. That is a pity. The literature is complex and frequently includes mixed results; it also raises doubts about Ringen’s central claim about the influence of money. He has the background to offer a concise and balanced assessment of research about the influence of wealth on politics. He simply asserts that that rich control politics as if the claim were so obvious as to be self-evident. Yet this claim needs support because Ringen wants to

ban private money in elections in favor a pure publicly funded system. He believes that this reform would not limit freedom of speech. But it does. The only speech and political activities that take place in Ringen's democracy will be funded by the government. It will take place according to the rules set out by the government. Perhaps the government will set the rules for public funding impartially, but that is unlikely. The majority parties and incumbents that write the rules for public funding will be tempted to fix the system to serve their interests. When they do so, those who object to the new order will not be able to privately fund efforts to fight back in the next election. They will have to go to the government to procure funding to turn out of office the people who set the rules for funding electoral struggle. In politics, as in economics, restraining government requires a private sector independent of the state.

Having offered some critical remarks, I will finish on a more upbeat note. Ringen writes well. He provokes the reader without being provocative, thereby fostering further thoughts and reasoned disagreement. Social scientists too often take for granted political theory. Ringen has set out and defended the moral and political ideals that inform his empirical work. His interest in educational vouchers and private accounts for pensions reveal a mind open to persuasion. I would add that I have focused here on his philosophical foundations; the book also has a lot to say about empirical issues related to the welfare state. Ringen may not in the end persuade many libertarians to endorse positive liberty, but for those interested in an updated and thoughtful defense of social democracy, *What Democracy Is For* merits a read.

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