

Athenian democracy prioritized people's welfare more than current democracies. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Athenian democracy and modern democracies are widely believed to be on opposite sides of world history; however, some historians may argue that they have more similarities than we think. Society likes to believe that as time goes by, humans evolve and become better versions of themselves. People today are far more complex than the ones that lived in Ancient Athens. It is difficult to compare two very different sides of history, especially welfare, considering how different the two eras are and how different our lifestyle is from over 3000 years ago, but within all this contrast a common trait can be found.

When thinking of welfare, we relate it to well-being, happiness, or success. There are some countries that we refer to as “welfare states” which tend to have higher levels of welfare for their citizens and provide higher living standards. A definition for them could be: “A welfare state is a state that is committed to providing basic economic security for its citizens by protecting them from market risks associated with old age, unemployment, accidents, and sickness.” (Weir, 2001). This term has first emerged in the UK in World War II and has been broadly used by systems of social welfare. It describes and examines many aspects of social issues like economic, political, institutional, and ideological factors. As outlined by (Penketh, 2015), some of the countries with the highest levels of welfare benefits are: France, the US, Germany, and the Nordic countries. The challenges that modern welfare states face is quite different from the ones in ancient Athens.

Ancient Athens developed a democratic system in the VI century B.C which at the time was something revolutionary to the life of society. The founders of Athenian democracy were: Solon (594 BC), Cleisthenes (508–07 BC), and Ephialtes (462). This democracy had shown early steps to building social and economic reforms which still exist today. One example of this is the creation of the Draconian Constitution, written by Dracon, who was the first legislator in ancient Greece. This written code made up of strict laws and rules, was one of the first signs of the development of democracy in Athens. This development was followed by Solon who issued economic and constitutional reforms, to prevent inequity issues within Athenian society. He also provided the right for citizens to participate in assembly meetings, which shows that democracy was very direct at the time, and not representative, like the one we often see today. By granting the formerly aristocratic role to every free citizen of Athens who owned property, Solon reshaped the social framework of the city-state. Under these reforms, the boule (a council of 400 members, with 100 citizens from each of Athens's four tribes) ran daily affairs and set the political agenda.

An important aspect of welfare at the time was the social classes that made up society. They were based on wealth and ethnicity. Ethnicity was the characteristic that was the most significant when it came to voting and taking part in assemblies. Although democracy claimed to be inclusive, realistically only adult male Athenian citizens were allowed to participate in voting, resulting in

very low electoral turnouts like 10% -20%. The title “Athenian” was only granted to free citizens, which benefited special rights and privileges. They mostly followed a citizenship-through-birth system criterion, to decide who was eligible. The important part was having an Athenian father, and possibly even an Athenian mother, since they believed that one’s birth had relevance to their political identity and their role as a citizen. The rest of the society: like women, children, freed slaves and metics) were excluded from any sort of political involvement.

There is quite a contrast between the role of women in society at the time, to the role that they have established in society today. Not only were women denied any sort of involvement in politics, but they were also denied their role as citizens in most cases, thus not granting any of the special privileges that men had. The way that society had perceived their role had highlighted two main functions: give birth to children and maintain the household. Their limitations due to their gender were established since birth by their families, continuing with Athenian women having no access to any sort of education, early marriage and being owned by their husbands, under a guardianship. According to Jacob (2021) historians believe that girls were at a higher risk of infanticide because of their gender, as most families preferred to have at least one healthy boy who could inherit their lands and fortune.

Free slaves were another part of society who suffered mistreatment and lack of participation in any political decision. Ancient Greece was not the first nation to practise slavery, but historical facts support that slavery was a very common phenomenon for Greeks. It was a sort of “lifestyle” that was normalized, children had begun forming friendships with the slaves that they grew up with. Slavery was not seen as a problem or a harassment of humans at any point, so its abolishment was never considered. Clearly, for society at the time there was a biological difference between the owners and slaves, which is why they “deserved” to be treated poorly. Aristotle referred to them as a piece of property that breathes, which is a surprising statement considering that he was one of the brightest minds at the time, but as it appears even he could not beat the collective mindset of that era (Garland, 2020).

Although most people believe that slavery has been abolished throughout the course of history, sometimes they do not realise that modern slavery is present in society. The modern world faces the issue of economic inequality, where more developed countries are able to establish more stable financial systems and better welfare programs for their citizens, while other less-developed countries face poverty and their citizens become subject to exploitation. Modern day slavery can be defined as: a form of organised crime in which individuals including children and young people are treated as commercial goods and exploited for the benefit of criminals.

Industries which are continually developing, and becoming more modernized such as the Fast Fashion business are one of the main contributors of child exploitation and forced labour. This exploitation takes place as a result of the shift in manufacturing from western developed countries to the Far East. There have been many attempts to try and regulate the laws against forced labour

or human trafficking, but unfortunately this still takes place as there is a great demand for cheap products, which need to be produced rapidly to meet the demand in the market.

Globalization has certainly impacted the welfare states. Weir (2001) explains that there is a strange coincidence between a country's size, its economic openness, and its welfare state. This means that smaller, export dependent economies are more likely to experience international shocks and need to be more adaptive. He adds that the relationship between power and welfare states is ambiguous. Both strong labour movements and generous welfare states could emerge from global economic pressures. An aging population is certainly another problem that welfare states are experiencing. Considering the more modern, fast, and work-orientated lifestyle, creating a family has become less of a priority to people of younger people, groups of ages 25-40. According to *The Week* (2022), "The US has seen birth rates decline 20% between 2007 and 2020. Even in China, where its one-child policy sought to halt a population explosion, the fertility rate now stands at 1.16, barely half the average of 2.1 births required to maintain its population level." They added that the pandemic also played a role in the reduction of fertility rates, where in the UK the rate fell to 1.58 children per women, lowest number since 2002.

The role and importance of women in the welfare states is a rising issue considering they are experiencing gender pay gaps. Since the beginning of history, taking examples from ancient Athens, women have only taken domestic roles, while today we have many successful examples of women in leading positions, which is a great achievement. However, statistics present some disappointing results on the issue. A report entitled "A widening gap: women and welfare reform", by a joint group of women's organisations in Scotland, notes that: "The gender pay gap in Scotland, which is 12% for full-time work and 32% for part-time work, signifies persistent and widespread differences in women's experience of the labour market." They also added that: Of the £26 billion in changes to taxes and benefits by the UK Government since June 2010, £22 billion will be borne by women and £4 billion by men. This is proof of the creation of a system that disfavors women's work capabilities and actually reduces their contributions in welfare states.

In conclusion, there is not a perfect welfare model in the world right now, but there certainly was not one in Athens. It is understandable that we cannot expect Athenian society to share the same mindset as society today, but their lack of knowledge should not be used as a justification for the problems that the welfare system had at that time. After all, their system of democracy, was built by knowledgeable philosophers who believed in the principles of democracy and welfare but did not find the best methods to apply them to everyday life. Democracy in Athens certainly served as an example for all the modern democracies that exist today, but leaders and politicians have managed to create welfare programs which are more inclusive, and more supportive for all citizens. There is still a lot of work ahead to perfect the welfare programs, but there are many positive examples in the world right now, which prove that modern democracies prioritize people's welfare more.

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