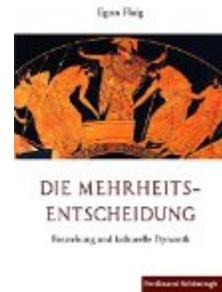


Egon Flaig. *Die Mehrheitsentscheidung: Entstehung und kulturelle Dynamik*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, 2013. 628 S. ISBN 978-3-506-77415-6.

Reviewed by Lorenz Erren
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E. Flaig: Die Mehrheitsentscheidung

What a beast of a book! This reviewer can't remember when he was so impressed by a single monograph. Egon Flaig, professor of Ancient History in Rostock, has written a thought-provoking study on majority vote, a core practice of democracy. His study touches at the same time on anthropology, global history, and political science. Flaig's analysis is almost free of enlightened stereotypes and narratives that shaped prevailing contemporary western concepts of democracy. The author bluntly declares, for example, that he did not examine modern parliaments, because "they did not add much to the evolution of majority vote" (p. 25).

Central thesis of the book is that majority vote is a necessary precondition for collective deliberation – i.e. a debate whose participants honestly try to find the best decision for the common wealth. Any other procedure would grant minorities a privilege and thus enable them to blackmail the majority, claiming recognition for something they ought to give for free: their consent to the best decision. By consequence, honest deliberation about best solutions would be replaced by parties' negotiation of foul compromise agreements.

Practice of majority vote, to begin with, is an exception in world history. Seen from a global perspective, mankind usually avoids crucial voting, clearly preferring the illusion of "unanimous" decisions based on "general consent". According to Flaig, history records not more than five stable institutions of decision-making by majority vote: in India, in Greece, in Jewish communities, in Iceland and in some Swiss communities ("Landsge-

meinden"). Flaig dismisses concepts of "tribal democracy" for a well-defined reason: democracy, he declares, exists only where decisions are made by majority vote, a procedure which necessarily implies that voters mutually acknowledge themselves – at least in the moment of debating and voting – as equals. Only under this condition will they enter into a frank and honest deliberation. Flaig does not deny the possibility that chiefs or leaders of consensus-oriented societies may try to find a wise decision. He insists that there is a major difference. The level of sobriety, consistency and honesty of debates where orators address an audience of listeners, each of whom enjoys equal voting rights, will never be reached by any consensus-oriented talk. In Samoan people's assemblies, which he cites as example, it is "strictly forbidden to bring forward any argument", all speakers being expected to express approval of others' opinions (p. 101).

Flaig engages in extensive analysis of debating and voting practices in various cultures, summarizing a large amount of anthropological literature. A most important topic is the problem of why and when overruled minorities object to adhere to the majority's decision and, more generally, what makes societies cohesive. In tribal and nomad societies, the situation is significantly different from ancient city states.

Once established as the decision-making rule of the Greek *polis*, majority vote enabled the emergence of Greek democracy. Today, ancient Athens is viewed as the epitome of a genuine democratic constitution in a political sovereign state of considerable wealth and power.

Athenian democracy had been generally dismissed as decadent, chaotic and ineffective until the 19th century, when this view changed and historians like George Grote started to defend democracy against historical judgments stemming from oligarchic bias. Mogens Herman Hansen, *The Tradition of the Athenian Democracy A.D. 1750–1990*, in: *Greece & Rome Second Series* 39 (1992), pp. 14–30. Very much in this tradition, Flaig emphatically declares that Athenian democracy worked very well indeed, and that people’s assemblies, where several thousand people gathered, took place in a calm and constructive atmosphere. In general, behavior was clearly more disciplined than among members of modern parliaments. In sharp contrast to what modern common sense or political science would expect, Athenian assemblies were not divided in parties, factions, or lobby-driven caucuses. As a consequence, assemblies of that size did not end up in chaos, but even more proved able to engage in sincere, authentic, honest deliberation. Unbound by party discipline, attendants observantly listened to various speakers without bias and made their vote according to their authentic conviction. As best orators had best chances to find support, rhetoric evolved as an important art. Flaig is convinced that precisely the deliberative democracy served as the ultimate incentive for the emergence of Greek philosophy and science.

In Rome and most communities of Roman Empire, however, people’s assemblies never enjoyed supreme power. The Roman Republic was clearly not a democracy but rather a “mixed constitution”, as Aristotle might have called it. Although citizens enjoyed well-defined rights of political participation, the most important decisions were nevertheless made in narrow elite circles. According to Flaig, there was a general trend, during Imperial period, to replace majority by supermajority vote and finally by mere acclamation. Majority step by step was disempowered by a privileged oligarch minority. If deliberation ever had been possible in Roman communities, it was over time completely eclipsed by selfish minorities’ negotiations. This is how things stayed in Italian communities through the Middle Ages.

Although Flaig does not examine modern parlia-

ments, he takes the opportunity to express his grief about present developments, lamenting that Europe allegedly “gives farewell to majority vote” (p. 19, 499–507) – an assertion which is not convincing at all. It is difficult to understand why Flaig spends so much ink to slash European national parliaments’ undue obedience to the European Commission. His previous chapters make it perfectly clear that representative democracy isn’t that democratic at all, for the simple reason that it usually allows a close circle of party leaders to accumulate enough power to suppress honest deliberation and have all decisions voted on by obedient delegates. An attentive reader will come to the conclusion that modern western constitutions never had much in common with Athens’ genuine democracy, but rather resembled consensus-oriented Roman communities. In modern times, there always has been a popular opinion that representative democracy is nothing but a mild form of oligarchic rule, which this book underpins with strong historical argument. It is therefore difficult to understand why Flaig, in his last chapter, is suddenly worried about today’s leftist groups which undermine democracy by opposing “decisions voted for majority vote”. Couldn’t such protests be seen as a sound reaction to the perception that parliaments decide without prior honest deliberation? This reviewer does not understand why Flaig, who dedicated his brilliant monograph to Swiss *Landsgemeinden* (Appenzell and Glarus), did not close it with a plea in favor of plebiscitary democracy.

In any case, this is a great book of unusual scope and original thought. Beyond its most illuminative description of the interplay between voting rules and quality of deliberation summarized above, it contains an immense amount of further insights and examinations. Even if some specialists of ancient history, anthropology or political science will find Flaig’s conclusions somewhat less innovative or convincing than this reviewer does, there is no doubt that his book earns great merit by simple aggregation of so many different facts from various cultures, uniting them in a coherent narrative of global history, and, last but not least, by its capacity to provoke historians of all backgrounds to rethink the question: What is democracy?

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