**Week 1 – Why democracy?**

**Is section at Harvard a democracy?**

Let’s put grading—the most despotic part of section—aside. Is section at Harvard a democracy? Should *this* section be a democracy? What would it mean for this section to be a democracy?

Now: some TFs have students submit questions ahead of time based on the readings, and then those are the questions you talk about during section. I, however, am a despot when it comes to section. You can interrupt me and raise questions—feel free to do this—but when it comes to constructing the agenda, I have these very specific ideas about what makes a good section. There should be tantalizing questions that lead to tantalizing discussion that proceeds logically, each point building on the last, according to *my* predetermined structure, all while hitting upon all the readings, incorporating main points from the lectures, and to be quite frank: I don’t trust that your questions are going to do this.

And: I hate to tell you this. If there were other classes where you had to submit questions, the TF was actually a despot who had a preconceived idea about what the arc of the discussion should be. He or she just put your questions—they way you worded things—into their proper slots. It was the appearance of democracy, but without actual democratic content, to make you *feel* *all warm and democratic-ky*.

Sorry, I’m getting carried away. I’m sure that there are TFs who are actually successful at structuring section democratically…. Which brings us to an important point. We’re talking about democratic structure here. But structure isn’t the only thing that makes a democracy democratic. There are certain character traits that we associate with being in a democracy: a sense of moral equality, a sense of justice, equal voice, etc.—what are others? I just want you to throw out adjectives that capture the democratic flavor.

This raises a few questions.

1. Can something have a democratic character without a democratic structure?
2. What would a perfectly democratic structure look like?
3. Is a perfectly democratic structure desirable?
4. Are quasi-democratic structures democratic enough for them to count as democracies—due to the fact that they have quasi-democratic structures and strive to promote a democratic character?

Before we move on to the readings and these questions—which are not going to be resolved today—the theme of the sometimes unwieldy relationship between democratic structure and democratic character is going to appear throughout the semester—there’s something else I want to bring up vis-à-vis section and democratic-ness:

1. Democracy: all opinions equally meritorious (Greek/Mill’s criticism of democracy → Mill p. 85)
2. Democracy: space for meritocratic competition (Schumpeter & market theory of democracy)

#1 seems intuitively wrong, but it seems to better capture the democratic character than #2. Yet, when you actually think through the intellectual consequences of #1, as Mill does, it sounds rather snobbish. How to reconcile?