

# The 2500th Anniversary of Democracy: Lessons of Athenian Democracy

## Lessons of Athenian Democracy: Editor's Introduction

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First, the good news: 1992-93 is the 2500th anniversary of the birth of democracy. It was in 507-508 B.C.<sup>1</sup> that the reforms of Cleisthenes took place in Athens.<sup>2</sup> In a world seemingly devoid of much to cheer about, here's an excuse to celebrate.<sup>3</sup>

Now, for the quibbles. If Cleisthenes is so important, why have I never heard of him?<sup>4</sup> Moreover, why should I celebrate Athenian democracy when I know from both Madison and Hamilton in the *Federalist Papers* that it was really mob rule, an example to be avoided at all costs in shaping a constitution for a republic in search of stability and good government? Hasn't Thucydides taught us that the fickleness of the Athenian populace led to repeated Athenian military disasters after the death of Pericles, the Athenian "first citizen" whom Thucydides sees as having ruled over Athens while permitting the masses the illusion that they were in control? Wasn't it an Athenian people's jury that forced the world's greatest philosopher to drink hemlock? Perhaps even more importantly, isn't it (politically) incorrect to call Athens a democracy? How can a militaristic society built on the backs of slaves and the revenues of imperialism, in which women couldn't own property or participate in politics, ever be something to celebrate?!

On the other hand, even if we did choose to regard classical Athens as a democracy, isn't its form of government no more than a historical curiosity? Could anyone seriously propose that the membership of Congress consist of whoever shows up in Washington on a given day who's willing to serve (à la the

Athenian assembly) or be replaced by a group of citizens chosen by lot and rotated yearly (à la the Athenian council)?

There has been an explosion of writing about fifth- and fourth-century Athens, mostly by classicists and ancient historians, including at least seven books about Athens published in the past five years that have democracy in their titles (Farrar 1988; Hansen 1991; Kagan 1991; Ober 1989; Sinclair 1988; Starr 1990; Stockton 1990; see also Davies 1978) and a number of others published in that same period that do not have democracy in the title but are still largely or entirely about that topic (Fornara and Samons 1991; Manville 1990; Meier 1990; Ostwald 1986; Strauss 1988; see also Carter 1986). With a handful of important exceptions, this writing has not yet had much of an impact on political scientists, whose views of Athenian democracy remain, I suspect, primarily influenced by the suspicions and animadversions of Plato, Aristotle, or Thucydides,<sup>5</sup> or the very negative image of Athenian democracy purveyed in the *Federalist papers*.<sup>6</sup>

The view of Athenian democracy offered by work building on this recent scholarship is sophisticated and nuanced.<sup>7</sup> It makes any portrait of Athens as anarchic or ill-governed appear simplistic and outmoded. While there is no classic text in which a theory of Athenian democracy is laid out that is written by someone truly sympathetic to that democracy, this recent scholarship has done much to recreate such a theory from a variety of fragmentary sources, including speeches before Athenian juries (Ober 1989), funeral orations (Wills

1992), dramatic and comedic texts (Euben 1986, 1990), careful attention to the writings of anti-Democratic theorists such as the "old oligarch" (Wolin 1993, this volume),<sup>8</sup> and painstaking reconstruction of the historical evolution of Athenian institutions of governance (see esp. Hansen 1991; Ostwald 1986)—including such minutiae as a decades-long effort to locate the boundary markers defining the geographic districts used as subunits for electoral rolls and military muster introduced as a key element of the Cleisthenic reforms (see Eliot 1962; Traill 1975, 1986; Whitehead 1986).<sup>9</sup>

Looking to this scholarship we do not see either direct mass rule or concealed elite dominance; rather, it is a complex system including not just the assembly and the people's courts but also the council and popularly elected officials such as the board of generals, with mechanisms for accountability and checks and balances such as a mode of constitutional review, hearings on fitness to hold office, a charge of unconstitutional conduct, strict scrutiny of accounts, and ostracism.<sup>10</sup> I would argue that, once we recognize the institutional richness of the Athenian system, we ought to be suspicious of overly romanticized notions of Athenian democracy that render it indistinguishable from modern notions of pure participatory democracy à la SDS, even as we recognize that "the Athenian demos was able to exercise collective power in order to prevent elite domination" (Ober 1993, this volume).<sup>11</sup> Recent scholarship has also cast doubt on claims that Athenian democracy could flourish only with the spoils of

empire<sup>12</sup> or required slavery to make possible a leisured citizenry with sufficient time to participate actively in politics (see, e.g., Strauss 1988; Ober 1989, 20-35; cf. Finley 1980).

The five essays in this symposium are all informed by recent scholarship, but each draws somewhat different conclusions with respect to the nature of Athenian democracy as compared to our own and/or with respect to the lessons that Athenian practices and theories of politics provide to modern democracies.<sup>13</sup>

Sheldon Wolin sees Athenian democracy and its practices as a benchmark against which to judge contemporary democracies (and find them wanting). Wolin wishes to rebut Robert Dahl's (1989) charge that, as paraphrased by Wolin (1993, this volume of *PS*), "the sheer size, scale, and complexity of a modern society such as the United States render Athenian democracy a curiosity rather than an inspiration." He rejects a goal he attributes to both ancient and modern constitutional theorists from Aristotle to Polybius to Madison to Tocqueville of seeking to "dampen, frustrate, sublimate and defeat the demotic passions," through devices such as removing constitutional rules from the gusts of popular passion, checks and balances, indirect elections, and suffrage restrictions. His aim is to restore the *demos* as "actor" and end its marginalization as "voter"; he looks to Athens for his inspiration. As he reminds us, in Athens "the principal legislative body was the Assembly of all citizens, the boards of lawmakers (*nomothetai*) and the juries were chosen by lot from the citizens; the Council which prepared the agenda for the Assembly was chosen annually by lot from the citizenry; the decisions of the Assembly were subject to review only by the people's courts."

Peter Euben alerts us to the ways that the "lessons" of history are shaped and reshaped for new audiences in response to changed historical circumstances and political climates and asks us to question the ways in which classical political theory has been used and is being used to "legitimate an anti-democratic political and educational agenda." One of his concerns is a

fear that liberal democracy will lose sight of its democratic half. Euben's earlier work has emphasized what I will call the political culture aspects of democracy more than its formal institutional mechanisms, but here Euben's response to the last of the rhetorical questions in the first paragraph above is to rejoin that, in the light of the ineptnesses and malfeasances of our rulers, "it is at least worth asking how much worse off Americans would be if our political leaders were selected by lot with frequent rotation of offices, or whether justice would be less served by expanding the responsibility of juries or with having judicial review conducted by common citizens rather than lawyer-judges."

Josiah Ober emphasizes that, in Athens, contemporary witnesses took for granted that "the political power (*kratos*) of the mass of ordinary citizens (*demos*) was real," and thus we should be hesitant to dismiss Athenian democracy as only a myth. Ober then discusses why many liberal theorists of democracy have been so unwilling to "countenance the possibility that the ordinary citizens really did rule." Ober also offers his own unique synthesis of the groundings of Athenian democracy, with a focus on the ability of the people of Athens to maintain their rule "through control of public speech." Ober reminds us that, in Athenian juries, there was no judge—or rather, "each of the several hundred citizens serving on a jury as a judge (*dikastes*)." Moreover, there were no lawyers. Rather citizens had to speak for themselves, but with the wealthier able to afford the help of rhetoricians in drafting their remarks in advance. Rather than deferring to elite expertise when it came time to make important decisions, "the citizenry believed itself to be the best judge of important matters."

The last two essays, by Arlene Saxonhouse and Michael T. Clark, share an emphasis on the writings of Thucydides.

Saxonhouse, while her primary aim is to trace changes in the way Athenian democracy has been portrayed, offers a reading of Thucydides on democracy that takes seriously the questions the ancients themselves asked about the nature

and meaning of democracy. She is skeptical of "myth-makers who give us an amorphous vision of the perfection of ancient democracy where freedom allowed the arts to flourish, where men eagerly participated in a public world, where care for the community did not work in opposition to individual interest. . . ." According to her, "we need not attribute to the ancients a Rousseauian vision of participation (or) an Arendtian world of men seeking immortality through speech. . . ."

While entering into a dialogue with Saxonhouse about Thucydides' views of democracy, the central focus of Clark's essay, addressed primarily but certainly not exclusively to international relations theorists, is to warn against Procrustean reading of ancient texts such as Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War* that forces us to place them in terms of references derived from modern conceptual frameworks. Here he echoes Saxonhouse's concern about a too modern reading of the ancients. He reminds us that Thucydides is often cited but rarely read; and if read, read more to be chastised for his pre-modern lack of causal clarity than cherished for the power of his thought. He also reminds us that Thucydides poses questions about the linkage between democracy and empire that are worthy of contemporary consideration and forcefully suggests that contemporary international relations theorists have at least as much to learn from Thucydides as Thucydides from them.

These essays remind us that ancient venues and ancient texts can provide an ideal backdrop for modern quarrels<sup>14</sup> as well as for timeless insights. In seeking to understand Athens, almost inevitably we are forced to try to better understand ourselves.

## Notes

1. The exact date of the reforms is in some dispute (see Ostwald 1986, 16-17, n. 49). Cleisthenes is in power between the time of Solon and the time of Pericles.

2. Many classicists take the Cleisthenic reforms as marking the emergence of a genuine democracy in Athens, although recognizing that the Cleisthenic model builds on the earlier structures created by Solon, on the one hand, and that it would take later

leaders such as Ephialtes and Pericles to consolidate that democracy, on the other. Some prefer to delay giving Athens the epithet of democracy until a later period (compare, for example, Ostwald 1986, 15-28 and Kagan 1991). Cleisthenes is credited with giving the common people "a voice in the management of public affairs" on matters that had "previously been the exclusive province of the upper classes" (Ostwald 1986, 23). According to Ostwald (1986, 18), his was a careful balancing act in which he broke the aristocratic monopoly of wealth and power "without eliminating from the political scene the upper classes whose economic power, social prestige, and military expertise made them indispensable for the management of public affairs" by creating a democratic counterweight in the form of popular Assembly and a Council chosen by lot from among an expanded class of citizens. Cleisthenes is also credited with creating a juridical concept of Athenian citizenship whose locus was in a set of geographically defined communities (demes). The subsequent use of deme-based patronymics probably helped level social differences. Moreover, the groupings of demes into *trittyes* and then into "tribes" helped integrate elites tied to farming, coastal and urban interests and prevent internecine power struggles that had characterized earlier periods. The new "tribal" groupings, with components from all three areas, became the principal basis for voting and tribal conscripts apparently fought together in the same units in the military. Thus, the new tribal structure became a basis for social solidarity. However, differences among classes of citizens persisted, with only the higher classes permitted to hold certain offices.

3. A few years back, two U.S. classicists, Josiah Ober (Princeton) and Charles Hedrick (UC Santa Cruz), over a couple of beers, noted that the anniversary of the Cleisthenic reforms was coming due and decided to spark a commemoration of that anniversary that would focus on the democratic legacy of Athens. With a large grant from NEH funding, a six-week summer institute at UCSC in 1993 (attendance at which got me and Michael Clark as well as several other political scientists into the act), conferences in both Washington, D.C. and Greece, and a Smithsonian display, they have succeeded admirably.

4. For example, despite its relatively extensive discussion of Athenian democracy, Cleisthenes goes unmentioned in Dahl (1989). His name is equally conspicuous by its absence in virtually everything else ever written about democracy by political scientists.

5. In the view of my colleague, A Wuffle (personal communication, April 30, 1993), this is roughly equivalent to looking to the memoirs of George III for one's understanding of the political philosophy of the American Revolution. An even more vitriolic view of the link between classical philosophy and democratic theory is found in Wood and Wood (1978). A less jaundiced and more balanced view of what we can learn about Athenian democracy from ancient writers usually considered unfriendly to mass democracy is found in Saxonhouse (this volume), with respect to Thucydides, and in Euben (this volume) with respect to Socrates.

6. For a discussion of how American views of Athenian democracy did a volte-face between the late 18th and mid-19th centuries, see Wills (1992). Roberts (n.d.) and Saxonhouse (this volume of *PS*) discuss the many different ways in which Athenian democracy has been portrayed over the centuries. See also the various essays in Claster (1967). With only some slight exaggeration we may say that classical Athens (especially in the age of Pericles) has been seen as both the best of times and the worst of times.

7. Much of this work skillfully and painstakingly reinterprets existing evidence rather than offering new data. However, sometimes relevant new information does become available. For example, recently discovered archaeological information about the size of the Pnyx (see Saxonhouse, this volume of *PS*, and references therein) shows that only a

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fraction of the citizenry (albeit a non-trivial one) could be present in the Athenian Assembly at any given time.

8. In my own work (in progress), I am hoping to reexamine Aristotelian justifications for collective wisdom in the light of the judgmental models of the French mathematician and philosopher, the Marquis de Condorcet (cf. Grofman and Feld 1988), although I am sensitive to Saxonhouse's strictures (this volume of *PS*) about overmodernizing the past.

9. Some classicists believe that *trittyes* boundaries were gerrymandered for political purposes. If so, it might seem only fair to give credit where credit is due and rename the gerrymander (named for the 18th-century U.S. politician, Elbridge Gerry) the "Cleisthemander."

10. Not all these mechanisms were in place at the same time. See esp. Ostwald 1986; Hansen 1991.

11. I hope at some point to write an essay comparing Athenian checks and balances with the Madisonian system, since I believe that the parallels between the two have been missed in the comparative treatments of Athenian and modern electoral democracy that focus on the supposed sharp contrast between direct/active versus indirect/passive forms of democracy.

12. Albeit, as we are reminded by Clark

(this volume of *PS*), it flourished along with empire.

13. Of course, not only is the historical record sketchy and inevitably to remain so, but no amount of historical detail can force a choice between competing normative perspectives. Thus, historical scholarship can never fully resolve the debates about the true nature of Athenian democracy or the lessons we should draw from it.

14. Similarly, sparked in part by the writings of Foucault, Athens has been reexamined recently through the lens of gender and gay studies, with an ongoing dispute about the nature of eros and the legal status of certain types of sexual behavior (see, e.g., Cohen 1991). Some of this debate seems ineluctably tied to (and even subordinated to) present-day political agendas, and it can be conducted with remarkable vituperation (see, e.g., Camille Paglia's 1991 review of David M. Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, reprinted in Paglia 1992, 170-87).

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Photo Courtesy of Press Office/Embassy of Greece

# Democracy: Electoral and Athenian

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The third-century Christian convert, Tertullian, once asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" A twentieth-century American political scientist might ask, What has Athens to do with Washington? In both cases the answer is not as obvious as the rhetorical question would imply. Historically, revelation's identity depended on its contrast with reason even as it sought reason's discredit. American democracy has always been dogged by a so-called Founding whose Fathers never intended a democracy and were scathing in their opinion of "the turbulent democracies of ancient Greece" (Madison 1961, No. 14, 84).

Tocqueville claimed to have discovered in America a democracy "more perfect than antiquity had dared dream of" (Tocqueville 1961, vol. 1(1), 34). His comparison was between Periclean Athens of the fifth century (BCE) and the New England township of the Jacksonian era. His intention was to show that American democracy was superior to any of the ancient democracies because it was stabler, more law-abiding, and respectful of property rights. Here Tocqueville was simultaneously reaffirming the virtually unanimous judgment, from Plato to the authors of *The Federalist*, about the innate tendency of democracy toward anarchy and expropriation of the rich, and attempting to present America as the great exception.

The rupture with Athens seems complete when Tocqueville remarks elsewhere that upon considering the numerous attempts made to judge the "American republics" by ancient Greek or Roman models, "I was tempted to burn my books and to apply only new ideas to such a novel social condition" (Tocqueville 1961, vol. 1(1), 316). Yet Tocqueville did not burn his books, and while he did develop some new ideas he could not avoid lapsing into the idiom of Pericles' Funeral Oration when eulogizing American democracy:

It is difficult to say what place polit-

ical concerns have in the life of an American. To involve himself in the government of society and to discuss it is his biggest concern and, so to speak, the sole pleasure an American knows. . . . [E]ven the women often attend public assemblies to listen to public discourse as a respite from household routines. . . . If an American were reduced to being occupied solely with his own affairs, he would be deprived of half of his existence; he would feel an immense emptiness in his life and he would be unbearably miserable (Tocqueville 1961, vol. 1(1), 254).

In Athenianizing America, especially New England, Tocqueville did a disservice to ancient Athens and to present-day America. For he makes it easy for modern liberals and even for self-styled radical democrats to argue that only fanatics would want to spend their lives attending political meetings. The implicit assumption, which our contemporaries share with Tocqueville, is that democracy is essentially about "participation" and that fifth-century Athens is to be understood as the extreme version. Accordingly, most political scientists—the Samuel Huntingtons excepted—would probably not dismiss Athenian democracy for the reason that it was "an ungovernable mob" (Hamilton 1904, vol. 2, 22), but be inclined instead to echo the opinion of Robert Dahl that the sheer size, scale, and complexity of a modern society such as the United States render Athenian democracy a curiosity rather than an inspiration. From here the argument typically branches out to claim that participatory democracy is an impracticable scheme of government. It is not unusual to find that claim accompanied by another: that democracy is too sophisticated a form for non-Western peoples to operate. Thus, democracy is at once too simple for complex Western societies and too complex for simple non-Western ones.

The argument from practicality leaves the impression that the dis-

agreement is not about democracy itself but how to realize it. That impression is, I want to suggest, wrong. The democracy begun by the American political science, initiated by *The Federalist*, and inherited by its contemporary practitioners, is a different project. I shall call it "electoral democracy." It requires a different kind of citizen, not simply a distinction between representative and participatory institutions. Representative democracy is not about the demos as an actor but as a voter, job-holder, taxpayer, and rule-observer. The last thing it is about is the power of the demos as reported in Aristotle's Constitution of Athens:

The people have made themselves supreme in all fields; they run everything by decree of the *Ekklesia* (assembly) and by decisions of the *dikasteria* (courts) in which the people are supreme. . . (Moore 1975, 41.2).

When Dahl asserts that, if modern democracy were to achieve the form of representative government, "the theory and practice of democracy had to burst the narrow bounds of the polis" (Dahl 1989, 23), the implications are not just about scale and complexity but about reducing the reach of citizenly action and the stature of the citizen. Thus the modern paradox (which Dahl does not formulate as such): before democracy could be enlarged, it had to be constricted. With one significant omission, Dahl can fairly be said to have restated the agenda set out in *Federalist #10* where Madison contrasted direct democracy with republican or representative government and recommended the latter. The exception is that in contrast to *The Federalist*, especially in the pieces written by Hamilton, Dahl feels no compulsion to reformulate what was, after all, the main concern of *The Federalist*, the creation of a strong, centralized state.

One of Tocqueville's most suggestive remarks was that nothing had surprised him more about American democracy than the virtual absence

of the state (Tocqueville 1957, 5(1), 89-90, 258-59). In short, in Tocqueville's America the verdict was still in suspense regarding *The Federalist* project of a strong state, a project which, of course, would become more problematical with the outbreak of the Civil War. That postponed the question of whether a democratic politics, more Athenian than *Federalist*, could survive the establishment of a truly strong state. But that question directs attention to what the so-called Founders had in mind for democracy.

Among the main reasons Madison had recommended a republican constitution based on representative government was that it would control democracy by making it difficult for the majority to rule and that it would establish a political system in which there was a fair prospect that most of the major institutions of the national government—the Senate, electoral college, the president, and the Supreme Court—would be staffed by republican *aristoi*. Concurrently, Madison's collaborator, Hamilton, supplied the rationale for the American version of the modern state, complete with a chief executive, a national administration, a military establishment, and an active foreign policy, all of which contributed to pushing democracy still further into a corner.<sup>1</sup>

I want first to retrieve a notion that once figured prominently in the rhetoric of anti-democratic theories and whose suppression in Dahl's work might help to illuminate a significant contrast. It is the notion of "passion." Ironically, it was ascribed to Athenian democracy, thus reversing Tertullian's formula and enabling reason to be claimed for the state that governed the world's oldest, most continuous democracy.

Among ancient writers, such as Thucydides and Plato, as well as among moderns such as Madison and Tocqueville, one of the common charges against democracy was that its dynamic or driving force was in the "passions" of the multitude. The usual claim was that the democrat had a passion for equality not merely because he was envious of distinctions of wealth, social status, birth, education, and virtue, but because he hated them. Plato went further and

refined the idea by saying that the democrat loved freedom because he had no use for the forms of deference traditionally owed to various authorities. The demos was, in other words, disrespectful of social boundaries (*Republic*, 537b-d). Wherever the demos was incorporated as sovereign, the passions so to speak were collectivized. The result, so it was alleged, was "turbulence," "disorder," frequent changes in the laws, and erratic policies. In contrast, the counsels of reason, elaborated by the philosopher and attributed to the Few, produced prudent judgments and virtuous actions.

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It is no exaggeration to say that one of the, if not the, main projects of ancient constitutional theorists, such as Plato (*The Laws*), Aristotle, Polybius, and Cicero, as well as of modern constitutionalists, such as the authors of *The Federalist* and Tocqueville, was to dampen, frustrate, sublimate, and defeat the demotic passions. The main devices were: the rule of law and especially the idea of a sacrosanct "fundamental law" or constitution safeguarded from the "gusts of popular passions"; the idea of checks and balances; separation of powers with its attempt to quarantine the "people" by confining its direct representation to one branch of the legislature; the "refining" process of indirect elections; and suffrage restrictions. The aim was not simply to check democracy but to discourage it by making it difficult for those who, historically, had almost no leisure time for politics, to achieve political goals. (Twentieth-century

voter registration laws have a long genealogy.) The strategy of delay counted on this disadvantage because those who had wealth or other resources could hire surrogates to do their political bidding. Constitutionalism and electoral democracy became complementary. Together they signified the destruction of the demos as actor, its marginalization as voter.

One measure of the success of that project in depoliticization is that political scientists now study a citizenry distinguished by passivity, alienation, resentment, and, above all, a growing despair about the efficacy of the political system. This comes at a time when, by most accounts, class divisions are widening and disparities in life chances and in access to basic needs, such as breathable air, drinkable water, and pacific schools, are becoming sharper.

The anti-democratic rhetoric of political theorists about the passions and the turbulent spirit of democracy was really an attack upon the vitality and energy displayed by a demos that believed that it truly was the political system and not as in modern democracy, a sovereign who reigns but does not rule. Thucydides has a Syracusan leader portray the Athenians in terms that allow us to see that what might appear as passions to some were the energies of ordinary beings whom democracy had transformed into citizens, into the bearers of the political:

The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution. . . . [T]hey are adventurous beyond their power, and daring beyond their judgment, and in danger they are sanguine. . . . [T]hey are never at home . . . for they hope by their absence to extend their acquisitions. Their bodies they spend ungrudgingly in their country's cause; their intellect they jealously husband to be employed in her service. . . . [T]hey were born into the world to take no rest for themselves and to give none to others (Thucydides 1951, 1.70).

In a democracy, according to a speaker in the debate arranged by Herodotus, "the state and the people are synonymous terms" because "the magistrate is appointed by lot and is held responsible for his conduct in

office and all questions are put up for open debate" (Herodotus 1972, III.80). Historians have often described the wide array of institutions in which the Athenian democrat took part and the intense civic experience it produced.<sup>2</sup> By 400 BCE, property qualifications for citizenship had been eliminated; the principal legislative body was the Assembly of all citizens; the boards of lawmakers (*nomothetai*) and the juries were chosen by lot from the citizens; the Council, which prepared the agenda for the Assembly was chosen annually by lot from the citizenry; the decisions of the Assembly were subject to review only by the people's courts. Citizens not only deliberated and took decisions in the Assembly, Council, and the courts, but they chose leaders, made decisions about foreign policy and war, judged the credentials of officeholders, issued decrees, and much more. To this should be added the flourishing local political cultures centered in the demes.<sup>3</sup>

The reason for the extraordinary energy displayed by Athenians was, I would argue, directly related to the nature of power at that time. Democracy was the political moment when the demos recognized that the power of the polis was their power, not an illegal seizure of something that belonged to the rich or well born. Here is an account of that democracy by an observer known only as "The Old Oligarch." He was no friend of Athenian democracy yet, unlike Plato or Aristotle, his prejudices did not get in the way of his insights:

[I]t is right that the poor and ordinary people [in Athens] should have more power than the noble and rich, because it is the ordinary people who man the fleet and bring the city her power; they provide the helmsmen, the boatswains, the junior officers, the lookouts and the shipwrights. It is these people who make the city powerful much more than the hoplites and the noble and respectable citizens (Moore 1975, 2).

What the passage suggests is that participation was instrumental, the means by which social groups and classes constituting the majority of inhabitants gained access to forms of power that enabled them to improve their condition by contesting the forms of power associated with wealth, birth, and education. Electoral democracy, in contrast, allows the citizenry to "participate," not in power but in the rituals and festivals of power. The differences can be crystallized by recalling the Athenian practices of lot, rotation in office, frequent elections, and close accountability of officials. Doubtless these made for "turmoil" and that impression offends the highly developed modern sensibility which looks upon "order" as the sine qua non of politics and, more fundamentally, of a (financial) market society. The guardian of that order is not democracy but the state. And no modern society has yet managed to democratize the state.

## Notes

Special thanks to Peter Euben, John Wallach, and Josiah Ober for comments and arguments.

1. For further elaboration and textual references in *The Federalist* see Wolin (1989).

2. For discussions of the practices of Athenian democracy see Finley (1983, 70-96), Sinclair (1988, esp. chaps. 1-5); Stockton (1990, 57 and ff.) is helpful on the relations of local and central governments; on the early background of citizenship see Manville (1990); and for the legal development of Athenian democracy see Ostwald's (1986) magisterial work. Euben (1990) has many suggestive ideas on the political culture surrounding Athenian democracy.

3. See Ober (1989) for emphasis upon the effective relationships between citizens and leaders. Ober uses forms of analysis familiar to social scientists. Also Hansen (1987) and Whitehead (1986) on local governments.

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## Democracy Ancient and Modern

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With the collapse of communism and consequent disrepute of Marxism, there is a danger that liberalism will overwhelm democracy and that liberal political theory will become hegemonic despite the efforts of "communitarians" and postmodernists. I want to suggest that, given these developments, Athenian democracy and classical political theory read in its terms is a worthy political and theoretical interlocutor for both. (For a more detailed argument see the "Introduction" to Euben, Ober, and Wallach 1993.) This is not to engage in yet more polis envy, indulge in yet more Hellenic romanticism about "The Glory That Was Greece," or endorse the uncritical worship of "great books." My aim, rather, is to avoid the self-congratulation, complacency, and presentism that too often attends "our victory" in the Cold War and to make a contribution to the ensuing debate about American political identity.

As this suggests, my concerns here are partly political. I want to indicate the strategies by which "Athenian democracy" is delegitimated as a challenge to contemporary democracy and question the way classical political theory is used to legitimate an antidemocratic political and educational agenda. That democratic Athens should be understood in terms of contemporary political controversies is nothing new. *The Federalist Papers* used it as an object lesson by which to justify limiting democracy in the name of republicanism, and debates over reform of the British Parliament and French Revolution found conservatives criticizing the politics of their own day in terms of the putative excesses of democratic Athens, much as Allan Bloom has done in our own time (Turner 1981, chaps. 1 and 5). Nor is there anything new in claiming that interpretations of classical texts are influenced by extrascholarly considerations. Plato as "totalitarian" and Barker's "liberal" translation of

*The Politics* are clearly responses to World War II, as is the recent reading of a "pessimistic" Thucydides to Vietnam. Before that war, scholarly consensus regarded Thucydides as a realist offering rules of politics and power which enabled analysts and leaders alike to predict the course of war and empire. But after the war, interpreters argued that the *History's* lesson was that one could not learn from history, except perhaps of how

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*. . . conservative canonists who lament the politicizing of higher education ignore the way the texts they venerate create an educational atmosphere they deplore.*

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to be more brutal than one's predecessors had been. This Thucydides owed more to the tragedians than to Hippocratic science. The change was not due to better translations or new evidence about the events Thucydides portrayed. It had to do with a changed political climate of an interpretive community in the aftermath of a futile and divisive war.

This does not mean that everything is political and subjective or that scholarship is really ideology. It does mean that political agendas and cultural moods play a role in representations of Athenian democracy and classical political theory now as they have in the past.

I am not sure this is a "bad" thing. For it seems to me that recent feminist, Marxist, and postmodernist critiques of Athenian democracy and classical theory have helped stimulate more subtle critical appropriation of that "democracy" and more subtle interpretations of those texts. It may even be that such critics have provided dimension,

urgency, and liveliness to the discussion of "canonical" texts precisely by generating controversies about them. If so, then conservative canonists who lament the politicizing of higher education ignore the way the texts they venerate create an educational atmosphere they deplore.

## II

Athenian democracy is often represented as radically unstable, illiberal, intolerant, and prone to violence and greed. Given this vision, liberals and conservatives have found it easy to argue or natural to assume that if democracy is to flourish it must be governed by what the Trilateral Commission (1975) called "responsible elites" (by which they no doubt have themselves in mind). Thus, democracy is largely a matter of choosing among elites in periodic elections rather than what it literally meant; the *kratia* (power, rule, mastery) by the demos partly reflected in Lincoln's government of, by, and for the people. Because the demos was prone to excess, democracy had to be liberal and constitutional, relying on a system of rights which, while it would protect individuals from government, would, perhaps more importantly, protect individuals from each other.

Athenian democracy is also represented as a myth and this in two ways. The first (Dahl 1960; but see Dahl's more recent and nuanced view, Dahl 1989, Introduction and chap. 1) argues that the vision of a participatory democracy that mesmerizes contemporary democrats is more political projection than historical fact, and that it is "natural" that the majority of citizens in a democracy "chose" more efficient ways of gratifying their desires and achieving their goals than political activity. (Thus there is nothing oxymoronic about chapters entitled "Citizenship Without Politics.") The second simply asks, "What democracy?" Given the presence of slavery,



the political marginalization of women, and the denial of citizen rights to foreigners, regarding Athens as a democracy is a dangerous mistake.

Yet a third way in which Athenian democracy is represented is as an ideal which, however fully realized 2500 years ago, is irrelevant to our own society of infinitely greater scale and complexity. The massive transformation of economy and society during the last 350 years means that democracy must be representative democracy, which relies on professional expertise rather than a direct democracy of amateurs. Whereas the Athenians chose almost all their officials by lot, mandated frequent rotation in office, and could expect to spend much of their time governing themselves in the local demes and in city institutions such as the Council of 500 (the executive arm of the Assembly)—by sitting on juries that heard not only criminal and civil cases but examined magistrates before and after they assumed office, and speaking or voting in the sovereign Assembly of the people,<sup>1</sup> we cannot.

There is something to be said for each of these representations. But there is also something to be said against them and the insulation of our democracy from the challenge of Athenian democracy.

One could make a strong case that the vices attributed to democracy have characterized democratic elites rather than the demos. In Athens the most violent revolutions came from above, and our own "crisis of governance" has had more to do with the ineptness of our rulers (think of Watergate, Vietnam, Irangate, the savings and loan scandal, for example) than from the people. Given this, it is at least worth asking how much worse off Americans would be if our political leaders were selected by lot with frequent rotation of offices, or whether justice would be less served by expanding the responsibilities of juries or with having judicial review conducted by common citizens rather than lawyer-judges.

Few would deny the need for rights in a large and diverse nation-state or—in the face of recent history in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union,

China, South Africa, Chile, Argentina, and Cambodia—would reject the importance of constitutional guarantees and liberal institutions. Yet we need to be alert to the conservative if not anti-democratic impulses of liberal constitutionalism and the inadequacies of relying on rights, not only because, as Marx argued in *On the Jewish Question*, actual social inequalities mock the formal equalities, but because rights may not work when we need them most (as in the Dennis case). Thus we may, even in the interests of strengthening rights, require ideas and practices of civic virtue and political education, two ideas upon which the Athenians relied in their exercise of democracy. Such reliance was one reason why their "solution" to the problem of democratic excess was more democracy, not less. They assumed that expanding the opportunities for people to exercise power taught them the responsibilities of power and that maximizing the places and ways people participate (in courts, festivals, theater, demes, etc.) provided multiple points of view about political controversies thereby encouraging a less parochial understanding of them than would otherwise be available. Continuous discussion in these various forums among citizens who recognized both the differences that divided them and the shared fate that confronted them, constituted as it enhanced the capacity for reasoned debate. Underlying and justifying democratic participation was the wisdom available from performances in the theater where the entire citizenry<sup>2</sup> saw their cultural and political dilemmas reenacted before them in the form of myth and legend (as with tragedy) or in political parody (as in comedy). In sum, democratic excess was to be contained by the political education in civic virtue that came from living a public life.

The argument that participatory democracy is a mythical projection delegitimizes comparisons between it and American democracy that might "problematize" the latter's claim to be the preeminent democracy of our time. If, as Robert Dahl argues, people do not participate because they choose not to do so, then insisting that they should has the paradoxical

result of proposing a "perfectionist" standard that legitimates coercing people to be democratic activists. But in what sense have people "chosen" not to participate when they do not fully grasp the consequences of that "choice" or when there are strong cultural inhibitions as well as direct political costs to their doing so? More than that, an Athenian might argue that failing to consistently participate in public life is analogous to selling oneself into slavery since it is to leave one subject to the will of another. (See especially John Gaventa's application and elaboration of Steven Lukes' "third dimension of power" in Gaventa 1980.) He might even make a moral argument for the significance of continuous participation like that made by Aristotle (who is hardly an ardent democrat). Aristotle suggests that the polis is the highest community because it is in the public arena that citizens deliberate about what is highest and that political activity is intrinsically valuable because it changes who you are by educating you to think and speak as a citizen rather than as a private person with private, narrowly partisan interests. But if politics is intrinsically rewarding, then having someone represent you makes no sense, and we ought, in thinking about policies and institutions, to seek ways to maximize the opportunities for participation and thus the impartiality of our compatriots (but cf. Carter 1986).

Penultimately, though it is true and significant that Athenian democracy was radically undemocratic in its reliance on slavery, its marginalization of women, exclusion of foreigners from citizenship, and in its drive for glory and empire, we need to understand the differences between their slavery and ours (it was almost never racial), and the role women did have in religious festivals and that, given our own "underclass" and the continuing inequality of women, we are in no position to be self-righteous. But most crucially, we need to see how the Athenian justification of democracy provides powerful grounds for us to criticize its own inadequacies.

Finally, though the emphasis on the disparity between our own and Athenian society and economy is well

taken, it is not clear that our political conundrums about war and peace, the organization of power, and the relationship between young and old and rich and poor, are that different from theirs or that these conundrums are primarily technical matters amenable to the decisions of experts rather than to the judgment of citizens. And it is worth remembering that the state is not the same as politics, which means that there may be forums and places where the moral and political rewards of direct democracy can be realized.

### III

The idea that classical political theory might be a "democratic" interlocutor for contemporary political theory seems perverse given how much of that theory is so critical of so much of democracy. True, Pericles presents an eloquent vision of democracy. But Thucydides regards Periclean Athens as the rule of one man and preferred the "moderate" democracy/oligarchy of the 5000. We can also find passages in Aristotle favorable to democracy (such as the superiority of collective wisdom over that of one man), but his "ideal" democracy is one that *minimizes* participation. And even Plato in his *Apology* of Socrates has his teacher claim that he does philosophy with anyone he meets as he walks the streets of his city, insists that philosophy is the gift of the gods to Athens, and makes the truly remarkable claim that everyone can live the life of a thinking citizen. But the bulk of the Platonic corpus finds Socrates an unrelenting critic of democracy which is why he was and is castigated (most recently by I. F. Stone) for being a teacher of traitors and right-wing revolutionaries.

The dialogue most often cited as evidence of Socrates' anti-democratic sentiments is the *Gorgias*. It is there that he ridicules the revered democratic leaders of Athens; offers a vision of political knowledge as available only to the few who possess the art and science of politics and are thereby immune to the seductions of false speech; and criticizes specific democratic institutions such as jury pay.

All I can do in a few pages is com-

plicate the conventional reading of the dialogue and plant a few doubts about the conservative political and educational agenda and liberal political theory that reading is thought to authorize or to discredit (depending upon one's politics). In offering such complications I do not deny that Socrates criticizes democracy. But I would insist that we recognize that one thing that made the Athenian political tradition distinctive was precisely its incorporation of institutionalized self-critique. Moreover, if we read the *Gorgias* (and other Platonic dialogues) against the background of

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*But in what sense have people "chosen" not to participate when they do not fully grasp the consequences of that "choice" or when there are strong cultural inhibitions as well as direct political costs to their doing so?*

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drama, Socrates becomes a character rather than a spokesman and the argument of the dialogue lies as much in the architecture of the work as in its explicit argumentation.

Socrates accuses the leaders of Athenian democracy (and Pericles in particular) of corrupting the people by gratifying rather than educating their desires. Only the man who possesses the political art or science in the way a shoemaker possesses the art of shoemaking, a horse trainer the art of training horses, or the doctor possesses a body of knowledge that enables him to cure people, has the right and capacity to rule.

Yet Socrates fails with Callicles in the dialogue even though he claims to possess the political art that would guarantee his success. More substantially, his contemporaries accused him of what he accuses Gorgias and Pericles of doing: being unable to control those in his care, most notably Critias, the leader of a violent

oligarchic revolution, and the traitor Alcibiades. Thus the criticism he makes of others was made of him. The whole matter becomes more curious since Alcibiades was Pericles' ward as well as Socrates' student.

But what about the idea of a political leader as a social engineer, who possesses knowledge analogous to that of other crafts and skills? Socrates' views emerge as a response to Gorgias' claim about the power of rhetoric to enable someone to dominate anyone anytime for any reason. Gorgias' ideal of power, happiness, and freedom is that of the tyrant who knows no limits and gets away with everything. Indeed, all three interlocutors—Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles—assimilate the democratic leaders of Athens to tyrants, thus making the very idea of a democratic leader who shares responsibility with free and equal citizens unintelligible. But if Pericles is a covert tyrant, then which "Pericles" is Socrates criticizing? Perhaps his primary target is a representation of Pericles that has come to legitimate a corrupt understanding of democracy.

One might go further and suggest that Socrates is arguing that Pericles is a bad political leader because leadership itself is a problematic idea in a democracy, since relying on leaders seduces people away from accepting the political and moral responsibilities that attend democratic citizenship. If I am right, it gives a curious twist to Socrates' claim that he alone possesses the political art.

There is another reason to be suspicious of Socrates' arguments in favor of a political art. While a shoemaker makes a good pair of shoes and a doctor can "make" a patient well, it is not clear that a teacher can "make" anyone think in the same sense. And provoking people to think is the point of dialectic and, presumably, Socratic philosophy generally. In other words, dialectic and dialogue may be incompatible with the idea of a political science or art.

But doesn't Socrates derive norms epistemologically, leaving the philosopher to rule rather than deriving them politically which would enable citizens to rule? In the *Republic* perhaps, but not here. Indeed, the *Gorgias* is unique among Plato's dialogues for the degree to which it is a

dialogue about dialogue and the extent to which it shows how and that the establishment of a dialogic community (or "discourse") involves power and manipulation. Though I would not claim it is Plato's "intention," the dialogue portrays moral debate as framed by politics, knowledge as framed by power, and truth by interest.

#### IV

Is Socrates a "democrat"? He is, at least in the sense of being a critic of the critics of democracy as well as its putative defenders (such as Callicles) who would use democratic rhetoric to dominate the demos. In this he raises the questions of who is a true friend of democracy and who is an enemy and at what point being a critic of democracy makes one antidemocratic instead of recalling democracy to its highest traditions and most promising future.

But asking whether Socrates is a democrat might not be the right question. More significant perhaps is the way this dialogue (and others and classical thinkers generally) can provide a sensibility and range of argument to challenge some of our firmest assumptions. Wouldn't it be

instructive, if not refreshing, to turn Plato back on his critics so they could examine the new dogmas of anti-foundationalism and consequentialism as well as on his purported conservative defenders with their reductionist polarities of universalism and relativism, timeless truths and historicism, democracy and order.

In the end the *Gorgias* does not answer the questions it raises but leaves us to do it. If I am right about the democratic dimensions of the dialogue, that is as it should be.

#### Notes

1. It is important not to exaggerate. The Pnyx could only accommodate 7,000 people; there were informal inequalities of access and willingness to speak in the Assembly despite formal equality; and there is evidence that traditional forms of deference did not wholly disappear. But it is also important not to exaggerate the degree to which these inequalities undermined the radicalness of Athenian democracy (as Sinclair, Brook-Manville, Ober and others have shown). Indeed, that rapidity with which scholars use these inequalities to domesticate the critical potential of Athenian democracy is part of the phenomenon I am talking about.

2. In many ways the theater was a more "democratic" institution than others in the sense of who was in the theater (women, metics, perhaps slaves close to the entire male citizen body), what could be talked about,

and who was at stake (women, slaves, foreigners, all of whom, however, were portrayed by Athenian men).

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## Public Speech and the Power of the People in Democratic Athens\*

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I will defend three premises. (1) If we take democracy to mean what ancient Greeks took it to mean—"political power wielded actively and collectively by the *demos*" (i.e., all residents of the state who are culturally defined as potential citizens, regardless of their class or status)—then Athens was a democracy. (2) Even granted that Athens excluded from regular political participation persons Greeks did not regard as potential citizens (slaves, women, most foreigners, children), the historical example of the Athenian experience with democracy should be

taken seriously by democratic theorists interested in expanding "the bounds of the possible" (as well as "of the thinkable"). (3) The Athenian *demos* exercised its collective power in order to prevent elite political domination, and thus the "power of the people" was not a cover for elite rule.

These premises do not mean that the people's power was in some ontological sense "pure," or "undistorted"—indeed it was arguably through the tightly coiled and convoluted "distortions" of social and political power that the Athenian

democratic order counterbalanced elite social power. Nor can Athens, with its acceptance of slavery, exclusion of women and foreigners from political participation, and jingoistic "blood and soil" doctrine, be considered a readymade model for a just, modern political society. It can be argued (incorrectly I believe: Ober 1989a, 20-35), that democracy in Athens was fundamentally dependent upon slavery, or empire, or the exclusion of women and foreigners. More work is needed on the relationship between the egalitarian, democratic political society of the citizens

and the larger, hierarchical "whole society" of polis residents (see Ober n.d.d). But whether Athens was, overall, a just or even an attractive society is not at issue here. The question is whether classical Athens provides a genuine historical example of direct, and relatively stable, mass (vs. elite) political power and, if so, whether that example should be interesting to democratic theorists.

In writing what would become a foundation text for historians and political theorists alike, Thucydides the Athenian (as he pointedly describes himself: 1.1.1) had as his central concern the relationship between public speech (*logos*), brute facts (*erga*), and power (*kratos, dunamis*). Thucydides was particularly concerned with how this triad operated within and was affected by the democratic society of Athens (Ober n.d.b, n.d.e). Although Thucydides put his own original spin on the problem of speech, action, and power, his interest in the triad was far from idiosyncratic: his younger contemporary, Plato, examined similar issues (notably in *Apology*, *Crito*, *Gorgias*, and *Republic*), as did Plato's student, Aristotle (in *Politics*, *Rhetoric*, and *Constitution of Athens*). Each of these writers lived most of his adult life in Athens; each was, from his own distinct perspective, profoundly critical of the relationship between speech, fact, and power in the Athenian democracy (or, in Aristotle's case, in "extreme" democracies of the Athenian sort (Strauss 1991). The substance of that criticism is interesting to any student of Athenian democracy, but for my present purposes the key point is that each of these thoughtful contemporary witnesses assumed that democracy—the political power (*kratos*) of the mass of ordinary citizens (*demos*) was real and that the people of Athens maintained their rule through control of public speech.

If we move from late classical Athens to the late twentieth century of our era, we discover an odd reversal. The classical theorists supposed that the democracy they experienced in Athens was real, but undesirable; many modern democratic theorists assume that a strong, vibrant, participatory, directly democratic political culture is desirable in principle,

but that no such culture has ever existed for long—and certainly not in the Athens of Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle. This reversal is ironic given the foundational status that the three great theorists of classical Athens enjoy in the modern politics curriculum. They are taken very seriously as abstract thinkers, but a central premise from which their abstractions proceeded—that democracy, as "the power of the people" really existed—is ignored. The followers of Leo Strauss are a possible exception to the general rule of dismissing the reality of classical democracy; yet Straussians seem to feel that the empowerment of ordinary people was as disastrous then as it is undesirable today.

Why are liberal theorists of democracy unwilling to countenance the possibility that the ordinary citizens really did rule in Athens? One possible reason is that when theorists turn to the scholarly work of classical historians, they discover that the *communis opinio* (until quite recently) has been that Athens was not genuinely democratic: The real political business of Athens was done behind the scenes, by a few wealthy aristocrats who formed themselves into parties, factions, *hetairiai*, etc. And thus, since the name "democracy" concealed a crypto-oligarchy, the serious student of Athenian political life must learn to ignore the façade of popular rule and focus on relationships (political alliances, marriage connections, extended family ties, inherited clan enmity, etc.) between the power-brokers. Many Greek historians (e.g., Fornara and Samons 1991), especially since the Second World War, have tended to be (for the most part unwittingly) staunch adherents of Robert Michels's "Iron Law of Oligarchy" (Michels [1915] 1962).

While it would be reductionist to claim that this allegiance to Michels's dictum had a single source, the work of Ronald Syme, especially his vastly influential *Roman Revolution* (1939), must bear much of the credit (or blame). Whether or not he had himself read Michels (or other early twentieth-century elitist theorists), Syme was convinced that, "[i]n all ages, whatever the form and name of government, be it monarchy, republic, or democracy, an oligarchy lurks

behind the façade; and Roman history, Republican or Imperial, is the history of the governing class" (Syme 1939, 7). Since Syme felt called upon to spell out this conviction, he presumably recognized it as something not universally agreed upon and thus potentially disputable—in short as a theory (although one he regarded as well established) rather than a fact. Syme's many students (direct and indirect), however, took his theory about politics as a given, a common-sense fact of human nature that need be neither asserted nor defended. Thus the "Iron Law of Oligarchy" has become the unspoken, unacknowledged, even unrecognized theoretical underpinning for a great deal of historical scholarship that is thought and proclaimed by its authors to be staunchly "anti-theoretical" (e.g., Fornara and Samons 1991, Introduction).

The political theorist who delves into the specialist literature on Athenian politics is unlikely to know the history of the establishment of Michels's theory into the foundational assumptions used by ancient historians. Thus, when informed by well-regarded specialists that Athens was a crypto-oligarchy, the theorist may take this conclusion as an objective historical fact. And thus, convinced by a specialist literature founded on a theory derived from a study of modern political parties, that politics in the ancient world works pretty much like politics in the modern world, the theorist's suspicion that true democracy is impossible is confirmed. The circularity of the argument gets lost in the deference paid by the explorer across disciplinary borders to the body of established knowledge he or she feels (rightly or wrongly) inadequately prepared to challenge. And because of this circular argument, the disruptive potential of classical democracy to challenge the assumptions of modern democratic theory is lost. That potential might, however, be recuperated if classical historians were able to show that the "Symian" view of Athenian politics was in error and that Athens was considerably more democratic than a strict interpretation of the "Iron Law of Oligarchy" would allow.

If contemporary access to classical Athenian democracy were exclusively

through the literary output of intellectual critics, we might suppose that the assumption of Thucydides et al. that democracy was real was simply a theoretical premise, a straw man that allowed the development of interesting arguments about hypothetical alternatives to politics as usual. But, in fact, a substantial body of primary evidence supports the view that the ordinary citizens ruled in classical Athens: ca. 150 speeches, mostly composed by skilled orators for delivery in Athenian law-courts and the citizen Assembly. This body of material is extraordinarily important for students of Athenian politics because it gives relatively direct access to the language used by elite speakers in Athenian courts and Assemblies. According to the ancient critics, the demos ruled through its control of public speech. Because we have a large sample of the sorts of speeches made in public forums, it is possible to analyze the ideological underpinnings of the language used by elites when communicating with mass audiences. We can therefore attempt to assess the balance of power implied by the content of that communication and decide whether the oratorical corpus confirms or contradicts the ancient conviction that, in Athens, the people ruled.

It may be helpful at this point to sketch out the conditions under which the speeches in question were delivered. By the later fourth century, the citizen assembly (*ekklesia*) met 40 times each year. Meetings, which were usually announced several days in advance, ordinarily lasted about half a day, and were open to all citizens (adult, free, native-born males: a body of perhaps 30,000 persons). Some 6,000-8,000 men typically attended; those who arrived early enough were paid (about an average day's wage) by the state. The agenda of each meeting was established in advance by a Council of 500 citizens selected by lot for an annual term of service; the Council also made recommendations on some agenda items. There is no reason to suppose that any class of Athenian citizens was systematically underrepresented at the Assembly, and—given the voluntary nature of attendance—there was no way for a speaker to know in advance the

social configuration of any given Assembly. While representing only a fraction (perhaps a fifth or a fourth) of the citizen body, each Assembly was taken by the Athenians as synecdochy for the whole of the citizenry. The meeting was called to order by a lotteried "president-for-a-day"; who announced (through a herald) the first item on the agenda. After reading the Council's recommendation (if any), the president asked, "Who of the Athenians has advice to give?" At this point any citizen in attendance could get up to speak to the issue—advocating a negative vote, revisions to the Council's proposal, or a completely new proposal—for as long as his fellow citizens were will-

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*Why are liberal theorists of democracy unwilling to countenance the possibility that the ordinary citizens really did rule in Athens?*

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ing to listen to him. When the Assemblymen tired of listening to a speaker, they would shout him down. After everyone willing to undergo this gauntlet had had his say, the president conducted a vote, usually by show of hands. A simple majority determined the issue, and the president turned to the next item. In this manner, the Athenians conducted all important business, including foreign policy and taxation. The language of many preserved decrees demonstrates that the debate in the Assembly had substantial effect; frequently the actual decree had been proposed at the Assembly by a voluntary speaker (Hansen 1987; with review by Ober 1989b).

The people's courts (*dikasteria*) met most days of the year. Most cases, both private suits (*dikai*) and public suits (*graphai, eisangeliai*, etc.), were brought by a private citizen (*ho boulomenos*), on his own initiative, against another citizen. The prosecutor brought his charges before a lotteried magistrate, who then assigned the case to a court (in

some instances after mandatory arbitration—every citizen who reached age 60 was required to serve for a year as public arbitrator). The litigants faced a jury of (usually) 200 or 500 citizens over age 30, who had been assigned to the court through a random drawing and were paid for their service. There was no presiding judge—or rather each of the several hundred citizens on the jury was a judge (*dikastes*). With the exception of the exclusion of citizens from age 18-29, there was little difference between the sociological profile of typical Assembly and typical jury. Prosecutor and defendant were each given a fixed period (measured by water-clock) to present his case (extra time was allowed for the reading of laws, witnesses, etc.). Within his allotted time, each speaker could say pretty much what he wished and often digressed to attack the character and past life of his opponent and to defend his own reputation. The Athenian standard of relevance seems very broad by American standards, but it was not infinitely flexible; as in the case of the Assembly, a litigant who irritated his listeners could expect to be shouted down by them (Bers 1985). Moreover, many Athenian laws were remarkably vague (e.g., the law on *hubris*, which forbade the commission of *hubris* but failed to define it), leaving the judges with considerable leeway in determining whether a wrong had been inflicted. Immediately after the two speeches, the *dikastai* voted, without formal consultation, by secret ballot; a simple majority determined innocence or guilt. In some instances the punishment of a guilty man was mandated by law; in other cases the jury voted again on rival punishments advocated by prosecutor and defendant. The whole affair was done in a day (Hansen 1991, 178-224).

In both Assembly and court the speaker faced a mass audience of "judges" ready and willing to shout him down if they did not like what they heard. The Assemblyman who hoped to get his decree passed and the litigant hoping to win his case were constrained to construct their speeches very carefully, since a single rhetorical misstep could be fatal. The speaker was often (although certainly

not invariably) a member of a relatively small elite by virtue of his wealth and education. Although in principle any Athenian could address the Assembly, in practice much of the debate was carried out by a cadre of skilled "politicians" who were well known to their audiences and referred to variously as rhetors, demagogues, or the "accustomed speakers." These same men took up a good deal of court time by prosecuting one another for misdeeds ranging from dirty talk in the presence of female relatives, to *hubris*, to sacrilege, to financial misconduct, to high treason. The classical Athenian democracy thus featured a politically active and litigious elite (Ober 1989a, 104-27). Was this a dominating elite?

The answer, I think, is no.

Classical Athens was a large (by polis standards: total population of ca. 150,000-250,000) and complex (not "face-to-face") society, which confronted serious external threats. The Athenian democracy could not have functioned without intelligent, thoughtful, and articulate persons who had the leisure to devote themselves to the complexities of foreign policy and finance. That indispensable elite of competence might accurately be defined as a politically dominant elite within a nominal democracy if the men in question furthered their own interests by cooperating among themselves to manipulate public institutions. Manipulation might take various forms. (1) Elites might dominate the Assembly and/or courts numerically. (2) Elites might manipulate ostensibly open voting by exerting patronal authority over the votes of dependent citizen-clients. (3) Elites might control the political agenda and so prevent certain issues from being debated. (4) The mass-dominated institutions of Assembly and courts might be covers for a decision-making bureaucracy dominated by the elite. (5) Elite discourse and values might define the ideological underpinnings of "democratic" culture itself and thus exercise a hegemonic prior restraint upon the evolution of a genuinely democratic politics.

Most of these possibilities can be readily discounted. (1) Recent research has refuted the notion that

the Assembly and courts were dominated by the upper social strata of Athens (Markle 1985; Todd 1990). Numerical elite domination is inherently unlikely, given the relatively huge numbers involved and ordinary citizens were encouraged to participate by the practice of pay-for-participation. (2) While clientage is widely recognized as a vital component of Roman political life, recent research has pointed out the absence of any similar structures (institutional or social) in classical Athens (Millett 1989). (3) The agenda for the Assembly was set by the Council of 500, whose (paid) members were chosen by lot and who were forbidden to serve more than two annual terms. The Council's large and rotating membership was an environment inhospitable to the development of the institutional identity conducive to the domination of an elite. An attempt to show that the Council was the "senior partner" in the government (de Laix 1973) has not gained adherents among historians. Furthermore, although the "accustomed speakers" were no doubt frequently heard in Assembly, there is considerable evidence for more casual and occasional participation by a much wider group of speakers (Hansen 1991, 145-46). (4) Although, in the fifth century, annually elected (rather than lotteried) generals and, in the fourth century, elected financial magistrates were indeed important players in the government, they had limited decision-making power. Magistrates were forced to undergo a rigorous public scrutiny before entering office and a public audit upon leaving office. Magistrates suspected of conspiring against the people could always be (and frequently were) indicted and punished in the people's courts. There is no evidence to suggest that boards of magistrates ever constituted anything like a hidden government. Until the Macedonian overthrow of the democracy in 322 B.C., the most important political work of the polis was done in the open, in the Assembly and the courts (Ober 1989a, 327-36).

It is the fifth issue—the presumed ideological hegemony of the elite—that particularly concerns me here, especially because it has been asserted recently by scholars whose

work is not particularly influenced by Syme (e.g., Loraux 1986; Wilson 1991). With ideological hegemony, we move from the "gravitational field" of Robert Michels to that of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, who attempted to explain in cultural terms the problematically stubborn "false consciousness" and lack of revolutionary energy of exploited masses. It is this ideological argument for elite domination that the oratorical corpus is particularly useful in answering. Athenian mass audiences responded vigorously and readily to any comment with which they took issue. Their decisions (votes) had profound consequences for the speaker. Thus the themes and *topoi* that appear frequently in the oratorical corpus should point quite accurately to what skilled speakers took to be the operative political and social values and opinions (collectively, the "ideology") of the Athenian citizenry. For ideological analysis the *captatio benevolentiae* is more important than the substantial case that the orator is attempting to make; the latter may contradict what the audience believes; the former must necessarily conform as closely as possible to that same set of beliefs.

My studies of rhetorical *topoi* (Ober 1989a; n.d.c) suggests that, far from being subverted or preempted by elite values, the ideology of the Athenian *demos* was highly democratic. The Athenians had considerable faith in the potential and actual wisdom of mass audiences. Rather than deferring to elite expertise when it came time to make important decisions, the citizenry believed itself to be collectively the best possible judge of important matters. Moreover, the Athenians did not suppose that any special education was necessary for a citizen to participate fruitfully in collective decision making, as growing up in the democratic polis was itself an education. According to popular thinking, citizens were educated by the decisions of the Assembly and courts through being reminded of the ultimate source of political power in Athens and through the inherent wisdom of the particular decisions. The people were, by contrast, very suspicious of individual claims to special political knowledge or education; public speakers often attacked their

opponents specifically on these grounds, characterizing themselves as ordinary citizens, their opponents as over-clever, highly trained speakers whose rhetorical facility threatened to pervert collective decision making (Ober 1989a, 156-91).

Similarly, the Athenians believed themselves to be a collective nobility. All Athenians could trace their ancestry back to the earliest "earth-born" inhabitants of Attica, and so all Athenians were "autochthonous" and shared a connection to the soil of their homeland. In Athenian ideology, autochthony ensured a firm loyalty to the good of the polis and to the political regime that sustained it. As a result, it was difficult for an individual Athenian to claim special status on the basis of his "high birth." A logical corollary to the autochthony ideology was a tendency for litigants to attack the legitimacy of one another's birth—"foreign blood" was grounds for suspicion regarding one's loyalty to Athens and its democracy (Ober 1989a, 248-92).

Popular ideology also dealt with wealth and the power brought by its possession. Athenian society was certainly stratified along the lines of economic class. Moreover, despite the fears of certain members of Athens's wealth elite, no serious attempt was ever made to redistribute property systematically among the citizens—the power of the people was not used to equalize access to the goods that wealth could and did provide its possessors. Yet, on the other hand, democratic ideology both encouraged voluntary redistribution and limited the political effects of wealth inequality. The ordinary Athenian juror harbored a deep suspicion of the wealthy as a class; he tended to view rich men as arrogant, willful, and potential (at best) enemies of the democratic political regime that prevented them from translating their economic position directly into power over others. The rich Athenian litigant, well aware that his fate hung on the opinions of resentful jurymen, was at pains to dispel their distrust by demonstrating himself to be a man of the people. Well-to-do speakers sought the sympathy of jurors by assuming the role of poor men, beset by richer, more powerful opponents. Other speakers

pointed out that their private wealth had frequently been put to public uses, in the form of liturgies, special taxes, and voluntary contributions to the state and to impoverished neighbors. By contrast, one's opponent could be characterized as notoriously ungenerous. Historically generous litigants felt entitled to ask jurors to give them the benefit of the doubt when they contended with selfish opponents. Since every rich Athenian had a good chance of finding himself in court, this "market" relationship encouraged private generosity. Yet since the individual litigant was put in the position of the suppliant, the terms of the bargain were controlled

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*Rather than deferring to elite expertise when it came time to make important decisions, the citizenry believed itself to be collectively the best possible judge of important matters.*

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by the ordinary citizens (Ober 1989a, 192-247).

The system of mass judgment of individual speech-acts also tended to inhibit the tendency of the elite to act cohesively in their own class interest. The procedures of Athenian Assembly debate and litigation placed elite speakers in contention with one another for scarce resources: In the Assembly there could be only one decree passed on a given measure, and in court only one successful litigant. Moreover, Athenian jurors were well aware of the dangers that could attend intra-elite cooperation and were highly suspicious of any aspiring politician who did not engage in fierce and public litigation with other politicians (Ober 1989a, 328). Some legal processes seem designed to encourage inter-elite competition and litigation, notably the *antidosis* (exchange) procedure. Rich citizen A, who found himself saddled with a non-voluntary liturgy and who thought rich man B had done less than his share of liturgical

service, could formally challenge B to assume the liturgy. If B refused, A could then sue in court for an exchange of property so that A could pay off the liturgy from B's (former) estate. *Antidosis* procedure encouraged rich Athenians to spy out one another's hidden resources and pitted fellow members of the wealth elite against one another in courtroom contests for the sympathy of the masses (Christ 1990).

The Athenian democracy channeled the activity of an aristocratic elite characterized by a highly competitive, agonal ethos into competitions that benefitted the demos and were judged exclusively by mass audiences. Paradoxically, the enduring strength of a competitive aristocratic ideology among the Athenian elite supported the democratic order by providing a number of competent advisors (not authoritative leaders), each dedicated to explaining to the *demos*, in word and deed, the depth of his allegiance to democratic ideals and practice, and eager to expose his fellow elites' failures of allegiance.

Classical Athens provides a particularly well-documented historical example of a dynamically stable democratic culture in which a large and socially diverse citizenry directly ruled a complex society that was much too large for a politics of "face-to-face" personal interaction. Those who would reject the reality of democracy in ancient Athens need to explain a body of contemporary evidence that consistently asserts that reality. At least until an example of a more directly democratic complex society can be found, the Athenian example deserves to be taken very seriously by political theorists willing to resist the authority of "iron laws" of politics and those interested in the possible as well as the conceivable.

## Note

\*This essay was written in the aftermath of a conference, organized by myself and Charles Hedrick ("Democracy Ancient and Modern," Washington, D.C., April 16-18, 1993), that featured papers and commentary by both classical historians and political theorists. I have taken this opportunity to develop some arguments I sketched out in the course of several conference discussions.

Given the informal nature of much of the debate, I have not always attributed positions to specific authors, but I have tried to catch the general tenor of the conversation and to avoid attacking straw men.

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## Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists\*

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Recent archaeological and textual studies by classical scholars give us new ways of thinking about Athenian democracy. Morgens Hansen, for example, has calculated the seating capacity of the Pnyx, the site where the Athenians held their assemblies. By figuring out how much space a seated adult Athenian male would occupy, he has concluded that the assembly in the fourth century B.C. could have held at most 6,000 people. That is a third or fourth of the potential participants (Hansen 1983, 18). Another classical scholar argues that attendance was considerably below this and concludes: "The Athenians had

never seen a full meeting of the citizen body, though the very idea of democracy is predicted on it. From the very start they must have accepted that any assembly was bound to be a sample of the citizenship—and not even a random sample" (Carter 1986, 193). Other questions worthy of being asked but not asked before are now raised: How were votes actually counted? How does one calculate a closely divided vote when there are 6,000 people sitting in the assembly?

In one of the classic books on Athenian democracy published in 1957, the author claimed: "Prima facie the Athenian democracy would

seem to have been a perfectly designed machine for expressing and putting into effect the will of the people" (Jones [1957] 1964, 3). Hansen, with his calculations of the seating capacity of the Pnyx, and scholars questioning the degree to which and how citizens really engaged in the political life of Athens, are motivated by this perspective on ancient democracy. Such historical analyses and such questions, important in their own right, bring to the study of Athens our notion of democracy as it emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These scholars are asking how sovereign were the people, did they participate,



were they informed, were the voters representative, as if these were the questions that the Athenians asked about their own regime. We living in twentieth-century democracies too often begin our analyses of Athenian democracy with the assumptions of "a people" and "a will" that must be transformed through participation into public policy. For this view of democracy we must thank Rousseau who, in order to preserve equality and freedom, gave us the language of the general will. The ancients lived in a period before the concept of "the will" and of "popular sovereignty" became the coin of political discourse.

To approach ancient democracy as addressing our own concerns is not unusual. In this brief essay I will relate some of the different ways in which it has been used and (I would say) abused by writers and politicians and then turn briefly at the end to how Thucydides thought about a democratic regime. The ancients take us beyond the practice of Athenian democracy and beyond a simplistic view of democracy as power in the hands of the whole people to a deeper sense of what democracy entails, its benefits, and especially its internal contradictions. Space permits only a brief discussion of Thucydides, but Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle deserve similar readings.

In 1627 Hobbes' translation of Thucydides appeared. According to Hobbes, Thucydides least of all liked democracy and praised Athens' political regime most when "it was democratical in name but in effect monarchical under Pericles" (Hobbes [1627] 1975, 14). In the translation of Pericles' funeral oration, Hobbes uses the following words to turn the Greek into English: "We have a form of government . . . which, because in the administration it hath respect not to a few, but to the multitude is called a democracy" (Hobbes [1627] 1975, 131-32). Many have been the translations into English since Hobbes. The one used most frequently now is the Penguin edition with the translation by Rex Warner; he translates the same passage: "Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the

whole people" (Thucydides 1954, 117, italics added). Generations of contemporary students have been brought up on Warner's translation, but note the difference when one translator opposes democracy and the other is sympathetic to it. Hobbes is more accurate. Nothing in Pericles' speech suggests that *democratia* entails power in the hands of "the whole people." It is, rather, "administration [with] respect not to a few, but to the multitude." Warner's mistranslation suggests the confusion that surrounds our understanding of democracy in ancient Athens. This is not at all surprising since the term, for all its emotive and normative power, hardly enjoys a precise and universally accepted definition today. Consent, participation, rights, liberties, self-determination, and autonomy all mingle unclearly in our understandings of democracy. Warner's mistranslation illustrates the problems of imposing expectations of democratic systems as participatory on the ancient Athenians. To do so may give us false expectations about the possibilities of a democratic life and polity. The romantic view of ancient democracy that has taken hold since the 1820s or so has hindered our ability to grasp the significance of that regime.

This romantic view is captured well by the history of Ypsilanti, Michigan. The city was founded originally by Benjamin Woodruff and settlers from Ohio and was called Woodruff's Grove. In 1833 the inhabitants changed the name to Ypsilanti to honor Demetrius Ypsilanti, the general who had led the Greeks to victory against the Turks during the Greek war of liberation. The inhabitants had no particular ties to Greece; immigrants from Greece were not fondly recalling their homeland. They had all recently moved from Ohio. The city was, however, filled with citizens eager to memorialize the Greek spirit that overthrew tyrants and founded the political model of self-rule. Ypsilanti is hardly the only city in the 1800s to be named or renamed with a view to the democratic spirit of ancient Athens. For the same reason, we find Doric columns on many a front porch and a bank facade.

The Roman Republic with its aris-

tocratic model of virtuous leaders and anti-monarchical principles held sway over much of the thinking of the early years of the American Republic. As is evident through the *Federalist Papers* democracies such as those found in Athens are the source of chaos, not the much desired order. The more positive democratic, participatory vision of ancient Athens began weaving itself into the American consciousness in the 1820s. Listen, for example, to Daniel Webster, speaking to Congress in 1923 requesting a commission to support the Greek rebels:

An occasion which calls attention to a spot so distinguished, so connected with interesting recollections as Greece, may naturally cause something of warmth and enthusiasm. . . . We must, indeed, fly beyond the civilized world; we must pass the dominion of law and the boundaries of knowledge . . . if we would separate ourselves entirely from the influence of those memorials of herself which ancient Greece has transmitted. . . . This free form of government, this popular assembly, the common council held for the common good—where have we contemplated its earliest models. This practice of free debate and public discussion, the control of mind with mind, and that popular eloquence which . . . would move the stones of the Capitol—whose was the language in which all these were first exhibited? Even the edifice in which we assemble, these proportioned columns, . . . remind us that Greece has existed, and that we, like the rest of mankind are greatly her debtors (Webster 1903, 5:61).

No longer is Athens intended to conjure up images of chaos and disorder as in *The Federalists* or Hobbes. It has become the marvelous model of popular government and of the reasoned exchange of ideas. Garry Wills in his recent book on *Lincoln at Gettysburg* points out how Pericles' funeral oration with its evocation of ancient Athens formed the thematic basis for the speeches of the phil-Hellene Edward Everett and Lincoln as they commemorated the war dead at Gettysburg (1992, chap. 1).

In England, around the same time, the Philosophical Radicals, arguing for the expansion of the franchise, tried to use Athenian democracy to

spur the English to a more democratic regime; this would enable England to recapture the cultural brilliance to which Athenian democracy had given birth. In the eighteenth century, Sparta with its harsh discipline had provided the appropriate model for Englishmen, while Athens illustrated the horrors of a democratic regime. "In Athens the power of the people was too excessive," says one historian after another (e.g., Stanyan 1751, 1.94). The most widely read of these historians was William Mitford (1838) who wrote in the late eighteenth century to warn of "the evils arising from the forms of government adopted in the different states of Greece" (p. 1.xvii). Athenian democracy was an "Ochlocracy, Mob rule" (p. 253), "a turbulent form of rule" (p. 365), "a tyranny in the hands of the people" (p. 365), which shows (the last straw) "marks of kindred [with] Turkish despotism" (p. 2.20). The freedom of English institutions does not come from Athenian democracy, but "from the German forests" (p. 1.364).

In the nineteenth century, George Grote, a friend of the Mills and a Philosophical Radical, wrote a 12-volume *History of Greece* that replaced Mitford's. In contrast to Mitford, Grote (1851) portrayed Athenian democracy in the most glowing terms. First he talked about how the "fresh planted democracy brought the growth of Athenian power, and the still more miraculous development of Athenian energy" and that "[t]he grand and new idea of the sovereign People, composed of free and equal citizens" (p. 4:237) transformed Athens. He continues noting that it created "in the mass of the citizens an intensive positive attachment and dispos[ed] them to voluntary action and suffering on its behalf, such as no coercion on the part of other governments could extort" (p. 869).

John Stuart Mill wrote a series of reviews of Grote's *History*. In one he comments:

The superior nobleness and superior gentleness combined, in which Athens shone preeminent among all states Greek or barbarian . . . Mr. Grote unhesitatingly ascribes to the superiority of her institutions: First, to her

unlimited Democracy; and secondly, to the wise precautions, by which the capacity of Solon and Cleisthenes had guarded the workings of Athenian institutions (Mill [1846] 1986, 24, 1088).

So successful was Grote's re-fashioning of the vision of ancient democracy, that one scholar has argued that the Britons of the nineteenth century envisioned themselves as closer to the Athenians of the fifth century B.C. than to the British of the eighteenth (Turner 1981), a sentiment that is captured in Mills's absurd claim: "The battle of Marathon, even as an event in English history, is more important than the bat-

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*The more positive democratic, participatory vision of ancient Athens began weaving itself into the American consciousness in the 1820s.*

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tle of Hastings. If the issue of that day had been different, the Britons and the Saxons might still have been wandering in the woods" (quoted in Momigliano 1952, 7).

In a similar vein, the English historian Alfred Zimmern, preparing the second edition of *The Greek Commonwealth* just at the brink of World War I, wrote in his Preface:

[W]ar has broken out, bringing Great Britain face to face, for the first time since she has become a democracy, with the ultimate meaning of civic responsibilities, both of thought and action. . . . Greek ideas and Greek inspirations can help us today—in the work of deepening and extending the range and the meaning of democracy and citizenship, liberty and law (Zimmern 1914).

During the war itself Pericles' funeral oration was displayed on placards to arouse modern democrats of Britain, identifying with the Athenian democrats of the fifth century, to fight the Germans (Turner 1981, 187).

In both America and England,

Athenian democracy was transformed in the political imagination. From a regime that turned the mob into a tyrant, it became the glorious vision of nobility, freedom, and equality to which politicians, theorists, and journalists could turn. The role of Athens in the political thought of England and America, of course, differs in focus and emphasis but in both countries the transformation is radical and accompanies the drive towards greater democratization of the respective political regimes.

If one turns to the political thought of the mid-twentieth century, democratic Athens helps to identify weaknesses in regimes that consider themselves democratic. Hannah Arendt is perhaps the most powerful example here. For her Athenian democracy illustrates how democracies ought to work in contrast to what we find today. According to Arendt, ancient democracy provided the realm in which, "[M]en could show who they really and inexchangeably were" (1958, 4). A recent study of Arendt begins, appropriately I believe, with quotes from Pericles' funeral oration and then argues:

"Periclean Athens and its celebration of the public life of the polis—its democratic temper, the virile virtuosity of its citizens— . . . is the powerful image at the heart of Hannah Arendt's political theory" (Dozza 1989, vii). The modern world where humans labor in the economic and social sphere only for the sake of life has lost the authentic ancient concern with immortality. Arendt's return to the ancient polity differs from those discussed above: she finds there not a political system that draws its authority from "the sovereign people"; rather, the polis offered an arena for action among equals in a realm of freedom, transforming man from a laboring animal to a human being giving expression to his individuality. The Greeks are used by Arendt to inveigh against a world that ignores "action" in favor of "labor," that has focused human energy on fabrication with unpredictable ends rather than the immortality gained by political speech.

One of the most esteemed classical scholars, M. I. Finley, similarly uses ancient democracy. His compact and wonderfully readable, *Democracy*:

*Ancient and Modern* ([1973] 1985) has perhaps done the most to articulate for the present generation the model of ancient as distinct from modern democracy. To present the popular view of modern democracy Finley turned to the social scientists of the 1960s who applauded apathy as a source of stability. In a world still recoiling from the horrors of fascism, a lead article in *Political Studies* by Morris Jones could be titled, "In Defense of Apathy," and could argue that "many of the ideas connected with the general theme of a duty to vote belong properly to the totalitarian camp and are out of place in the vocabulary of liberal democracy" (Finley [1973] 1985, 4). Against Jones and other "democratic" theorists such as Berelson and Schumpeter, Finley brings the model of participatory Athens where "politics, the art of reaching decisions by public discussion and then obeying those decisions" was discovered. He writes of Athens as the "case-study of how political leadership and popular participation succeeded in co-existing . . . without either the apathy and ignorance exposed by public opinion experts" ([1973] 1985, 13-14). He avoids claims that we should try to recapture ancient democracy, but asks that we consider whether "new forms of popular participation, in the Athenian spirit though not in the Athenian substance . . . need to be invented" ([1973] 1985, 36).

Cynthia Farrar in a recent work is not quite so restrained. She writes:

It is democracy, as conceived and lived by Athenians in the fifth century B.C., that offers at least the possibility of healing this spiritual and social fragmentation. . . . All citizens were thought to be capable of appreciating and feeling the connection between their interests and those of the community because they were constantly, as active political participants, asked to assess and interpret that connection. . . . The challenge is to turn toward the example of a living democracy, ancient Athens (1988, 274-76).

And Donald Kagan introduces his book on Pericles with a call for newly developing democracies to learn from Athens:

In their rational and secular approach,

in their commitment to political freedom and individual autonomy in a constitutional, republican and democratic public life, the Athenians of Pericles' day are closer to the values of our era than any culture that has appeared since antiquity (1991, 10).

These are the mythmakers who give us an amorphous vision of the perfection of ancient democracy where freedom allowed the arts to flourish, where men eagerly participated in a public world, where care for the community did not work in opposition to individual interest, where, in Finley's terms, "they decided on policy in open discussion

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*Ancient democracy serves as a nice model for rhetorical purposes, but the failure to take seriously the complexity of ancient democracy means that any theoretical significance is lost.*

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by counting heads" (1981, 22), and where Socrates' execution happened only because of Socrates' foolish anti-democratic fervor and not because of any faults in the democracy itself (Stone 1988).

Ancient democracy serves as a nice model for rhetorical purposes, but the failure to take seriously the complexity of ancient democracy means that any theoretical significance is lost. As an amorphous concept inadequately situated in the world of ancient Athens, it can only provide meaningless prescriptions based on visions that may be no more than romantic longings. One of John Stuart Mill's more silly statements is his claim that the battle of Marathon was more important for Englishmen than the Battle of Hastings. These mythmakers do not let us see the issues and questions about democracy raised by the historians and the philosophers of Athens. Unfortunately, no writings of an author whom we might seriously call a democratic theorist from that period remain.

Occasional passages in the plays praise democracy, but there are no developed arguments or justifications for democracy.<sup>1</sup> Rather than look for a democratic theorist as such, the ancient philosophers and historians help us address issues that any analysis of democracy must confront, but embedded traditions of scholarship may hinder our ability to learn from these authors. We must get beyond the view of Plato as anti-democrat and see him exploring the very difficult questions surrounding democratic claims to equality, beyond Aristotle as an Arendtian proponent of participation and see him as recognizing the disruptive consequences of the participation he at first praises. I will illustrate briefly here how a reading of Thucydides' commentary on Athenian democracy reveals quite a different understanding of democracy's benefits and contradictions than mythological images of sovereign wills and participatory citizenry do.

Everyone who has read Thucydides recalls Pericles' funeral oration and Thucydides' apparently favorable conclusion that under Pericles Athens was a democracy in name, but in deed a monarchy. The funeral oration, though, is a very strange speech. The citizens and dead warriors to whom and of whom Pericles speaks have no bodies; bodies are replaced by mind. The description of the plague which follows the funeral oration, though, reminds us that we do have bodies that get sick and die painful, ugly deaths. Pericles, because of his focus on mind, however, has the capacity to always stay the same. His speeches are filled with reminders that he perseveres in his previous decisions, unlike the variable embodied Athenians who suffer from the ravages of the war and want to revoke previous decisions.

In Book 3 of *Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides records the Mytilenian Debate as the Athenians deliberate whether to revoke an earlier decision to kill all the men of Mytilene and to sell their women and children into slavery as punishment for the city's rebellion. The first speaker, Cleon, in Thucydides' language a most violent man, repeats many of Pericles' phrases about remaining the same and argues for maintaining the pre-

vious decree. Against Cleon speaks Diodotus who argues for change; he notes the benefits that come from debate in the assembly where different people present different views because of different ways of looking at problems; he forces us to think about democracy as a regime, not of sovereign people, but as one that can change its mind and acknowledge bad decisions. Diodotus prevails and Thucydides, in one of his very few openly evaluative statements, remarks that this was good. Thucydides here is not the denigrator of democracy as a volatile regime subject to mob rule; rather, he recognizes the benefits of an assembly precisely because it brings together a variety of different men who debate as they engage in communal decision making. Debate allows for change and a forward-looking policy, rather than the backward-looking policies of a disembodied Pericles who insists on remaining the same.

Weighing this debate against Pericles' role as a monarchical ruler, we find Thucydides justifying democracy with principles that have nothing to do with the sovereign will of the people, but rather with a regime's capacity to deal with a variable world and to see the human being as embodied in the particularity essential for there to be debate. Pericles in the funeral oration had tried to abstract from bodies. The romantic tradition about the funeral oration and Athenian democracy makes us overlook the critique of Pericles which Thucydides may be offering as well as the justifications for democratic discourse in other sections of his history.

The historians of today are looking at Athenian democracy trying to assess how democratic it was in our terms, by asking questions of modern theorists and being guided by modern mythmakers. They are

not asking the questions that the ancients asked about the benefits of communal decision making, the sources of evaluation, the consequences of equality, where the humanity of the human being comes from, and the consequences of large attendance at the assembly. These are the questions that plagued Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle as they observed the democratic regime in which they lived. We need not attribute to the ancients a Rousseauian vision of participation, an Arendtian world of men seeking immortality through speech, or an I. F. Stone view of freedom, so that we are awed by the first attempt to institutionalize principles of equality. What the ancient theorists do is suggest that we should not only admire, or try to emulate, but recognize the complexities of democracy that lead to contradictions in the very attempts to institutionalize it.

## Notes

\*This article is based on the Frank M. Covey lectures delivered at Loyola University in Chicago in February 1992, to be published by the University of Notre Dame Press.

1. The most articulate defense probably appears in Plato's *Protagoras* where Protagoras tells a myth to explain how all citizens share in the qualities of shame and a sense of justice and thus are all equally part of the political community, but since Protagoras appears as a foil to Socrates he is made to look like a pompous fool and his whole argument is undercut by the end of a dialogue.

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## Realism Ancient and Modern: Thucydides and International Relations

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When you're stymied on the measurement of one of your critical variables, put that project aside and write another essay on what Thucydides *really* meant (Singer 1975).

The trouble with Classical Realism is that it is difficult to distinguish . . . dialectical insight from a refusal to define concepts clearly and consistently, or to develop a systematic set of propositions that could be subjected to empirical tests (Keohane 1983).

In the study of ancient Greek democracy, Thucydides' account of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians surely deserves a privileged place. As a cardinal instance of the genre Hegel (1975, 14) called original history, Thucydides' work provides a uniquely direct point of contact with Athenian democracy in its most radical—and imperial—phase: the chief figures of that work “express the maxims of their nation and of their own personality, their consciousness of their political position and of their moral and spiritual nature, and the principles that underlie their designs and conduct.” Thus, from Thucydides we get much more than a reconstruction of events. We also get access to the ancient Greeks' own understanding of the world they made and destroyed.

Now here is the rub. If we are to learn from the Athenian experience, we must go some distance toward understanding that experience as it was lived (even if, in the end, we decide to reject that very mode of consciousness, of intellectually comprehending and ordering the world). The task of reconstructing that experience is very far from straightforward, however. There are enormous distances of language and time to be overcome. And there is the almost intractable problem that the range of possible meanings of Thucydides' text is rooted in a world that is almost lost to us now. Yet, if the experience of ancient democracy is to yield insight into our own, the

differences must be recognized.

In her contribution to this symposium, Arlene Saxonhouse has warned against assuming a rather facile correspondence between the categories and questions of ancient democracy and those of our own political world. My own contribution will follow a similar line, seeking to understand why, despite the homage routinely paid to Thucydides, most of his essential concerns have been dropped from the agenda of modern international relations (IR) research.

There is, if I may say so, a kind of symmetry in our essays: for both of us, ancient Greek democracy is a puzzle that *neither confirms nor contradicts* contemporary postulates but that raises a rather distinct set of issues largely excluded from contemporary reflection and research. The

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*. . . ancient Greek democracy is a puzzle that neither confirms nor contradicts contemporary postulates but that raises a rather distinct set of issues largely excluded from contemporary reflection and research.*

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issues excluded, moreover, are important, though space constrains us from saying why. It would be most un-Thucydidean, however, for me to leave matters quite so disconnected. And so in my conclusion I will say just a word or two about what IR theorists *really do* understand well about Thucydides and his experience, and why that insight deserves to be taken more seriously by political scientists in every sub-discipline.

I

On a rather superficial reading of contemporary IR literature, the influence of the cashiered Athenian colonel looms large. In the first instance, Thucydides “effectively defined a paradigm of realist thought” (Smith 1986, 4) and, it hardly needs to be added, realism is hegemonic in the subdiscipline, if not in practice at least as an aspiration. For nearly everyone “a source of interpretive insights” (Keohane 1983, 162), Thucydides' untitled history of the war fought between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians is *de rigueur* for every graduate student preparing for comprehensive examinations. Thucydides' intellectual ambitions, moreover, are seen as co-extensive with those of modern inquiry: “Thucydides, assuming that the behavior and phenomena that he observed would repeat themselves throughout human history, intended to reveal the underlying and unalterable nature of what is today called international relations” (Gilpin 1988, 15). Finally, the heritage is one in which a fairly broad array of contemporary political scientists take comfort. Diplomatic and military history found in Thucydides (among other “classics”) is said to “indicate that good foundations have been laid and give hope that progress can be made” (Bueno de Mesquita 1988, 53).

On the strength of such affidavits, which can be multiplied endlessly (Lebow and Strauss 1991, 1-2), one might suppose that the relationship of Thucydides to contemporary IR is what George Kennan reportedly ascribed to Reinhold Niebuhr and the postwar generation of realists: “he was the father of us all.”

But this is scarcely the case. The influence of Thucydides on contemporary scholarship is at best remote, a putative source of inspiration perhaps, but rarely a cause for extended reflection. There has not been published in English during the past

quarter-century a single book-length analysis of Thucydides' political ideas written by a scholar of international relations. The number of refereed journal articles focused centrally on Thucydides' contribution to international relations published during the same period barely exceeds a handful. In 1988, 13 classicists and political scientists joined to compare notes and reassess the status and utility of Thucydides' work in light of evolving U.S.-Soviet relations. The fruits of that (most welcome) endeavor are modestly described by the editors as "a first step toward such a reexamination" (Lebow and Strauss 1991, 3). But even this may go too far, since the point of the exercise on the part of the IR specialists seems to have been to decide whether Thucydides was a good political scientist, as that term has come to be defined.

## II

With respect to the *practical* influence of Thucydides' work on contemporary IR, the sarcastic aphorisms that head this essay neatly epitomize, with only slight exaggeration, the attitude of most working students of international relations. Whatever salutary diversion it might offer from the serious pursuits of contemporary political science, Thucydides' work remains just that, a diversion. As suggestive as Thucydides' reflections might be, professional standards of knowledge and of valid inference require going beyond his work, not merely in focus but most decisively in method. Given the self-understandings and consequent expectations of modern IR research protocols, it could hardly be otherwise.

In essence, the problem is that "Thucydides did not think of causes in the modern or scientific sense of the term" (Gilpin 1988, 21) and that the premises underlying Thucydides' history do not in themselves "constitute the basis for a science" (Keohane 1986, 7). To qualify as modern or scientific, any minimally acceptable theory must satisfy at least four essential epistemic criteria: (1) it must consist fundamentally of singular propositions, or laws, asserting relations of cause and effect; (2)

it must be susceptible of abstract representation or idealization, where numbers or symbols are understood to signify not just specific features of a situation at hand but a (potentially) large class of instances of like features; (3) it must be systematic, in the sense that propositions are linked and ordered by logical principles; and (4) it must be universal, in the sense that, other things being equal, actions proceeding from the same initial conditions will produce the same outcomes.

Does Thucydides present anything like such a theory or theoretical system? An honest answer must be a simple no. Although Thucydides is not at all shy about revealing his own opinions about the causes of nearly every event in the Peloponnesian war—indeed, the extent to which he seems to force his views on the reader is notorious in some circles—there are few statements in the entire opus that qualify as the kind of proposition that might form the building block of a respectable theoretical system. Thucydides' famous claim (at I.23) that the Athenians "becoming great" and the fear inspired in the Lacedaemonians "necessitated" the war is certainly not framed as a general statement of the causes of *all* wars. This despite Thucydides' admitted ambition to "provide a clear view both of the events which have happened and of those which will some day, in all human probability, happen again in the same or in a similar way" (I.22). The causal claim is introduced, as the author explicitly stresses, to explain the origins of *this* war.

Perhaps the best candidate for a general law-like statement is the one put in the mouths of the unnamed Athenian interlocutors at Melos who declare: "For of the gods we hold the opinion, and of men we see clearly, that, by necessity of nature, wherever they have the power, they rule" (V.105.2). But there is first of all the problem that this remark expresses a view whose relationship to Thucydides' personal outlook is problematic to say the least. Even if one believes, as I do (very controversially), that the views expressed by the Athenians at Melos are on the whole thoroughly consistent with those of the author, there would be

room to doubt whether this particular statement were intended to be a proposition of the kind expected in modern theory.

The rule asserted is actually described as a law, but the Greek word employed, *nomos*, is much closer to our idea of norm, with additional meanings of custom or practice. To be sure, the *nomos* is said to predate the Athenians, who neither enacted or were the first to use it, and is expected to remain in existence for "all time." Yet the undeniable human institution of the law, even buttressed with the pressure of natural necessity, distinguishes it from the laws of modern theory.

Finally, the law is introduced not with an epistemic interest in mind, but as a very pragmatic response to an especially unconvincing appeal to metaphysics by the Melians who declared, "we trust that . . . we shall be at no disadvantage because we are god-fearing men standing our ground against men who are unjust" (V.104). To assert this law outside the context of the Melian dialogue is not to exploit a general principle, but to initiate an open-ended exercise in question-begging.

There being no set of single propositions to build from, there can hardly be a theory (in the modern sense) at work here. Indeed, Thucydides' disposition at every point seems to be very nearly the opposite of what good theory requires. Beyond his refusal to express his views in the form of empirical laws, there is a complementary and systematic refusal to appeal to any level of abstraction; a palpable absence of system, though not of structure; and an ascetic and steadfast disinterest in (except to depreciate) any parallel events outside of his chosen case.

Nor is this all. There is, in fact, a rather inescapable, if endlessly interesting, irresolution to the work as a whole. The work is riven with impasses (between structural and decisional explanation, for example), omissions (most notoriously, of almost anything having to do with finance or tribute), narrative breaks and stylistic unevenness (especially in Books V and VIII), profound ambivalence (toward Alcibiades, and toward democracy), and personal

prejudice (especially toward Cleon) and partiality (toward Pericles and Nicias). And it is incomplete. The narrative of Book VIII ends abruptly, at a semicolon, about seven years before the end of the war. If logical coherence and formal rigor are what we are to judge by, Thucydides cannot but disappoint.

### III

Formal requirements aside, there are other important areas where Thucydides fails to abide by the substantive methodological canons of contemporary IR. IR presupposes for its justification as a distinct sub-discipline of political science a discrete domain of social phenomena (most strenuously, Waltz 1979). The aim of IR is to identify, assess, and explain the relatively independent causal forces emanating from the international system itself. Yet Thucydides fails to limit his focus, and he refuses to distinguish between domestic and international processes as categorically distinct phenomena. The parallel between domestic and "international" processes is drawn most famously in Thucydides' description of the *stasis* at Corcyra (III.82): "For in peace and prosperity both states (*poleis*) and individuals (*idiotai*) have gentler feelings, because men are not then forced to face conditions of dire necessity; but war, which robs men of the easy supply of their daily wants, is a violent teacher and creates in most people a temper that matches their condition."

The central contrast here between *poleis* and *idiotai* is especially muted in Thucydides; indeed they must be understood as two moments of the same phenomena. There were no "states" in the ancient Greek world as we would understand that term (i.e., as entities operating apart from, and often in opposition to "civil society"); nor were there "individuals" as we conceive them (i.e., as autonomous moral subjects for whom the political world, no matter how important, is essentially an external phenomenon). Rather, as Castoriadis (1991) has reminded us, polis membership and the experience of personal identity were mutually defining terms of experience for the ancient Greeks.

Similarly, when Thucydides makes the famous distinction introduced at I.23 between the "differences and grievances" that were the immediate occasion for the war and the war's "truest" cause, he does not assert an absolute distinction. Neither type of "cause" works independently of the other: without the separate conflicts over Corcyra and Potidaea, the structural cause would have had no effect; without the Athenians "becoming great" and their fear of the Peloponnesians, the conflicts of the mid- and late 430s would have been inconsequential. In sorting out "unit-" and "system-level" causes thus, it is not for Thucydides just a matter of interlocking but discrete forces, but of the two being equally essential, parallel, and mutually conditioning dimensions of an embracing phenomenon that can be understood in its parts only through its totality.

In Thucydides' history there is, as well, an unavoidable preoccupation with the kinds of causal explanation that Waltz labels (disapprovingly) "reductionist." Throughout his work, Thucydides is concerned especially with the effects of speeches, with the grounds of deliberation and choice, with fundamental human motives—to wit, honor, interest, fear—and with the accidental or cultivated variables of human intelligence. These all matter to Thucydides because in the polis-world, as we just saw, it was impossible to confuse states with things. The modern habit of doing just this is but one of the many deformations introduced by the impersonality, or rather the specific form of legal personality, of the modern nation-state. For Thucydides as for his contemporaries, "states" were first and last communities of human beings; no one could have conceived of states in the abstract or thought to reduce them to a number of material attributes. Correlates of power and resource were understood to be important, but unreliable, indicators of political strength. It would be quite misleading to judge the relative power of Athens and of Sparta by the monuments that have survived, or the power of each relative to their allies by sheer numbers alone. The decisive measure of public power was not strictly quantifiable;

in the words of Pericles, "for those in the face of calamities show least distress of spirit and in action make most vigorous resistance, these are the strongest, whether they be states or persons" (II.64.3).

In particular, Thucydides presents moral choice as a central (if problematic and quite variable) dimension of causal narrative. The set-piece debates over Mytilene and at Melos, the *stasis* at Corcyra, Spartan motives and bad faith, the Athenians defending the justice of the empire at Sparta, or even on the numerous occasions where moral considerations seem to be shoved aside (including the death of Nicias and Hermocrates' inversion of the law of the stronger) all hinge upon the recognition or denial of moral attitudes that not only help to determine structural outcomes, but also deserve themselves to be viewed as essential elements of structure (Ashley 1981).

Nor does Thucydides succeed in bracketing his own moral preferences, as we think any good social scientist should. His reputation for reserve notwithstanding, he cannot help allowing his moral judgments to color his political analysis. His judgments of Cleon are invariably skewed by his moral appraisal, as is his kid-glove treatment of Nicias. Alcibiades appears to have been bedeviling for Thucydides precisely because of the incongruence between his strategic genius and his apparent moral indifference. The entire account of the Sicilian expedition is inspired by moral considerations; and, if I may venture another controversial assertion, so are the work as a whole and Thucydides' final (ambivalently admiring) view of Athens.

### IV

If Thucydides is not really one of us (IR theorists) as we have come to define ourselves, then the question posed at the outset returns with renewed urgency: How *can* we learn from him? And, any reader who has come this far will also want to know, *What* can we learn from Thucydides' work? A full answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this essay. I will take a stab at them, however, with three concluding observations.

First, having stressed the importance of recognizing and taking into account just how different were Thucydides' own ideals of knowledge as well as practical concerns, let me now come around to stress that I consider it wholly appropriate, indeed indispensable, to approach his work from the perspective of our time. To believe that we can proceed in any other way, as Gadamer has observed, is a "naive illusion": "To interpret means precisely to use one's own preconceptions so that the meaning of the text can really be made to speak to us" (1975, 358).

Second, and even more important, I want to stress that IR specialists do have an important contribution to make to understanding Thucydides. One point that IR specialists generally take as axiomatic, but which is usually ignored as a central problem elsewhere, is the idea that the challenges of preserving a democratic polity cannot be effectively addressed or even conceived apart from the external milieu. And we find it quite natural that the greatest surviving contemporary analysis of the golden age of democratic Athens focuses not on constitutional theory but on war.

Third, this insight, when applied not only to Thucydides' work, but to the entire experience of democratic Athens, places that experience in an important new light. What Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War ultimately reveals for all of us, political scientists of every stripe, is that the problems of democracy, however understood, cannot be resolved unless the problems of foreign policy are also resolved. We all know that no polity exists isolated in space; yet we persist

in studying politics as essentially driven by domestic forces, with the external world impinging as an unsystematic and "exogenous" variable. By the same token, the exclusion of domestic policy, or rather the distinctive approach to domestic policy formation, in IR theory is in many ways simply the mirror image of the tendency to isolate domestic from international forces in public policy.

For American political scientists in particular, it is uncomfortable to acknowledge that, for us no less than for the Athenians, democracy flourished with empire. Even more disturbing is the following thought: Most of what is best of the Athenian heritage—the classical drama, the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, the preserved achievements in architecture and art, the flourishing of democracy itself, and even the moral outlook of Socrates—all developed with the empire. The rest—chiefly, the very real philosophical achievements of Plato and Aristotle, the less edifying quarrels of Demosthenes and Aeschines, the second-rate history of Xenophon, and the late comedies of Aristophanes—is all, as Hegel famously observed, essentially afterthought (Clark 1993).

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