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Athenian Democracy: A Debate between its Advocates and Critics

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The article attempts to reconstruct and offer a critical evaluation of the arguments put forward in debates concerning the nature of democratic rule in ancient Athens between the supporters and the opponents of democracy. By relying on ancient sources, but also insights from contemporary scholarship, the article looks at three main issues discussed in these debates: the issue of efficiency of democratic collective decision-making, the issue of stability of democratic regimes, and the issue of justice of democratic government. Given that the arguments put forward by the critics of democracy are both more voluminous and more philosophically sophisticated, this imbalance in the debate is compensated by the reconstruction of the pro-democratic arguments that appear in the texts of the most prominent critics of democracy in the ancient Greek world, as well as historical accounts offered by modern scholars. In the concluding part of each section, the article offers an assessment of the validity of the arguments of both sides in these debates.

Keywords: Democracy; ancient Athens; Plato; Aristotle; Thucydides.

1. Introduction

Starting with the influential study on the Athenian democracy by Arnold H. M. Jones published in 1953, accepted wisdom among contemporary scholars is that the ancient Greek sources do not provide us with a developed theory of democracy. Jones asserted that "in the abundant literature produced in the greatest democracy in Greece there survives no statement of democratic political theory" (Jones 1953: 1). Three decades later, Moses Finley went a step further, claiming not only that there is no surviving text on democratic theory from that period, but that there never was such a theory: "I do not believe articulated demo-

cratic theory ever existed in Athens. There were notions, generalities […] but they do not add up to a systematic theory" (Finley 1985: 49). Subsequently, other scholars have accepted Finley's claim. In her seminal book on the funeral oration in classical Athens, Nicole Loraux talks about "undiscoverable democratic theory" and the "nonexistence of a *written* theory of democracy" (Loraux 1986: 176, 179). Josiah Ober follows suit when arguing that "there was no philosophically articulated democratic theory in fifth- or fourth-century Athens" (Ober 1989: 38) and "there are no surviving texts to explain democratic theory because few such texts ever existed" (Ober 1996: 147). Similarly, Ryan Balot maintains that Athenian "[d]emocrats did not develop a systematic philosophy to support or defend their emphasis on freedom and equality" (Balot 2006: 50).

This insight is often juxtaposed with the fact that political thinkers and writers from the "golden age" of Athens were, for the most part, deeply critical of democracy. As Jones noted: "All the Athenian political philosophers and publicists whose works we possess were in various degrees oligarchic in sympathy" (Jones 1953: 1). Finley agrees: "In antiquity, intellectuals in the overwhelming majority disapproved of popular government" (Finley 1985: 8). Ober confirms this claim: "we have a number of important classical texts critical of democracy but no surviving texts that sympathetically and systematically enunciate the theory on which Athenian democracy was predicated" (Ober 1996: 147). "[A]lmost all known ancient Greek intellectuals", notes Paul Cartledge, were unsympathetic to democracy (Cartledge 2007: 160). The voices of sages critical of democratic rule – those of Thucydides, Socrates, Xenophon, Plato, Isocrates, or Aristotle – have echoed much louder than the voices of the defenders of democracy. However, none of these thinkers, as Kurt Raaflaub pointed out, was an advocate of existing tyrannical or oligarchic regimes (Raaflaub 1983: 517, 522). Philosophers like Plato and Aristotle preferred the rule of the *aristoi* – those who were most intellectually and morally virtuous – and were critical of tyranny and oligarchic rule by the wealthy. Late fifth- and fourth-century critics of democracy, especially after the exclusionary, brutal, and unstable oligarchic governments in 411 and 404 in Athens, were exploring theoretical alternatives to democratic rule while, at the same time, rejecting traditional defence of aristocratic privileges based on birthright and wealth (Ober 1996: 156).

That being said, the conundrum still remains: why, in the birthplace of a democratic experiment that lasted (with only two minor interruptions) throughout the 5th and most of the 4th century (until 322 BC) – the same *polis* and the same period in which the most influential ancient writings in political philosophy were produced – is there no major work of democratic theory? How come the arguments by the critics of democracy are much more prevalent than the arguments offered by the defenders of democracy? Why were there no democratic writers

"to defend democracy against what were often violent attacks" (Loraux 1986: 177)? Contemporary scholars of political thought in ancient Athens offer several possible answers to these questions. First, they note that the genre of political theory was developed "by educated elites for consumption by elite audiences of readers or listeners" (Ober 1996: 4). There were not many supporters of popular government among the members of this elite. The most famous written works in that genre were not authored by "democratic leaders" involved in everyday politics of governing the Athenian polis, but by those who "took no part in the affairs of the city" and could indulge "in the activity of writing" (Loraux 1986: 178). Thucydides wrote the history of the Peloponnesian War in exile; Socrates consciously avoided speaking in the Athenian Assembly; both Plato and Isocrates refrained from participating in Athenian politics; and Aristotle was not a citizen of Athens and was therefore unable to participate in its public life.

Second, in contrast to these opponents of democratic rule, advocates of democracy primarily relied on public speeches to put their ideas forward. Public speech, Loraux argues, rather than written work, was the preferred form in which democratic arguments were presented (Loraux 1986: 179). However, the main function of these speeches was to address practical issues of the day. Their goal was not to offer a comprehensive philosophical defence of democracy. Even when democratic values were not merely invoked but elaborated – as in the famous Pericles' Funeral Oration – this did not amount to a fully developed democratic theory. Finally, the dominance of democratic rule in Athens in this period meant that there was no real need for such a theory to be developed. Historically speaking, "democracy arose and was maintained as a practice and as an ideology, it was not the result of a well-heeled, systematic theorist's sketch" (Balot 2006: 50). That means that democrats could rely on a prevalent egalitarian ethos to provide the necessary support for the existing institutions and practices without presenting sophisticated theoretical arguments in writing. "In Athens", Ober argues, "democratic ideology so dominated the political landscape that formal democratic theory was otiose" (Ober 1996: 148). This reveals an interesting point: at the time, the anti-democratic arguments found in works of political theory were not perceived as politically dangerous enough to warrant a philosophically developed written response. Allegiance to democratic principles by the overwhelming majority of Athenian citizens was not shaken by the arguments put forward either by the sceptics or the enemies of democracy. "One defends his faith vigorously", Dennis Peter Maio argued, "when it is under general attack; in fourth-century Athens, the democratic faith was under no such attack" (Maio 1983: 18–19).

Therefore, trying to reconstruct a comprehensive democratic theory from ancient sources seems like a fool's errand. If, as Jones pointed out, there are no surviving sources that provide us with such a theory or,

as Finley and later scholars argued, no such sources existed in the first place, any attempt to find a well-developed philosophical defence of democracy from that period leads to an anachronistic trap. However, we can avoid this trap by focusing on a more modest goal of reconstructing the main features of the debate that took place between advocates and opponents of democracy in the Greek world of the 5th and 4th centuries BC. There is an obvious danger of depicting a one-sided debate: not only are the arguments by the critics of democracy much more voluminous, but they are also more sophisticated and developed. Luckily, we can overcome this problem by acknowledging two points. First, adversaries of democracy did not put their arguments forward in a vacuum, but against existing positions and claims defended by their intellectual and political opponents. Even if, as Ober maintains, "[t]he climate of opinion to which the authors of critical political texts were responding was defined less by the reasoned positions of prodemocracy elite intellectuals than by democratic popular ideology and public rhetoric" (Ober 1996: 148), the fact remains that these responses by the critics of the democratic regime offer us insights to both sides of the debate. For a critique to make sense, one must have a certain understanding of the position that is being criticized. Despite one side utilizing complex theoretical concepts and argument, while the other side is relying on "popular ideology and public rhetoric", we can grasp the framework of the debate. The second point is that when reconstructing the arguments of the prodemocratic side of the debate, we are not limited only to the assumed points that critics of democracy argue against or to a few scattered fragments from defenders of popular rule. We are fortunate that in the text of most prominent detractors of democracy – authors like Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle, and even the Old Oligarch – we can find developed prodemocratic arguments. To their credit, instead of constructing a democratic strawman, these thinkers offer us an even-handed account of the arguments put forward by those with whom they disagree regarding the nature of democratic rule. Although these arguments are a far cry from a fully-fledged democratic theory, they are sufficient to provide a deeper insight into the debate on the advantages and disadvantages of democracy in ancient Greece.

The article deals with a debate concerning three aspects of *dēmokratia*: its efficiency, its stability, and its justice. It looks at the arguments from both sides – advocates and opponents of democracy – regarding these three aspects, reconstructing arguments of both sides by relying on both ancient sources and contemporary interpretations of those sources, as well as evaluating the validity of the arguments[1].

[1] The focus of the article, given the origin of the ancient sources, is on Athenian democracy. For other democracies in the ancient Greek world, see: Robinson 2011.

2. Democracy and the question of efficiency

The persistent debate in 5th and 4th century BC in Athens was about democracy's efficiency as a system of collective decision making. The critics were putting forward two mutually enforcing claims: first, that the people – *demos* – lack both expertise and moral character to make responsible and rational political decisions; and second, that *demos* is susceptible to demagogues' manipulation to make wrong decisions. The advocates of democracy, conversely, argued that the people are both capable – through the process of public deliberation – to reach valid decisions and able to make decisions that best reflect the interests of the *polis* as a whole.

A strong claim about the ignorance of *demos* in political matters can be found in one of the first classical texts – Herodotus's *History* – that discusses comparative advantages and disadvantages of different political regimes. In book three, Herodotus describes a debate between Persian leaders that overthrew the brutal and corrupt tyranny of the Magi. This debate, contrary to Herodotus' claim (3.80), is almost certainly fictional. It is very unlikely that the Persians would consider any other options other than monarchical rule for themselves. More likely, the conflicting positions about the benefits and detriments of different regimes presented in *History* reflect debates that Greeks had in the mid-5th century BC about the nature of various forms of government (Winton 2005: 110). First speaker, Otanes, argues for the rule of the many[2] as the best safeguard against the unchecked rule of monarchy that leads to "savage violence" (3.80). Two other speakers, Megabyzus and Darius, reject democracy and, respectively, support oligarchy and monarchy. Megabyzus's concern is that the rule of the people means giving power to "rabble" and "mob" that is "altogether devoid of knowledge" (3.81). This lack of knowledge is two-fold because the rabble, being "untaught", not only lacks the ability to make correct political decisions, but also lacks "natural sense of what is right and fit" (3.81). Therefore, collective decision-making by demos is both epistemically and morally deficient. Megabyzus' claim does not go any further than a mere sentiment, probably widespread among the aristocratic class in Greece at the time, that common people are morally crude and uneducated and, therefore, unable to deliberate responsibly about political matters.

More meat to the bones of this sentiment is given by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* through numerous examples of irresponsible decisions made by the Athenian *demos* during the war against Sparta and its allies[3]. On Thucydides account, Athenian citi-

[2] Otanes talks about *isonomiē* – equality of citizens before the law – rather than *dēmokratia*. For a more detailed discussion on Herodotes's use of term *isonomiē*, see: Cartledge 2007: 158–159.

[3] For a more detailed account of Thucydides' views on democracy, see: Raaflaub 2006; Mitchell 2015, ch. 5.

zens in the Assembly, often poorly informed and ruled by emotions, made repeated bad policy decisions that, in the end, resulted in Athens' defeat in the war[4]. The numerous examples of collective incompetence and recklessness he offers suggest that *demos*, unless guided by a capable political leader, has a tendency to make uninformed and politically questionable decisions, as well as a propensity for refusing to take responsibility for those decisions. In the second book, Thucydides praises Pericles as a true statesman who led the people "rather than they who led him" (2.65), arguing that democracy only works, especially during a crisis, when governed by such great men. Paradoxically, democracy functions only when it is not a true democracy, i.e., when "what was nominally a democracy, power was really in the hands of the first citizen" (2.65).

Plato's criticism of democratic decision-making is a part of his larger philosophical project that relies on "a formal distinction between mere opinion (*doxa*) and actual knowledge (*epistēmē*)" (Ober 1996: 158). Plato's dialogues also offer examples of the majority making wrong and morally dubious judgements, such as Socrates' retelling in the *Apology* of the Assembly's unlawful decision to condemn their own naval generals to death after the Battle of Arginusae. Socrates, the only member of the Council to vote against this illegal verdict, faced arrest by the orators supported by the people whose "shouts were egging them on" (32b-c). For Plato, as revealed in the *Seventh Letter*, the most disturbing case of wrongful decision-making by the majority was when, after democracy was restored in Athens and general amnesty was declared, the jury of 500 nevertheless "condemned and put to death" (325b-c) Socrates, his great teacher, friend, and "the justest man of that time" (324e). For Plato, these examples are indicative of a deeper problem of political and legal decision-making by the *demos*: the majority simply lacks the necessary knowledge, both on technical and moral issues, to reach responsible and sound judgments. In *Protagoras,* Plato's Socrates points out the irony that when it comes to technical matters – "building projects" or "construction of ships" – people rely on the experts to

[4] Thucydides' examples of reckless decision made by Athenian Assembly are numerous: instigating the conflict with Sparta's main ally Corinth by supporting Epidamnus (1.24-1.55); denying their responsibility and blaming Pericles for the decision to start the war against Peloponnesians (2.53.2-3); disregarding the neutrality of Melos and brutally conquering this island, executing all men and selling all the women and children into slavery (5.116). In their desire to conquer Syracuse and control Sicily, although "for the most part ignorant of the size of the island and of the numbers of its inhabitants" (6.1.) they voted for the Sicilian Expedition, which resulted in Athens' catastrophic defeat. Even those who were opposed to this expedition, did not vote against it because they feared to be seen as unpatriotic (6.24.). When the news of this defeat reached Athens, they first refused to believe it and later denied their responsibility in supporting this expedition by blaming orators that encouraged the Assembly to send the fleet to Sicily (8.1). Finally, in 411 it was the majority of citizens that voted to abolish democracy and allow Pisander and his supporters to establish oligarchy in Athens (8.63).

advise them and will only take into account the opinions of "craftsman" as valid (319b-c). However, "when it is a matter of deliberating on city management", the citizens in the Assembly will listen to anybody: "carpenter, blacksmith, shoemaker, merchant, ship-captain, rich man, poor man, well-born, low-born" (319d). Democracy, according to Plato, rests on an epistemic error by assuming that political decision-making, unlike most other forms of decision-making, does not require expertise and knowledge.

Interestingly, we can rely on almost the same ancient sources for counterarguments in the debate about the efficiency of democratic decision-making. Thucydides offers us two notable instances of praise for the ability of the *demos* to make responsible decisions. In the first year of the Peloponnesian War, Pericles, in his famous Funeral Oration, claims that in Athenian democracy, citizens show "care both of their own and the public affairs" and have "sufficient knowledge of state matters even in those that labour with their own hands" (2.40). He emphasizes how fellow Athenians "excel others" by "daring to undertake as much as any and yet examining what we undertake" and using public deliberation to "weigh what we undertake and apprehend it perfectly in our minds" (2.40). Freedom to discuss and make decisions collectively plays a crucial role in Athenian greatness. As already noted by Herodotus (5.78), the success of Athens as, economically, militarily, and culturally, the most prominent *polis* in the Greek world in the mid-5th century BC offered a best defence of its democratic regime. If democracy inevitably leads to blunders and bad decisions by the *demos*, it would be hard to explain Athens' accomplishments[5]. The second instance happens much later in the war in Syracuse, during a debate on the dangers of the Athenian invasion of Sicily. Athenagoras, the Syracusan "chief magistrate of the people" (6.35), counters the oligarchic claim that democracy is neither just nor well-governed by pointing out that oligarchy represents only the interest of the wealthy, while democracy, by allowing everyone to participate in the decision-making process, represents the *polis* as a whole. He concedes that "rich are indeed fittest to keep the treasure" and that "the wise are the best counsellors", but that "multitude, upon hearing" is "the best judge" (6.39).

One of the most passionate defences of the democratic ethos comes from Protagoras in Plato's dialogue of the same name[6]. As a response to Socrates' claim that the people lack the necessary knowledge to

[5] As Raaflaub points out: "Success in leading Athens to greatness was one of the strongest arguments in support of democracy and difficult to contest as long as success lasted. The setbacks in the latter part of the Peloponnesian War deprived democracy of this crucial source of legitimation and made it vulnerable" (Raaflaub 2006: 211).

[6] For Protagoras as "the first democratic political theorist in the history of the world", see: Farrar 1988: 77. For more detailed discussion on Protagoras' democratic arguments, see also: Finley 1985: 28–29; Ober 1996: 126, 129, 130; Balot 2006: 75–78; Mitchell 2015: 64.

make sound political decisions, Protagoras argues that all people have a sense of justice (*dikê*) and moderation (*aidôs*) and, therefore, the ability to develop political excellence (*politikê aretê*). His argument is presented as a myth in which humans, to protect themselves from wild beasts, founded early cities. Because they lacked "the art of politics", they started fighting each other, and cities were destroyed or abandoned (322b-c). Zeus, being afraid that the human race would go instinct, ordered Hermes to "bring justice and a sense of shame to humans, so that there would be order within cities and bonds of friendship to unite them" (322c). To ensure stability, Zeus told Hermes to distribute these traits equally to all humans. For Protagoras, Socrates is wrong to equate moral and political judgment (which is "shared by all") with technical expertise such as architecture or shipbuilding (which is in the hands of experts). Without "civic virtue" being "shared by all […] there wouldn't be any cities" (323a). The ability to make responsible political decisions – civic virtue – is not reserved exclusively for experts, educated aristocrats, or philosophers. That is why, Protagoras points out to Socrates, there is a "good reason that your fellow citizens accept a blacksmith's or a cobbler's advice in political affairs" (324c-d).

Aristotle offers a more technical defence of collective decision-making in democracy. In Book III of *Politics,* he presents his "summation argument": although most individual members of the multitude have less knowledge and understanding than an educated person, when deliberating together and when "regarded not individually, but collectively" (1281b2), their decision can be equally sound or possibly even better. The many, Aristotle maintains, "individually they may be worse judges than those who have special knowledge, as a body they are as good or better" (1282a16-17). There are two reasons for this. First, as "each individual among the many has a share of excellence and practical wisdom" (1281b4), when these shares are combined, they offer both better insight and a diverse perspective on the issues being discussed and decided upon. This kind of multiple perspective – where "some understand one part, and some another, and among them they understand the whole" (1281b9-10) – leads to better decision-making. Second, decisions by the many are more likely to reflect the interests of the whole *polis* rather than just the interests of the rich and educated aristocrats, even if these aristocrats have more expertise in political matters. As the knowledge of what is a good house is not limited only to an architect, but also to the occupant of the house, and as the pilot of the ship can be a better judge of the rudder than the carpenter who made it (1282b20-23), so the majority of citizens can better decide what is in the interest of the *polis* than a few experts. Irrespective of his "doctrine of the wisdom of the multitude"[7], Aristotle does hold an elitist

[7] On interpreting Aristotle's "doctrine of the wisdom of the multitude" as being about multiple perspectives and knowledge, see: Waldron 1996. For different interpretation, where collective decision-making is primarily about developing virtue (*aretē*), see: Cammack 2013.

view that, individually, members of the *hoi polloi* are more corruptible and prone to errors in political judgment and, therefore, "[t]here is still a danger in allowing them to share the great offices of state" (1281b25-26). However, this view is compatible with political practices in democratic Athens through election of ten generals (*strategoi*), based mainly on their strategic expertise; the advantage of speakers in front of the Assembly who were educated in rhetoric; and the Assembly's reliance on the advice of experts when it came to technical issues such as wall-building, ship-building, or finances (Mitchell 2015: 55, 238–239; Hornblower 1993: 13). Later, in the 4th century, the *Theorie* Fund was established as a professional class of elected experts who dealt with state finances (Ober 1989: 102).

The second line of criticism relating to limited epistemic abilities of the people refers to the danger of demagoguery in democracy. On this account, the common men that make up the *demos* are often susceptible to manipulation by power-hungry demagogues[8]. Rhetorical manipulation of the people comes in two guises: either a) by demagogues strengthening their own political standing and support by encouraging irrational impulses and prejudices of the people, or b) through promoting policies that benefit demagogues' narrow self-interest by masking them as policies that would benefit the *polis* as a whole. Both pandering to and manipulating *demos* by political leaders and *rhetors* lusting for personal power are recurring themes in ancient sources. Herodotus tells us how Pisistratus deceived the people of Athens twice, first to gain power as a tyrant and then, after his exile, to reestablish himself (1.59-60). Or how Aristagoras of Miletus, after being rejected by the Spartans, managed to convince the Athenians to grant him twenty ships for an unnecessary naval expedition that resulted in provoking Persian king Darius, leading to Herodotus' conclusion that "it seems indeed to be easier to deceive a multitude than one man" (5.97). Thucydides gives an account of both manipulation and pandering. Unimpressed with the political leadership of Athens after Pericles' death, he points out that "his successors, who were more on a level with each other and each of whom aimed at occupying the first place, adopted methods of demagogy which resulted in their losing control over the actual conduct of affairs. Such a policy, in a great city with an empire to govern, naturally led to a number of mistakes" (2.65). Two most prominent examples of demagoguery by Pericles' successors in Thucydides' narrative are those of vulgar and brutal Cleon and charismatic and duplicitous Alcibiades. Cleon "a popular figure […] who had the greatest influence with the masses" convinces Athenians to reject Sparta's peace offer (4.21). Later, when a crucial Athenian blockade of Pylos crumbles and regret for rejecting the truce spreads among the

[8] Historically, *demagogoi* – leaders of the people – was not a pejorative term, referring to orators that promoted interest of the people. However, in late 5th and throughout 4th century this term acquired a negative meaning that it has today (see: Finley 1985: 38–75; Ober 1989: 16–17; Mitchell 2015: 149–150).

people, Cleon, "becoming unpopular", falsely claims that reports from Pylos are untrue. He manages to persuade his fellow citizens to launch the Pylian campaign (4.27), which, against all odds and despite his military inexperience, proves successful (4.41). A decade later, in 415, Athenians were less lucky with a disastrous Sicilian Expedition they decided to launch at the behest of Alcibiades, who, although an able general and a great public speaker, was motivated first and foremost by his personal "wealth and honour" (6.15).

In the *Republic,* Plato deals with both sides of the coin of demagoguery – manipulating the multitude and pandering to the multitude. In the famous metaphor of the ship, the shipowner, i.e., the people, who is "bigger and stronger than everyone else on board" is also "hard of hearing, a bit-short-sighted, and his knowledge of seafaring is equally deficient" (488a-b). The sailors, i.e., demagogues, although they have no knowledge of the art of navigation, are fighting each other to become captain and control the ship by "crowding around the shipowner, begging him and doing everything possible to get him to turn over the rudder over to them" (488b-c). They manage to "rule the ship" by stupefying "their noble shipowner with drugs, wine, or in some other way" (488c). Later in the same book, Plato talks about sophists using their oratory skills to appease "the moods and appetites of a huge, strong beast", the people (493b). This complex relationship that exists in democracy between playing up to people's whims and deceiving them is also explored in Plato's critique of rhetoric, *Gorgias*. In this dialogue, Socrates claims that rhetoricians have to rely on the ignorance of their public to make their arguments persuasive (459a). The aim of rhetoric is to persuade an audience to hold a certain conviction on the subject, not to reach a true knowledge of the subject. The teacher of oratory, Gorgias, insists on the importance of his craft by offering an example of going with his brother, who is a doctor, on calls to sick people and managing to convince patients, who are unconvinced by his brother's arguments, to take the medicine or allow a doctor to operate on them (456b). However, this example only plays into Socrates' hands by confirming his point that experts like doctors have a necessary knowledge that orators do not, and that they only need orators' skill of persuasion when faced with "those who don't have knowledge" (459a). The same is true in the democratic assembly. Later in the text, Plato departs from Thucydides' positive portrayal of Pericles by describing him as one of the demagogues who feasted the people "lavishly with what they had an appetite for" – walls, dockyard, harbours, and tribute payments – instead of "justice and self-control", making the city "swollen and festering" (518e-519b). In *Politics*, when discussing different forms of democracy, Aristotle points out that when the multitude has supreme power and rules by decrees without being bound by laws, a demagogue, as the flatterer of the people, will "have great power" (1292b21). In

the *Constitution of Athens,* Aristotle offers historical examples of "the people being led astray" by orators when condemning to death their own generals after the Battle of Arginusae and, later, refusing a peace offer from Lacedaemonians (34).

The ancient sources do not provide a direct rebuttal of the charge that *demos* is susceptible to rhetorical manipulation. However, there is evidence that Athenians were well aware of the dangers of being indulged or manipulated by skilful public speakers. In Aristophanes' comic play *Knights,* produced in 424, Cleon is ridiculed as a crude populist, manipulating the people for his own benefit, using trumped-up accusations against his political opponents, using flattery of the *hoi polloi* to gain support, and lining his own pockets from the public treasury. When, at the end of the play, the chorus accuses the character Demos of being naïve and ignorant, Demos reveals that it is only playing being dumb, while keeping a watchful eye on those who think they are cheating him, ready to strike them down when necessary (1121-50). Thucydides, in several instances, clearly points out how suspicious citizens of Athens could be of their political leaders. After defeating Mytilene, the initial brutal decision by the Athenians to kill all the men and sell the women and children into slavery, a policy advocated by Cleon, is reversed by Diodotus' appeal to moderation (3.42). When Cleon advocates for the Pylian campaign and tries to convince the Assembly to give command of the campaign to experienced military commander Nicias, the citizens decide to support Nicias' advice and make Cleon the leader of the campaign (4.28). Although Athenians found out about Alcibiades' treachery to Sparta only after his death, Thucydides points out that many citizens were aware of his personal ambitions and tyrannical tendencies (6.15). Conscious of the dangers of demagoguery and the use of public support for personal gain, Athenian democracy introduced mechanisms such as ostracism and *graphe paranomon* to try to address these dangers (see: Finley 1985: 26–27; Ober 1989: 95–96; Mitchell 2015: 76). Ostracism, an opportunity to exile any citizen for 10 years if they were perceived too influential by the public, was introduced specifically to address the issue of powerful individuals that could subvert democracy. During the Peloponnesian War, Athens introduced the *graphe paranomon,* which enabled the legal prosecution of anyone who proposed a policy that was contrary to the law and against the public interest, even if that policy was accepted by the Assembly. Both mechanisms illustrate awareness of democratic forces in Athens about possible shortfalls of collective decision-making and their ability to self-regulate and self-correct those shortfalls. The critics pointing out the negative influence of demagogues in democracy were not wrong, but they might have underestimated the capability of democracies to temper such influences. If demagoguery finds fertile ground in democracy, it does not mean it is also inevitable.

3. Democracy and the question of stability

The critics of democracy were sceptical about the stability of a democratic regime, worrying that it is prone to internal power struggles – *stasis*[9] – that could escalate into civil war. Additionally, there was a concern that democracy's inherent factionalism and volatility encourage people to seek stability by relinquishing the state's power in the hands of the established elite or one person, resulting in oligarchy or tyranny. On the other side of the debate on democracy's stability, we find arguments – even among some opponents of popular rule – claiming that democracy is not inherently more unstable than other forms of government or that, as the historical record shows, it is even more politically stable than oligarchies or kingships.

Already in Herodotus' aforementioned Persian Debate, we can find elements of the argument that democracy leads to *stasis* and the argument that the end result of its instability is the establishment of a monarchy. Darius, as an advocate of monarchical rule, claims that oligarchies lead to power struggles among prominent men, and that such strife then often ends "in bloodshed". Democracies, conversely, lead "to close friendships" among those who have carried out "villainies" together, i.e., factionalism of competing "evil-doers". The solution to both oligarchy and democracy is monarchy as a guarantor of both stability and justice (3.82). In his narrative of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides offers a sobering account of how, in turbulent times, both in oligarchies and democracies, moderation gives way to self-interest, conflict, and violence. The most dramatic depiction of this insight is that of civil strife in Corcyra (3.69-84) between members of the pro-Athenian democratic party and pro-Corinthian members of the oligarchic party. Internal conflict among these two parties, exacerbated by the external threat of nearby Corinthian and Athenian fleets, resulted "in massacre […] of their own citizens" whom the more dominant democratic faction "considered to be their enemies" (3.81). This type of "violent fanaticism" caused by "love of power, operating through greed and through personal ambition" (3.82) spread to other Greek city-states, societies "divided into two ideologically hostile camps" (3.83) professing to "serve public interest" – either "political equality of the masses" or "sound government of the aristocracy" – while, in reality, "they were seeking to win prizes for themselves" (3.82). Thucydides shows a devastating effect that *stasis* has on both democracies and oligarchies. However, when focusing on Athenian democracy, Thucydides argues that without proper political leadership, without someone like Pericles at the helm, democracy's internal divisions contributed in large part to Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War. As Josiah Ober concludes, "[*d*]*ëmokratia*, as understood by Thucydides, was the unstable rule of mob and demagogues ", that is, "inherently unstable form of political

[9] For linguistic origin of the word *stasis*, see: Finley 1985: 44–45.

organization, one that, more or less predictably as a result of its own internal contradictions, pulled itself apart under the stress of a long struggle with a hostile nondemocratic power" (Ober 1989: 130–131).

The relationship between democracy and *stasis* was also explored by Aristotle in *Politics*. In Book V, when discussing political revolution, he offers several examples of democracies – in Thebes, Megara, Syracuse, and Rhodes – that collapsed due to "disorder and anarchy" (1302b30-34). When later discussing the reasons for this, he concluded that "revolutions in democracies are generally caused by the intemperance of demagogues" (1304b21-22), who, in "order to curry favor with the people, wrong the notables and so force them to combine" (1305a3-4), resulting in the overthrow of the democratic regime. In a desire to increase personal power and wealth, demagogues stir people against the rich, confiscate their property, and bring false accusations in courts against them, forcing them to unite and take over political control. Aristotle illustrates this argument by talking about oligarchic takeovers in Cos, Rhodes, Heraclea, Megara, and Cyme (1304b25-39). *Politics* also offers insight into the relationship between *demos* and tyranny[10]. When discussing types of monarchies, Aristotle notes that elective tyranny – *aisumnētēs* – arises from popular support (1285a29-b2). For Aristotle, the main reason, at least in archaic times, that the *demos* decided to support tyrants – like Pittacus in Mytilene – was to curtail aristocratic abuse and ensure stability.

His teacher Plato makes an explicit argument about the close connection between democracy and tyranny. In Book VIII of the *Republic*, when talking about different types of constitutions and their specific weaknesses, he explains how tyranny comes into being as a consequence of democracy's instability. The irony, for Plato, is that "democracy's insatiable desire for what it defines as the good" – freedom – is "also what destroys it" (562b). Its obsession with avoiding "having any master at all" leads to ignoring laws and to "general permissiveness" that "eventually enslaves democracy" (563e). Plato elaborates this process in the following way: the idle and extravagant men dominate the city by rallying otherwise passive people against the rich, distributing the wealth among the people, but "keeping the greater part for themselves" (565a). When the wealthy complain, they are accused of plotting against the people and trying to establish an oligarchy. This turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the conflict between the people and the wealthy escalates. Class conflict is inevitable in a democracy. To resolve this conflict, the *demos* elects "one man as their special champion" (565c) who soon turns into a tyrant. To win support and keep himself in power, a tyrant first distributes land and wealth, but then proclaims war, raises war taxes, gets rid of any critics or perceived political opponents, and surrounds himself with a private army of bodyguards. By

[10] For origin and the use of term *tyrannos* in archaic and ancient Greece, see: Salmon 1997; Parker 1998.

spilling "kindred blood" and using violence against the people, he turns himself into a wolf (565d-e). In its endless desire for freedom, democracy puts itself into slavery, i.e., its inherent instability leads to tyranny.

Were these assertions about the unstable nature of popular rule justified? The main line of argument against the claim that democracy is inherently unstable is historical, rather than philosophical. True, there were periods in the history of Athens or in other democratic city-states when internal conflict led to bloody civil strife or to tyranny supported by the *demos*. Apart from cited historical examples offered by Thucydides and Aristotle, the obvious case is that of Pisistratus, who came to power and established his tyranny in Athens in 546 BC with strong public support[11]. However, as contemporary scholars point out, when it comes to Athenian democracy in the mid-5th century and especially 4th century BC, the democratic government proved to be quite stable.

Finley argues that for almost two hundred years of democratic rule, Athens achieved stability, political, and military power, as well as economic and cultural prosperity (Finley 1985: 23). After the Peloponnesian War ended and throughout most of the 4th century BC, there were no major internal conflicts between the mass and the elite, no looming danger of tyranny or disregard for the law, no policy of extensive land or wealth distribution, and no support for extreme demagogues or attempts at an oligarchic coup (Ober 1989: 55; Mitchell 2015: 255). Ober concludes that this historical record shows that the "stability of democracy" was not "the result of inertia or a historical fluke" (Ober 1989: 18).

Ancient sources confirm this conclusion. In the text *The Constitution of the Athenians,* written around 420 BC by an anonymous author hostile to democracy, known only as the Old Oligarch[12], popular rule is decried as unjust and unable to achieve good government (*eunomia*). However, this anonymous author also acknowledges that Athenian democratic rule is efficient and stable. He claims that the conflict of interest between the rich and the poor, and between the aristocrats and the *hoi polloi,* is unavoidable, but that democratic Athens has proved very successful in neutralizing this conflict and preserving their constitution (1.1). They achieved this by keeping "the generalships or calvary commands" in "the hands of the most influential men" (1.3), allowing everyone – both highborn and lowborn – to participate in the process of political decision-making (1.6), not allowing great economic inequality (1.4), relying on naval power, which is mainly in the hands of the people and not high-born elites (1.2), and by promoting the interests of the majority (3.10) without prosecuting or disfranchising the rich (3.12).

[11] For more details on Pisistratus' tyranny, see: Ober 1989: 65–67; Mitchell 2015: 32–34.

[12] On Old Oligarch, also known as Pseudo-Xenophon, see: Ober 1998: 14–26; Balot 2006: 92–97.

Democracy is designed for the benefit of the poor and uneducated, not for wealthy, high-born "good men," and is therefore, from the perspective of the author of the *Constitution of the Athenians*, unjust. Nonetheless, the people "have preserved the democracy well" (3.1). For the Old Oligarch, justice and stability do not necessarily go hand in hand: Athenian democracy is an example of an unjust yet stable government.

Aristotle, in both *Politics* and *Constitution of Athens*, describes a process of institutional innovations in democratic Athens that were primarily designed to safeguard stability by addressing the problems of *stasis* and tyrannical tendencies of ambitious individuals. These innovations included the loss of civil rights of any person trying to establish tyranny, ostracisms, *graphe paranomon*, magistrates' obligation to rely only on written law, and establishing a more moderate form of democratic rule from 403 BC that put the rule of law above the will of the *demos*[13]. In conclusion, regarding the issue of democracy's stability, we can draw two inferences. First, although there are numerous historical examples of democratic *polises* falling into *stasis* or tyranny, democracy as a political regime was not inherently unstable or, as Plato argued, destined to end in tyrannical rule. Plato's insight that tyranny follows in the footsteps of democracy is valid if read as a warning, but questionable if it implies inherent instability of democratic rule that inevitably leads to tyranny. As documented by Thucydides and Aristotle, oligarchies were equally or even more likely to succumb to civil unrest or support for tyrannical solutions, especially in the context of all-out-war in the Greek world.[14] Second, the introduction of the abovementioned institutional mechanisms in Athens suggests that democrats were aware of the dangers of popular tyranny and civil strife and were ready to use legal checks and institutional innovations to curtail these dangers.

4. Democracy and the question of justice

The last debate I want to look at deals with the justice or injustice of democratic rule. The exponents of *demokratia* – such as the leader of the democratic party in Syracuse, Athenagoras – argued that democracy is the most just form of rule because "members of the same State ought, in justice, to enjoy the same rights" and because this type of rule accounts for the interests of all citizens. "What is meant by the *demos*, or people, is the whole State", Thucydides reports Athenagoras' claim, "whereas an oligarchy is only a section of the State" (6.38-39). In contrast, the critics saw democracy as an unjust system of rule because of its blind egalitarianism, because it promotes the interests of

[13] For more detailed account of institutional reforms in Athens, see: Aristotle's *Constitution of* Athens, 16 (on law against tyranny), 22 (on ostracism), 42-69 (on legal reforms); Finley 1985: 26–27; Ober 1989: 73–75; Mitchell 2015: 201–208.

[14] Winters notes that "the key source of *stasis* during fifth and fourth centuries was actually from within oligarchy" due to "ambitions and confidence of predatory oligarchs" (Winters 2011: 86).

the poor, crude, and uneducated majority at the expense of the wealthy aristocratic minority, and because it leads to expansionist and imperial foreign policy.

The Old Oligarch complains that by choosing a democratic constitution, Athens chose "to let the worst people be better off than the good" (1.1). His argument throughout the text relies on an oligarchic understanding of the natural superiority of the few and the rejection of Protagoras' egalitarian idea that civic virtue is shared by all. However, this elite ideology of claiming special status based on "high birth" was successfully countered by democratic ideology that depicted all citizens of Athens, irrespective of their wealth or social rank, as *autochthones* descendants of "earth-born" inhabitants of Attica (Ober 1996: 26–27). The claim about the natural superiority of the members of the aristocratic class probably lost most of its argumentative persuasiveness in Athens after the oligarchic coups of the Four Hundred in 411 and the Thirty Tyrants in 404, which revealed their incompetence, greed, brutality, and complete disregard for their fellow citizens (Raaflaub 1983: 535). Unsurprisingly, the philosophers in the 4th century, when talking about the injustice of democratic rule, did not rely on arguments about the natural hierarchy of birth and wealth. When Plato's Socrates in the *Republic* talks about how democracy promotes "equality to both equals and unequals alike" (558c), his concern is that it unjustly neglects true merit. For Plato, merit is not based on traditional oligarchic indicators such as wealth or lineage in a prominent family, but on objective knowledge of what is true and just, as well as a moral character to act in accordance with that knowledge. The members of the ruling class in the ideal city – *kallipolis* – depicted in the *Republic* are chosen through a rigorous meritocratic system of education that is designed to reward individual talents and nullify the privileges of wealth and high-birth. These rulers are not a traditional elite, but an epistemic one, chosen to lead the city because of their knowledge of what is good for the whole *polis*. Their ascetic existence stands in clear contrast to the oligarchic desire for material wealth and also to Plato's description of the democratic man who, in his ignorance, "declares that all pleasures are equal and must be valued equally" (561c).

We can find a similar rejection of traditional oligarchic privilege in the third book of Aristotle's *Politics,* when he argues that "advantages of wealth and birth" do not in any way guarantee excellence in matters of politics. He uses the example of flute-players in which one's wealth or birth in a prominent family does not "contribute to excellence in flute-playing" (1283a1). As a person's merit in music is determined by his excellence in playing the instrument, "the rival claims of candidates for the office can only be based on the possession of elements which enter into the composition of the state", i.e., excellence in political prudence[15].

[15] It is worth noting that Aristotle allows that "well-born" and "rich" might have a good reason to claim office based on the mere fact that they are often more educated

Aristotle's insistence on moral virtue and prudence as the main criterion of good citizenship leads him to criticize not only traditional hierarchies but also democratic egalitarianism. "The basis of democratic state is liberty", argues Aristotle in Book VI of *Politics*, and that liberty manifests itself in two ways (1317a40). First, there is the principle that "man should live as he likes" (1317b11). Second is "for all to rule and be ruled in turn" (1317b1-2). This entails "the application of numerical not proportional equality", where the will of the majority is "the end and the just" (1317b4-6). Neither of these principles of democratic justice caters to the ideal of meritocratic excellence that Aristotle advocates.

Is the charge that democratic egalitarianism leaves no room for merit justified? Looking at both democratic rhetoric and practices in Athens suggests otherwise. In Thucydides' retelling of Pericles' famous funeral oration, Pericles affirms the egalitarian nature of the Athenian constitution, where "power is in the hands not of minority but of the whole people" (2.37). However, he also emphasizes the importance of democratic merit, which is reflected in the "service to the state" (2.37) rather than just personal excellence. Therefore, the citizen who is poor can contribute to the *polis* and be meritorious as much as a wealthy citizen[16]. Democrats did not dismiss the value of merit as undemocratic but redefined it in more egalitarian terms. They did, though, leave enough room for individual excellence as pointed out in Pericles' claim that when it comes to "putting one person before another in position of public responsibility" what is taken into account is "actual ability which the man possesses" (2.37). Election to public offices on the basis of merit, in contrast to election by lot, was considered an aristocratic element in Athenian democracy. Nevertheless, it was an important part of the democratic constitution, which is demonstrated by the fact that offices that required military or financial skills were elective and, therefore, most often filled by members of the upper classes, such as Pericles (Mitchell 2015: 250). Similarly, although all citizens, regardless of class, had the right to address the assembly, it was mainly those who were educated in the skills of oratory who did so (Hansen 1991: 306-20; Balot 2006: 82-84). In practice, Athens combined democratic egalitarianism with aristocratic excellence.

The most prominent argument about the injustice of democratic rule was based on a claim that this type of rule promotes the interests of the majority at the expense of the minority. Old Oligarch complains that the majority is "not so much concerned with justice as with their own advantage" (1.13) and that the best element in society – the

and, as tax-payers, contribute more to the state (1283a16). He does, however, point out that the state can exist without virtues of "justice and valour", but "not well" (1283b21).

[16] Rich citizens can help the state by paying more taxes, but poor citizens contribute to the assembly, as jurors, as soldiers in war, and as rowers of trireme. "Pericles' funeral oration", points out Monoson, "equates elaborate acts of munificence with modest acts of participation" (Monoson 1998: 501).

noble, educated, and the rich – are extorted through funding public feasts, theatre, and athletic contests in which the people then participate. He holds a cynical view of politics, rejecting the idea of the common good and claiming that in oligarchies the rich minority rules, first and foremost, for its own benefit. In the same way, in democracies, the poor majority rules in its own interest. The rich want to protect their wealth, while the poor want to protect their freedom, yet they both want to rule. The crucial difference, from the Old Oligarch's perspective, is that the educated and wealthy, unlike the crass and the poor, can ensure good government (*eunomia*). Similarly cynical view of the nature of class interest in politics can be found in Thucydides when he tells us about Spartan general Brasidas speaking in front of Acanthians, assuring them that he did not come to pick sides between the democratic and oligarchic factions or to "enslave many to the few or the few to the many" (4.86). Here, "enslaved" is a figure of speech: neither were the majority enslaved in oligarchy, nor were the rich few enslaved in democracy. However, oligarchies excluded the majority of citizens from the decision-making process, while democracies were inclusive of all citizens. The way that the noble and the rich could claim they were enslaved in democracy is that they were "overpowered" by "the will of the whole polis, which included their wills without it being their will" (Raaflaub 1983: 525).

This is the reason why Aristotle, when classifying different types of political regimes in the third book of *Politics*, talks about democracy as one of the "despotic" and "defective and perverted forms" of rule (1279a20-21). Like tyranny or oligarchy, democracy promotes the interests of the ruling class, not the common good. In the case of democracy, that means the interests of the "needy" and poor majority at the expense of everyone else (1979b9). Later, in book four, Aristotle goes into more detail by describing four stages of democracy, offering us a narrative of decline from constitutional government as a more moderate type of democracy based on the rule of law to an extreme form of democracy "in which the people are superior even over the laws" (1298b15-16)[17]. However, unlike the Old Oligarch and Brasidas, Aristotle assumes that there are forms of government that benefit both the rulers and the ruled: a moderate form of democracy – constitutional government (*politeia*) – is one such example where laws are designed to benefit all citizens.

The main argument against democracy as a system that promotes the interests of the poor at the expense of the wealthy focused on the perceived injustice of property and wealth distribution, as well as on the financial burden placed on rich citizens to contribute to maintaining public goods. Advocates of traditional aristocratic privilege, such as The Old Oligarch, bemoaned the fact that the rich citizens' overwhelm-

[17] For criticism of Aristotle's "unrelenting theory-based aversion to radical democracy", see: Mitchell 2015: 207–208.

ing contribution to the state –through paying for liturgies and taxes, fighting in the cavalry, and providing expensive war equipment – was not reflected in their diminishing political influence (Raaflaub 1983; Ober 1996). In 462, institutional reforms lowered the property qualification for office holding and introduced salaried government service. Two decades later, pay for jurors in public courts was instituted. In the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War and throughout the 4th century, Athens could no longer rely on profits from silver mines in its colonies or revenue from allies in the Delian League, so more financial burden fell on rich citizens – through voluntary contributions and taxes, as well as securing pay for attending the Assembly – to keep the state solvent and its democracy functioning (Ober 1989: 30, 99, 133). From the perspective of the wealthy, this was clear proof of the unjust nature of democracy as a system that maintains itself by extorting a more capable minority for the benefit of a less successful majority. However, for the advocates of democratic rule, programs of wealth distribution served two main purposes: 1) use of private wealth to subsidise the poorest citizens and allow them to participate in politics, and 2) to control the affluent elite from using their wealth to make themselves too influential or immune to law (Ober 1996: 184)[18].

Were redistributive policies in democratic Athens unjust? The answer to that question depends on one's view of the goals of political community and understanding of fair distribution of material resources. However, what is clear is that in Athens – both during the reign of radical democracy in the 5th century and of more moderate democracy in the 4th – the well-off citizens were never in danger of having their land confiscated, their property taken away, or being taxed so heavily as to lose their wealth or status. As modern scholars have noted, the Athenian *demos* never used its collective power of decision-making to promote substantial redistribution of land and wealth (Ober 1996: 90–91). Contrary to Aristotle's claims in the *Politics* that the majority "will unjustly confiscate the property of the wealthy minority" (1318a25-26) or in the *Constitution of Athens* that "the democratic parties" are "rather in the habit of making a general distribution of land" (40), democratic Athens never resorted to redistributing land or confiscating property from members of the upper trierarchic class, not even after the defeat of Thirty Tyrants (Jones 1955: 153; Winters 2011: 87)[19]. Democratic government in Athens was never "dominated by the urban proletariat or the wider poor"; there was no radical redistribution of wealth, and democratic egalitarianism never translated into demands for social and economic equality, while prominent, affluent, and educated citizens were more likely to hold important public offices. The result was "a balanced modus vivendi between the social classes" (Mitchell 2015: 113).

[18] For this second point, see Demosthenes' speech *Against Meidias*.

[19] For a more detailed account of Athens' class structure, see: Winters 2011: 77–89.

It is worth noting that ancient claims about injustice in democracy refer to several different forms of injustice: the Old Oligarch detects it in the disregard for the natural superiority of the aristocratic class; Plato and Aristotle are concerned with democracy's neglect of true merit and excellence; and all of them are disturbed by the promotion of the interests of the poor majority at the expense of the wealthy minority, that is, by distributive unfairness. Once again, as revealed by both ancient sources and contemporary scholarship, the validity of these claims is provisional. They point to possible tendencies that exist in democracies, rather than establishing a persuasive argument about an innately unjust character of democratic rule. In conclusion, debates on the nature of democracy reveal that criticisms of popular rule were not completely unfounded: democracies can be inefficient, unstable, and unjust. However, they were not inherently so. One of the core features of democracy, which even many of its critics acknowledge, is its awareness of the dangers of demagoguery, *stasis*, popular tyranny, irresponsible decision-making, unjust redistribution, or imperial tendencies, and its ability to respond to these dangers by introducing institutional reforms and practices designed to curtail them.

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