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Critics and Critiques of Ancient Athenian Democracy

By Professor Paul Cartledge

Among the enduring contributions of the Greek empire to Western society is the foundation of democratic society. But what did the development of Athenian democracy actually involve?



Temple of Sounion

Invention of political theory

One of the indispensable words we owe ultimately to the Greeks is criticism (derived from the Greek for judging, as in a court case or at a theatrical performance). Another is theory (from the Greek word meaning contemplation, itself based on the root for seeing). An early example of the Greek genius for applied critical theory was their invention of political theory, probably some time during the first half of the fifth century BC.

The first concrete evidence for this crucial invention comes in the *Histories of Herodotus*, a brilliant work composed over several years, delivered orally to a variety of audiences all round the enormously extended Greek world, and published in some sense as a whole perhaps in the 420s. The evidence comes in the form of what is known as the Persian Debate in Book 3.

According to the writer's dramatic scenario, we are in the year 522. The mighty Persian empire (founded in Asia a generation earlier by Cyrus the Great and expanded by his son Cambyses to take in Egypt) is in crisis, since a usurper has occupied the throne. Seven noble Persians conspire to overthrow the usurper and restore legitimate government. But what form of government, what constitution, should the restored Persian empire enjoy for the future? That at any rate is the assumed situation. In hard practical fact there was no alternative, and no alternative to hereditary autocracy, the system laid down by Cyrus, could seriously have been contemplated. So what we have in Herodotus is a Greek debate in Persian dress.

Three of the seven noble conspirators are given set speeches to deliver, the first in favour of democracy (though he does not actually call it that), the second in favour of aristocracy (a nice form of oligarchy), the third - delivered by Darius, who in historical fact will succeed to the throne - in favour, naturally, of constitutional monarchy, which in practice meant autocracy. The main interest for us centres on the arguments of the first speaker, in favour of what he calls isonomy, or equality under the laws.

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Views of the masses

Why, to start with, does he not use the word democracy, when

democracy of an Athenian radical kind is clearly what he's advocating? Chiefly because of a fatal ambiguity: to its opponents democracy was no more, and no better, than mob-rule, since for them it meant the political power of the masses exercised over and at the expense of the elite. That was one, class-based sort of objection to Greek-style direct democracy. Others were rather more subtly expressed.



Actor posing as
Socrates

Intellectual anti-democrats such as Socrates and Plato, for instance, argued that the majority of the people, because they were by and large ignorant and unskilled, would always get it wrong. In these intellectuals' view, government was an art, craft or skill, and should be entrusted only to the skilled and intelligent, who were by definition a minority. They denied specifically that the sort of knowledge available to and used by ordinary people, popular knowledge if you like, was really knowledge at all. At best it was mere opinion, and almost always it was ill-informed and wrong opinion.

A further variant on this view was that the masses or the mob, being ignorant and stupid for the most part, were easily swayed by specious rhetoric - so easily swayed that they were incapable of taking longer views or of sticking resolutely to one, good view once that had been adopted. The masses were, in brief, shortsighted, selfish and fickle, an easy prey to unscrupulous orators who came to be known as demagogues. Demagogue meant literally 'leader of the demos' ('demos' means people); but democracy's critics took it to mean mis-leaders of the people, mere rabble-rousers.

Then there was the view that the mob, the poor majority, were nothing but a collective tyrant. A very clever example of this line of oligarchic attack is contained in a fictitious dialogue included by Xenophon - a former pupil of Socrates, and, like Plato, an anti-democrat - in his work entitled 'Memoirs of Socrates'.

'Then there was the view that the mob, the poor majority, were nothing but a collective tyrant.'

'What', asks the teenage Alcibiades pseudo-innocently, is 'law'? 'Why', answers his guardian Pericles, who was then at the height of his influence, 'it is whatever the people decides and decrees'. 'What?', replies Alcibiades; 'even when it decrees by fiat, acting like a tyrant and riding roughshod over the views of the minority - is that still "law"?' 'Certainly', says Pericles. 'So', persists Alcibiades, 'democracy is really just another form of tyranny?' 'Oh, run away and play', rejoins Pericles, irritated; 'I was good at those sorts of debating tricks when I was your age.'

Background of Athens

Not all anti-democrats, however, saw only democracy's weaknesses and were entirely blind to democracy's strengths. One unusual critic is an Athenian writer whom we know familiarly as the 'Old Oligarch'. Certainly, he was an oligarch, but whether he was old or not we can't say. His short and vehement pamphlet was produced probably in the 420s, during the first decade of the Peloponnesian War, and makes the following case: democracy is appalling, since it represents the rule of the poor, ignorant, fickle and stupid majority over the socially and intellectually superior



Re-enactment of fighting
'hoplites'

minority, the world turned upside down.



A Greek trireme

But - a big 'but' - it works: that is, it delivers the goods - for the masses. After all, at the time of writing, Athens was the greatest single power in the entire Greek world, and that fact could not be totally unconnected with the fact that Athens was a democracy. The specific connection made by the anonymous writer is that the ultimate source of Athens' power was its navy, and that navy was powered essentially (though not exclusively) by the strong arms of the thetes, that is to say, the poorest section of the Athenian citizen population. They therefore in a sense deserved the political pay-off of mass-biased democracy as a reward for their crucial naval role.

By 413, however, the argument from success in favour of radical democracy was beginning to collapse, as Athens' fortunes in the Peloponnesian War against Sparta began seriously to decline. In 411 and again in 404 Athens experienced two, equally radical counter-coups and the establishment of narrow oligarchic regimes, first of the 400 led by the formidable intellectual Antiphon, and then of the 30, led by Plato's relative Critias. Antiphon's regime lasted only a few months, and after a brief experiment with a more moderate form of oligarchy the Athenians restored the old democratic institutions pretty much as they had been.

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It was this revived democracy that in 406 committed what its critics both ancient and modern consider to have been the biggest single practical blunder in the democracy's history: the trial and condemnation to death of all eight generals involved in the pyrrhic naval victory at Arginusae.

The generals' collective crime, so it was alleged by Theramenes (formerly one of the 400) and others with suspiciously un- or anti-democratic credentials, was to have failed to rescue several thousands of Athenian citizen survivors. Passions ran high and at one point during a crucial Assembly meeting, over which Socrates may have presided, the cry went up that it would be monstrous if the people were prevented from doing its will, even at the expense of strict legality. The resulting decision to try and condemn to death the eight generals collectively was in fact the height, or depth, of illegality. It only hastened Athens' eventual defeat in the war, which was followed by the installation at Sparta's behest of an even narrower oligarchy than that of the 400 - that of the 30.

Restoration of democracy

This, fortunately, did not last long; even Sparta felt unable to prop up such a hugely unpopular regime, nicknamed the '30 Tyrants', and the restoration of democracy was surprisingly speedy and smooth - on the whole. Inevitably, there was some fallout, and one of the victims of the simmering personal and ideological tensions was Socrates. In 399 he was charged with impiety (through not duly recognising the gods the city recognised, and introducing new, unrecognised divinities) and, a separate alleged offence, corrupting the young.

To some extent Socrates was being used as a scapegoat, an expiatory sacrifice to appease the gods who must have been implacably angry with the Athenians to inflict on them such horrors as plague and famine as well as military defeat and civil war. Yet the religious views of Socrates were deeply unorthodox, his political sympathies were far from radically democratic,

and he had been the teacher of at least two notorious traitors, Alcibiades and Critias. Nor did he do anything to help defend his own cause, so that more of the 501 jurors voted for the death penalty than had voted him guilty as charged in the first place. By Athenian democratic standards of justice, which are not ours, the guilt of Socrates was sufficiently proven.

Nevertheless, in one sense the condemnation of Socrates was disastrous for the reputation of the Athenian democracy, because it helped decisively to form one of democracy's - all democracy's, not just the Athenian democracy's - most formidable critics: Plato. His influence and that of his best pupil Aristotle were such that it was not until the 18th century that

democracy's fortunes began seriously to revive, and the form of democracy that was then implemented tentatively in the United States and, briefly, France was far from its original Athenian model. If we are all democrats today, we are not - and it is importantly because we are not - Athenian-style democrats. Yet, with the advent of new technology, it would actually be possible to reinvent today a form of indirect but participatory tele-democracy. The real question now is not can we, but should we... go back to the Greeks?

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About the author

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