The Making and Unmaking of
DEMOCRACY
Lessons from History and World Politics

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Chapter One

Conditions for Athenian Democracy

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Democracy, as a word, concept, and set of practices, was invented in the ancient city-state (polis) of Athens. By democracy (demokratia) the Athenians meant active political rule by the demos—the native adult males. This political body was constituted for purposes of governmental and legal decision making without regard for extraneous socioeconomic distinctions; there was no property qualification for voting rights. Democracy flourished at Athens from 508–322 B.C., with only two brief interruptions in the late fifth century. After 322 B.C., periods in which the Athenians ruled themselves democratically were interspersed with periods of foreign-imposed oligarchy, but democracy remained an important part of the Athenian (and wider Greek) political landscape well into the era of Roman domination.

This relatively long political history is strikingly different from that of every subsequent democratic state in at least one salient respect: The democratic Athenians had no historical model of democracy from which they might hope to learn. Whereas Athens’ experience with democracy became an important model (or, more often, an anti-model) for virtually all later thinking about the potential benefits and pitfalls of republican forms of government, there was no road map for the Athenians’ own audacious political experiment. They quite literally invented democracy as they went along.

The Athenians were, of course, innocent of any teleological conception regarding the “conditions of political maturity” or “goal state” that a democratic form of government should or even might entail. Moreover, in the early days of the democracy, the Athenians had no clear expectations about the relationship between the form of political organization they had adopted and potential extra-political “side effects”: They had no prior idea of what a democratic economy might look like, no conception of how a democratic citizen might be expected to behave, no notion of either “democratic peace” or the effect of democracy on national capacity to wage war; in brief, they had no pre-Platonic sense of the nature of the “democratic soul.” It was not until the mid-fifth and fourth centuries that Athenian political orators and Athenian critics of democracy sought to analyze what democracy meant for national and individual character, social behavior, economy, and war.

In thinking about the Athenian experience with democracy, it is important to keep this historical tabula rasa in mind. The intellectual exercise represented by this volume was unavailable, even covertly, to the Athenians for much of their history as a democracy. Indeed, the thinking that led to this volume was (ultimately) made possible by the Athenian experience. Greek historical priority does not, however, mean that the Athenian political experience was so qualitatively different from that of subsequent democracies as to obviate the value of comparisons; it was, after all, Athenian political writers who first attempted to analyze the conditions for democracy. Pseudo-Xenophon (the “Old Oligarch”), Thucydides, Xenophon, Plato, and Demosthenes (to name only the best known) all wrote searching analyses of the social consequences of democratic government. But among Athenian writers it is Aristotle, in the Politics (especially Book 6) who most explicitly poses the question that animates this collection: What precisely are the conditions that promote, sustain, and threaten democracy as a form of government?

Aristotle asked similar questions about oligarchy and tyranny, the other two canonical “real world” regime-types familiar to him from the historical experience of the Greek city-states. But, like the majority of major Greek political writers of the classical period, Aristotle lived most of his adult life in democratic Athens. Aristotle regarded democracy as qualitatively inferior to three ideal-world “correct” regimes (polity, aristocracy, and monarchy). But he regarded democracy as the best (i.e., most capable of approximating conditions of justice) of the three commonly existing real-world political governmental alternatives (democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny) ordinarily available to his fellow polis-dwelling Greeks.

And so, like many of his Greek contemporaries who wrote what we now think of as political theory, Aristotle was especially interested in the conditions associated with democratic flourishing.

The general problem of specifying the conditions under which democracy arises, flourishes, collapses, and is reborn was among the
central concerns of Greek political philosophy from the mid-fifth century B.C. onward. And, at least in part because of the profound influence of Greek political thought, the “democracy problem” remained a central concern for many later Western political thinkers—even through the long historical era (roughly the third through the seventeenth centuries C.E.), in which there was no living example of democracy as the government of a complex independent state to which empirically minded political theorists might refer. Once again, it is important to keep in mind that “thinking abstractly about the conditions of democratic flourishing” was only possible after Athens had become a democracy. Whereas Aristotle, Cicero, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau, Paine, Madison, Jefferson, and others each had the history of democratic Athens (or at least historical and philosophical traditions about Athens) to think with, in the beginning the Athenians had only themselves and their own lived experience.

Because he asked questions so similar to those posed by the editors of this collection, Aristotle’s analysis of democracy in the Politics offers a useful starting point for thinking about the conditions that promoted and threatened Athenian democracy. First, although he (famously) failed to develop anything directly comparable to a modern analytic model of the economy, Aristotle does associate democracy directly with relations between clearly defined economic classes: For Aristotle, democracy was formally defined as the rule (in a polis) of the fraction of the total “potential citizen” (i.e., native, adult, male: hereafter NAM) population that was “poor.” And thus democracy, for Aristotle, was best understood as the self-conscious political dominance of men who were constrained to work for their living. The fact that most NAMs in any given polis were likely to be “poor” by Aristotle’s (conventionally aristocratic) standard means that democracies were in practice ruled by the “many” (the clear majority of NAMs) rather than by the “few”—that subset of NAMs who were leisure-class. But Aristotle insists that this empirical demographic phenomenon (many poor/few leisureed) is strictly irrelevant to the formal definition of democracy: The key to democracy was that it was government in the interest of the poor; the fact that it was therefore also in the interest of the majority was epiphenomenal for Aristotelian political analysis.

If democracy is defined as “the rule of the poor,” we might expect Aristotle to suggest that democracy will flourish whenever the material interests of the “poor” are clearly recognized by the “many” qua ruling faction, and maximized accordingly. But he certainly does not think this to be the case: Democracy does indeed, in Aristotle’s thinking, depend on the constitutional dissociation of political participation rights from property ownership, and thus on the political domination of citizens with relatively little property. But if “the poor” were actually to use their political power to maximize their own material interests (by seizing and redistributing the goods of the rich), this would constitute a condition of fundamental injustice.

In Aristotle’s thinking, the systematic practice of injustice is not only morally wrong, it is also destructive of established order. Injustice destabilizes the entire society and eventually leads to class-based civil warfare. In the Politics, justice is defined as “the common good” (to tei koinei sumpheron). This does not imply a utilitarian ideal of “the greatest good for the greatest number” but a distributive ideal of “to each according to his desert.” The redistribution of material goods by the ruling faction is unjust because it is an example of one empowered segment (meros) of the society using its political authority to further its factional ends by seizing from others that which they deserve, and thereby damaging the good of the society as a whole. The correct approach to securing the long-term stability of a democratic regime, according to Aristotle, is to devise judicial and political remedies for moderating the tendency of the empowered many to engage in excessive (material) self-aggrandizement, thereby preventing the interests of rich minority and poor majority from diverging too radically. To facilitate this desirable outcome, he offers various practical suggestions, at the level of institutional innovation or modification, for encouraging or discouraging particular classes of citizens from active political participation (Politics, Book 6).

If we do not worry ourselves too much about the details of Aristotle’s plan for “moderating” democracy, there is much to be said for the fundamentals of Aristotle’s analysis of the conditions conducive to the long-term functional success of Greek (and particularly, Athenian) democracy. In terms of prior Greek history, the most radical innovation of the Athenian democracy was that it made participating citizens of genuinely poor NAMs. This meant that the citizenship included not only the 35 to 45 percent (or so) of NAMs who were economically middle-class. But Aristotle insists that this empirical demographic phenomenon (many poor/few leisureed) is strictly irrelevant to the formal definition of democracy: The key to democracy was that it was government in the interest of the poor; the fact that it was therefore also in the interest of the majority was epiphenomenal for Aristotelian political analysis.

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Athenian democracy introduced a new socioeconomic factor into the political equation. The "naturalness" of the condition in which society's political rulers are also those persons whose ancestors had traditionally monopolized social and economic forms of power was put in doubt at the moment of democracy's inauguration. The ancient Greek aristocratic ideal, in highly schematic terms (which I will seek to nuance somewhat), was one in which society was neatly divided into two camps. On the one side stood the kaloskagathos. He was clearly distinguished by his noble antecedents; by his considerable wealth, correctly acquired (i.e., mostly inherited) and correctly invested (especially in agricultural land); by his bearing, gait, and the physical beauty of his tanned athlete's body; and by his ample leisure to participate in contests with his peers. These contests ranged from warfare to athletic games to drinking games at elite symposia. He was distinguished, finally and definitively, by his capacity to engage in political rule along with this fellow kaloskagathos, and to compete with them for high office and honors.

On the other side of the aristocrat's binary social universe stood the poneros: He was "nobody, son of nobody"; he possessed no ancestral store of prestige or wealth; he worked at a trade, did day labor, or engaged in sordid retail exchanges. He was effectively the slave of those who bought his wares or paid his wages. His body was ugly; bent from labor and often pale from work indoors (here, the untanned shoemaker provides the paradigm). The poneros lacked the leisure to improve his body via gymnastics, or his mind via poetry and music. His soul systematically corrupted by his menial existence, he had no capacity (and should have no desire) to engage in political affairs. The distinction between kaloskagathoi and poneros was—in the schematic aristocratic view of the world—overt and self-evident at each and every point: The two human types inhabited the same physical terrain but completely different conceptual spheres. It was simply impossible to imagine ever making a mistake about who was who, or who deserved what. The type-scene of the confrontation of kaloskagathoi and poneros is provided by the Thersites passage in Book 2 of the Iliad, in which the lowly upstart Thersites, who dares to raise his voice against his social and moral superiors, is soundly trounced by lord Odysseus. Homer approvingly notes that Thersites was the ugliest man on the expedition and that Odysseus' physical abuse of him resulted in salutary laughter all around.9

With the advent of democracy, this seamless vision of unquestionable distinction was no longer sustainable. Now the vote of "nobody, son of nobody" might actually choose to raise his voice in public—if not as a formal speaker in the citizen Assembly, then in concert with his fellow nobodies attending that Assembly as voting members, hooting and jeering at the distinguished men who dared to stand up to speak.10 The Thersites-type scene is thus inverted: Hurtful public scorn and laughter is levied by the self-confident poneros upon the upstart kaloskagathos.

After the inauguration of democracy, if a nobleman’s speech in the public space of the citizen Assembly was regarded by the mass of the poor as incompatible with their own demotic convictions and aspirations, their collective voice might simply drown out the nobleman’s individual voice. They might furthermore demand to hear a speaker whose public views were more in tune with their own. Given the traditional competition among aristocrats for political distinction, this "behavioral training" of public speakers eventually led (in the view of the old elite) to a sort of political Gresham's Law, by which the "good public speech" of adherents to traditional aristocratic norms was driven out by the "bad public speech" of "demagogues"—upstarts of dubious background who were willing to say whatever would please the mob.11

Much of the negative evaluation of Athenian politics offered by elite Greek writers, from Pseudo-Xenophon and Thucydides in the fifth century B.C. through Plutarch in the second century C.E., is influenced by more or less sophisticated versions of this general conception of "what went wrong" in democratic politics. While I certainly do not share the aristocratic evaluative stance of these elite writers, I think that their general description of democratic Athens, as characterized by demotic control of elite public behavior and (especially) elite political speech, is accurate and that it helps us to explain how Athenian democracy functioned in practice.12

The disgust of the traditional aristocrat at the social leveling that the political enfranchisement of the lower orders brought in its train is brilliantly satirized in Theophrastus' late fourth-century work on Characters. Theophrastus sketches an amusing portrait of the Oligarchic Man, who struts about in public dressed ostentatiously and ranting against the entire "race of demagogues" (26.4–6). He demands plenary powers for elected government officials. He seeks to display his education by citing Homer, although he actually knows only the verse praising monarchy.13 He calls for the elite to meet in private in order to discuss political matters and asserts that they should give up public participation in democratic politics so as to avoid being either
The history of Athenian democracy demonstrates the overall success of the effort to reconcile what might seem at first blush to be irreconcilably opposed social interests. With the establishment of democracy, the lower-class “many” had unexpectedly stepped onto the historical stage and asserted the startling claim that the poor man had as much right to share in political life as his wealthy compatriot. Because that claim was in fact made palatable to a significant portion of Athens’ social and economic elite, the Athenian democratic state was not debilitating by incessant class warfare. Plato (Republic 422e–23a) famously claimed that every existing Greek polis was in fact two poleis, one rich and one poor, locked in eternal strife. But, in practice, the Athenian democracy proved strikingly stable over time: Aristotle states explicitly that democracy is the most moderate of the three commonly existing regime types (Politics, 1289b2–5).

The conditions of Athenian democratic flourishing centered on the pragmatic integration of elite Athenians into a political regime dominated by the non-elite many. That regime offered honors and positions of leadership to elite individuals who performed their public duties at a consistently high level while simultaneously conforming to a demotic standard of public behavior and speech. By the same token, the democratic regime humiliated and not infrequently punished would-be leaders if they failed in either accomplishment or public deportment. Because a workable balance was not only struck but maintained through an effective (although informal and “ideological”) apparatus of public discourse, social practice, and civic education, the democracy proved highly resilient: The Athenians twice (410 and 403 B.C.) restored democracy in the face of adverse circumstances after antidemocratic conspirators briefly succeeded in establishing oligarchic regimes. But it remains to be seen how the democracy could have come into being in the first place, in the face of the presumed dominance of the ideology of aristocratic naturalism. We will return to that question at the end of this chapter.

Happily, the history of democracy at Athens is (by the standards of pre-modern political organizations) relatively well documented by well-informed contemporary or near-contemporary historians (Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Ps-Aristotle) and documentary evidence (especially inscriptions of decrees and laws passed by the democratic government). We possess a rich corpus of speeches delivered in democratic assemblies and courtrooms, a number of tragedies and comedies staged by the democratic state and attended by a large cross section of the citizenry, and contemporary political commentaries, ranging from polemical...
tracts (Pseudo-Xenophon) to careful (if critical) philosophical analyses (Plato, Aristotle). There is also a large body of later ancient work that bears directly on the history of Athenian democracy (notably the Lives of Plutarch), although this postclassical material must be approached with great care.

In sum, the evidence for the conditions that sustained Athenian democracy is quite good. And recent scholarship has gone a long way in specifying the institutional changes and social negotiations that preserved the tenuous balance between the various competing interests represented within Athenian citizen society (and among citizens and noncitizens). Along with the relationship between mass audiences and elite political leaders sketched here, recent scholarship has clarified other significant aspects of Athens’ democratic society: Freedom and respect for the dignity of the individual citizen were established as cornerstones of the democratic public order. Athenian law and legal practices encouraged contestants to convert private disputes into matters of public concern, thereby opening them to public scrutiny and subjecting them to the authority of judgments rendered by public arbitrators and mass juries. Through this process, traditional conceptions of reciprocity and revenge were successfully incorporated into an overarching democratic regime of discipline and punishment. The Athenian military complex quickly adapted to include the poorest of citizens in key military roles (notably, as rowers on war galleys) and to shift the primary burdens (and honors) of financing military operations to the wealthiest citizens—in the process, vastly enhancing the Athenian capacity to wage war effectively at a distance from the home territory of Attica.

Non-citizens—foreign-born men, Athenian women, and even slaves—were folded into the ambit of the democratic social and institutional order. There is considerable debate among scholars over whether that enfolding was predicated on a hypertrophy of NAM exclusivity or whether it entailed a progressive amelioration of exclusionary distinctions between citizens and “others.” It would be absurd to claim that all residents of Athenian territory were content with their lot: Athenian slaves took advantage of the disruptions of the later Peloponnesian War to escape in droves (Thucydides 7.27.5). Yet, faced by the oligarchy of 404 B.C., many of Athens’ resident aliens and slaves joined forces with the NAMs, risking their lives in fighting to restore democracy. The ambivalent relationship between Athenian citizens and their slaves was manifest in the function of the public shrine of Theseus (mythical founder of democracy) as a formally accepted place of refuge for runaway slaves. In any event, the potential of non-citizens to subvert the democratic political order remained latent; democratic Athens (unlike aristocratic/oligarchic Sparta, discussed subsequently) never felt constrained to institutionalize a regime of military terror aimed at suppressing local non-citizen ambitions.

A rich array of intermediary Athenian civic and civil organizations responded to the democratic regime, either by alignment with egalitarian democratic norms or by providing private-realm spaces in which alternative norms could be celebrated. The physical space of the democratic city was reconfigured to reflect the more equitable access to public goods characteristic of democratic thinking. State-sponsored festivals, parades, public sacrifice and feasting, and dramatic performances—all of which had deep roots in formerly elite-controlled religious rituals—were all brought under democratic institutional authority and served variously as loci for the display of social solidarity and (in the case of drama) for sharp and salutary critical interrogations of public values. New literary genres and subgenres, from historiography to oratory to philosophical dialogue emerged and evolved under the influence of democratic public discourse.

In brief, it is clear that classical Athenian governmental and legal institutions, political ideology and public speech, social practices, and high culture all participated actively in creating a distinctive set of values and practices—at once affected by and important for the robustness of democratic Athenian politics. Plato’s terminology may remain strange to us, but we can begin to see what he meant when he claimed in the Republic that the “democratic soul” was the microcosmic individual analogue to the socially diverse macrocosmic collectivity that was the democratic city. Although it may be impossible to specify the priority of these various “sustaining conditions,” they can be described in enough analytic detail to make the study of democratic Athens worthwhile for comparative purposes.

By contrast to the conditions sustaining democracy, the conditions that undermine democracy have, on the whole, concerned recent Greek historical scholarship less than they did earlier generations of scholars. The, by now, shopworn notions that a growth in democratic “radicalism” destabilized the democracy, that political leaders after Pericles abandoned concern for the public good and treated the public sphere as nothing more than a system of private spoils, and that class tensions and a growth in selfish individualism among the populace at large undermined civic solidarity, have been exposed as tendentious fictions by a spate of detailed work on the fourth- and third-century phases of the democracy.
The two late-fifth-century oligarchic coups d’état (in 411 B.C. at a time of crisis in the Peloponnesian War, and in 404 B.C. following Athens’ loss of that war) certainly did reveal the depths of antidemocratic sentiment within some sectors of the Athenian elite. But the denouement of the first of these political counterrevolutions was more notable for demonstrating the depths of shared sentiment between the genuinely poor citizens and the “middling men” of hoplite status, and for the unwillingness of the latter to join in a long-term alliance with extreme oligarchs. The second oligarchic interlude was short, brutal, and nasty, proving to most Athenians (including Plato: Seventh Letter 324d–25a; and the school of Aristotle: Athenaios Politeia 41–42) the moral bankruptcy of the antidemocratic elite. Thus, ironically, counterrevolution pointed unerringly to the relative moral superiority and choice-worthiness of the democratic alternative.

The fact that Athens was defeated by Philip of Macedon in 338 B.C. at Chaeronea, and subsequently failed to maintain a consistent independence vis-à-vis Philip’s successors on the Macedonian throne, is now less commonly attributed to the Athenian democracy’s internal failings than to the diplomatic and military skills of Macedon’s leaders and to their access to vast reserves of material and human resources. The final end of democracy in the Greek world is not, by the same token, now understood as a product of democracy’s inherent internal contradictions, but as a long-term result of the general preference of powerful imperial entities (Macedonian and especially Roman) for dealing with oligarchies: for small bodies of easily controlled elites over unruly and independent-minded democratic multitudes.

The remainder of this essay returns to a previously raised question: What conditions were necessary for the original emergence of Athenian democracy? I have suggested that a key prior condition was the disturbance in the uncontested sway of an integrated aristocratic ideology that saw political rule, social relations, and human corporeal appearance as homologous aspects of an unquestionable natural order. Ex hypothesi, that disturbance must have occurred some time before the democracy was established. There are various contending dates for the “origins of democracy” at Athens, but it seems that by far the best candidate is 508 B.C.23 That year saw the demotic uprising of the Athenian revolution and the sweeping governmental reforms subsequently inaugurated by Cleisthenes. And so we should seek a lapse in aristocratic ideological hegemony some time in the “archaic” period, the age before 508 B.C.

Regrettably, the (predemocratic) archaic period of Athenian history (and Greek history generally) is poorly documented in comparison with the classical (democratic) era of the fifth and fourth centuries. And thus any analysis of the conditions attending democracy’s origins will necessarily be provisional, and established only at a high order of generality. That said, the answer to the chicken/egg problem of whether democracy was a necessary precondition to challenging aristocratic ideological hegemony or a product of that challenge may lie in rejecting the implicit premise of the argument, by abandoning the notion that there ever was a Greek historical era in which the “naturalistic” and binary aristocratic ideal reigned completely uncontested. If the aristocratic ideal was always contestable and was periodically contested, then the question of democratic origins changes somewhat and becomes rather less mechanistic. Rather than asking “What predemocratic event disturbed the previously unflawed ideological surface and thereby precipitated democracy?” we may now ask, “Why did the contestation of binary aristocratic ideals take the specifically ‘democratic’ form of counting all NAMs as participatory citizens in 508 in Athens, and not before or elsewhere?”

The relevant history begins at least as early as the eighth century B.C., with the explosive cultural, social, and economic changes that ended the long Dark Age (ca. 1200–750 B.C.). The Greek world in the eighth century witnessed the inauguration of alphabetic literacy, a relatively steep rise in population, a wave of colonization that established new Greek cities through much of the Mediterranean and Black Sea coastal zones, and dramatic changes in art, architecture, and burial practice. The wide-ranging changes of the eighth century presumably threatened whatever structures of aristocratic authority had developed after the collapse of Mycenaean civilization around 1200 B.C. But because the Dark Age was an illiterate period, only mute archaeological evidence and the social memory preserved by Homeric poetry are available for specifying the extent and nature of Dark Age aristocratic authority. The evidence is far from transparent but points to a hierarchical society centered around aristocratic big men who controlled the distribution of goods and honors, including the right of formal burial.26

In a series of publications, Ian Morris has demonstrated that in the eighth century the number of graves in Athenian cemeteries far outstripped the rise in population. He has persuasively argued that Athenian burial patterns in the eighth and seventh centuries reveal a seesawing social conflict over the right to “formal burial”: The initial eighth-century opening up of burial rights to a wider cross section of Athenian...
society was followed by a seventh-century return to restrictions on burial. Morris suggests that formal burial implied full inclusion in the society (i.e., the social rank that would eventually be equated with citizenship). Morris has recently suggested that the ideological struggle over membership in society that he detects in the material record can also be traced in archaic (seventh- and sixth-century) Greek lyric poetry, a literature written by and for elite audiences. On the one side in this intra-elite conflict stood those aristocrats who sought to establish for themselves a monopoly of social and political capital by the display and conspicuous consumption of luxury goods (especially those imported from the high civilizations of the East). The proponents of this "habrosune ideology" emphasized interregional ties between the elite members of a cosmopolitan stratum of Greek and nearby non-Greek societies. On the other side were those elite Greeks who favored strongly local (intra-polis) ties that extended fairly deep into the "middling ranks" of the local polis population; this "metrios ideology" disdained ostentation, embracing a system of values and behavior centered on restraint, military discipline, and similarity among members of a relatively broad cross section of local property-holding society. Morris suggests that this metrios ideology had gained ascendance throughout much of the Greek world by the sixth century and provided the preconditions for the establishment of a variety of types of republican (broad-based oligarchic) governments.27

At Athens, the victory of something like Morris' metrios ideal was marked by the reforms inaugurated by Solon, who was appointed chief magistrate (archon) with special powers of arbitration during a period of social crisis in 594 B.C. Among the noteworthy reforms associated with Solon was the abolition of intra-polis debt bondage; Solon effectively created the status of citizen at Athens by his retroactive law forbidding any Athenian to enslave another. Citizenship was thus established as an immunity from coercive forced labor: freedom from being enslaved within one's own homeland. Although Solon was later celebrated as the original father of Athenian democracy, he certainly intended the Athenian elite to retain the balance of power in Athenian society. Solon's liberation of the poorest Athenians from the risk of slavery was a precondition to the demotic agency implicit in democracy, but he certainly did not intend to eliminate the primary importance of wealth-status within the body politic. Quite to the contrary, Solon established formal census classes, assigning differential political rights to Athenians corresponding to each individual's annual income (as measured in agricultural produce or its equivalent).28

The Solonian reforms left lower-class Athenians with only minimal access to the institutions of political power. But whatever clarity the renascent seventh-century Athenian exclusivist aristocracy had been able to establish in terms of the binary distinction between a distinguished few and an ordinary crowd of undistinguished "many" was blurred by Solon's reforms. In the space between the kaloi'agathoi and the poneroi, Solon interposed a relatively large body of metrioi: "middling and moderate" men who owned enough land to qualify for service as heavily armed infantrymen. By 490 B.C. (the battle of Marathon), there were about 9,000 Athenian hoplites, probably amounting to a third of the NAM population.

While some aristocratic Athenians who cleave to the habrosune ideology might regard the middle-rank hoplite as nothing more than a poneros, elite Athenians who embraced the metrios ideology were evidently willing to accept the men of the middle as sharers in the public realm. Solon perhaps hoped that Athens would develop into a republican government based on a relatively moderate (i.e., broad-based, low property qualification) oligarchy of the sort that flourished elsewhere in the late-archaic Greek world. Among the republican alternatives imaginatively open to Athenians in the post-Solonian era was archaic Sparta, where the hoplite warriors constituted of themselves a closed body of citizen "Similars," defined by their commitment to a regime of strict discipline, military education, and social control. That regime denied the existence of meaningful distinctions between members of the in-group of Similars, while subjecting the residents of Spartan-controlled territory outside that elite group to intentionally degrading forms of servitude and systematic military terrorism.29

But in the event, Athens developed quite differently from other Greek republics and very differently from Sparta. The Solonian legislation on slavery established (or at least signaled) as illegitimate the absolute subordination of lower class native Athenians, and thus gave no support to the growth of an exclusionary Sparta-like solidarity among "middling" Athenians. In the decades after Solon, and especially after the successful coup d'état of the tyrant Pisistratus (546 B.C.), new festivals and new legal institutions were inaugurated that served to emphasize the conceptual unity of the entire native population of Attica, a unity that further blurred the lines between kaloi'agathoi, metrioi, and poneroi. The tyrants (Pisistratus, and later his sons) sought to emphasize the connection of Athenians of all social classes with Athena as patron goddess, with Athens as a sociocultural entity, and with themselves as goddess-favored patrons of the city.
They were also, at first, careful to accommodate the ambitions of key members of the traditional aristocracy. After one of Pisistratus' sons was assassinated (the killing motivated, as Thucydides points out, by individuals seeking vengeance for a private slight), however, the tyrannical regime became more oppressive and lost its broad base of support. Without support from the local infantrymen and dependent on hired mercenary cavalry, the tyranny proved vulnerable. A Spartan expeditionary force invaded Attica and expelled the surviving tyrant in 510 B.C.

The collapse of tyrannical authority opened a confused political field of play. The two preconditions of relatively open "republican" social relations and a political ideology that we may (retrospectively) see as enabling the emergence of democracy were in place by the late sixth century B.C. But fairly similar conditions pertained elsewhere in Greece. The actual move from broad-based oligarchy to democracy cannot be explained without resort to historical contingency. Athenian history before 508 B.C. had presented various distinctive features: Athens controlled a very large territory for a city-state and supported a large population; Solon was a particularly astute lawgiver; and tyranny at Athens emerged later than elsewhere in mainland Greece and was accompanied by a thriving trade in painted pottery and a nascent silver-mining industry. But the basic pattern of territorial consolidation under aristocratic leadership, civil strife, lawgivers, and tyrants was not atypical for an archaic Greek polis. As the historian Herodotus points out (5.78), before the democratic revolution, Athens had not been a particularly notable polis or an important player on the wider Greek scene.

After the events of 508 and the establishment of the new democracy, Athens diverged quickly from the Greek norm. Athens moved rapidly to prominence in inter-polis affairs by crushing regional rivals, building a huge navy, providing key leadership in the Persian wars, and then creating the first true Aegean empire. By the middle of the fifth century, Athens was the preeminent center of Aegean trade and culture.

The full articulation of democratic governmental and legal institutions was obviously not accomplished in a moment; those institutions continued to develop throughout the fifth century. But it is, I believe, more correct to see Athenian flourishing as resulting from the original establishment of democracy than it is to regard democratic institutions as incidental by-products of Athens' imperial growth. The inauguration of the democracy meant a dramatic increase in the human resources available to the state. The potential military population doubled from roughly half to the entire NAM population, enabling the explosive emergence of Athens as a naval power. Moreover, it was no longer necessary for the enfanchised NAM population to waste its energy seeking to control the ambitions of "unenfranchised NAMs," since the latter category literally disappeared. Finally, the incorporation into the political body of those who necessarily worked for others contributed to the atrophy of traditional aristocratic constraints on individual economic activity. As recent scholarship has emphasized, the Athenian economy of the late fifth and fourth centuries manifests strikingly "modern" features. And these must be attributed, in some measure, to the emergence of frankly democratic social values. In brief, 508 and its immediate aftermath was a watershed in Athenian and, indeed, in Greek history. Athens became a great state upon becoming a democracy. So what was the sequence of events that precipitated the unpredictable and decisive political change?

The Athenian political stage in the years immediately following the expulsion of the tyrant in 510 B.C. was dominated by two ambitious aristocrats, Isagoras and Cleisthenes. Although the state of our evidence does not allow us to align these men or their supporters neatly along a habrosunemetrios axis, Isagoras clearly advocated a more exclusionary approach to elite rule, yet he found enough support among the "middling men" to win the archonship for the year 508. Whether out of principle or desperation, Cleisthenes turned to the remainder of the NAM population, "making the demos [i.e., the poneroi] his comrades" (Herodotus 5.66.2). In response, Isagoras called in military support from Sparta. He then exiled Cleisthenes and the more prominent of his supporters. Isagoras also sought to dissolve Athens' ruling council, intending to replace the sitting councilors with 300 of his own supporters. Unexpectedly, the councilmen resisted and the demos of Athens rose up in arms, quickly besieging Isagoras and his Spartan allies on the Acropolis. The Spartans surrendered; Isagoras was expelled from the city. Cleisthenes was then recalled to Athens and inaugurated the reforms that established the institutional basis of democratic government. A year later the decisive Athenian military victory over an alliance of several regional rivals marked the beginning of Athens' ascent to Aegean-wide prominence.

The import of my brief recapitulation of the events of 508 is this: Although the establishment of "republican/moderate-oligarchic" social and ideological conditions in the archaic period was a prerequisite for
the establishment of democracy at Athens, democracy only came into being with the sudden eruption onto the historical stage of the demos—the undifferentiated body of NAMs. It is only when the demos, rather than "the aristocrats" or "the metoi," became an actor in its own right (at the Acropolis siege) that democracy was born. Cleisthenes' institutional reforms did not create democracy; they gave sustainable substance to the political agency claimed by the demos in its own name, through its own act of revolutionary violence. By that act, the demos rejected the exclusionary conception of politics that had recently been championed by Isagoras. The poneros became participants in a common enterprise, a unitary regime. They joined their more privileged compatriots as citizens by forcefully seizing, not by being granted, a share in the control of Athens' fate. That fate has continued, in some sense, down to the present day. The historical conditions that yielded Athenian democracy were perhaps unique; certainly they were to some extent contingent and unpredictable, but not unrepeatable. Once democracy was securely in place, the model of Athenian democracy became a factor in world political history. Because the new democratic state proved wildly successful on the international scene and spectacularly productive of literary, artistic, and philosophical culture, the Athenian model was highly influential and never forgotten. Any post-classical attempt to assert the perfect naturalness of aristocratic or monarchical government had to face the potentially disruptive memory of democratic Athens. Concerted attempts by antidemocratic intellectuals to blacken the memory of Athens' political experiment did indeed ensure that there was no attempt to apply the Athenian model directly to a post-classical regime. But ironically, those who sought to show "what went wrong" in Athens kept alive the conceptual possibility of popular government and the hope that it might someday be "done right."
Josiah Ober


NOTES


3. Ober 1998 argues this general point in detail.

4. The "death of democracy" in the ancient world has been pushed back by recent scholarship on the political experience of the Hellenistic world, but even optimists tend to agree that democracies did not survive the era of the high empire; see Ph. Gauthier, "Les cités hellénistiques," in Hansen 1993. For proto-democratic thought in pre-eighteenth-century Europe, see T. Rabb, this volume.


7. For the problem of self-aggrandizement (pleonexia) in Aristotle, and earlier Greek thought, see Balot 2001.


10. See, e.g., Plutarch, Life of Demosthenes, 6.3.

11. Connor 1971 offers a detailed discussion of the progressive dislocation from Athenian democratic politics of the habits of self-display and self-legitimization associated with the traditional nobility.


13. The reference is to Iliad 2.204; cf. Aristotle Politics, 1292a13.


18. Citizens and non-citizens in Athens: Christensen 1984; Cartledge 1993; Ober 1996, chapter 11; Cohen 2000; Allen 2000; Humphreys 1993; Paterson 1998; Whitehead 1977. It is sometimes claimed (recently by Rose 1999) that the fifth-century democracy depended on military-supported imperialism and thus on the systematic exploitation of extra-territorial colonial subjects, but the nature of fifth-century Athenian imperialism is hotly contested. The fact that democracy anetiated the empire, and flourished for 80 years after Athens' loss of empire speaks against any direct correlation between imperialism and democratic politics.

19. Jones 1999 argues that all Athenian civic organizations evolved in response to democracy, in some cases to provide an alternative to democratic egalitarianism.


23. Such is the argument of several collections intended to relate the work of political theorists and classicists: Euben 1996; Dunn 1992; Euben, Wallach et al. 1994; Ober and Hedrick 1996.

24. The "crisis" of the fourth-century democratic polis was major motif of Greek historical scholarship in 1960s, but had become much less of a concern by the 1990s; compare, for example, Mous 1962 with Mous 1995. See, further, Eder 1995.

25. Recent survey of the debate over the date of origin of Athenian democracy: Morris and Raaffaeb 1998.


30. By contrast, Athens' aristocratic/oligarchic rival, Spara, suffered from endemic manpower shortages; the restricted body of Spartan citizens expended much of their time and energy suppressing the ambitions of an extensive population of disenfranchised NAMs. Although
Sparta and its allies defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War. Sparta fell apart as a society soon thereafter, and never recovered from the military defeat at Leuctra in 371 B.C. By contrast, Athenian society recovered quickly from what seemed a catastrophic loss in the Peloponnesian War.


Chapter Two
Republic and Democracy: On Early Modern Origins of Democratic Theory

Maurizio Viroli

Early modern political theorists have very little to say about democracy, if by democracy we mean a political constitution based on rules that confer the power to take collective decisions to a (more or less) large number of the members of the group and respect basic liberal rights. Some of these political theorists, however, were republicans, in the sense that they supported a republican political constitution. By republic or popular government, they meant a political constitution that affirms the principle of the rule of law and assigns sovereign power to a collective body, as opposed to a monarchy or principality: "All the states, all the dominions that have held sway over men, have been either republics or principalities," as Machiavelli put it in the opening lines of The Prince. Republics, in turn, can be either democratic or aristocratic. In democratic republics, sovereign power belongs to the majority of the citizens; in aristocratic republics, sovereign power belongs to a minority. Although both scholars and non-scholars prefer to use the term democracy, it would be more correct to use the term democratic republic, because contemporary democratic polities are in fact democratic republics.

The implication of these historical and conceptual considerations is that democratic theory is a special kind of republican theory. It also means that early modern republican political wisdom is a vital source for understanding the conditions and the problems of democratic societies. In this essay I intend to explore the contribution that early modern republican theory has to offer concerning the relevance of the international context for the institution and flourishing of democratic societies, the role of economic and social conditions, and the interpretation