Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy

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ITHACA AND LONDON
How to Criticize
Democracy in Late Fifth-and Fourth-Century Athens

Some twenty-five hundred years after the revolution that made it possible, democracy is widely regarded as the most attractive form of practical (as opposed to utopian) political organization yet devised. Among democracy's virtues is revisability—the potential of the political regime to rethink and to reform itself while remaining committed to its core values of justice, equality, dignity, and freedom. How is this highly desirable flexibility achieved in practice? The willingness to contemplate change may be regarded as an innate characteristic of democratic political culture, and the capacity for nondestructive political change can be institutionalized in a democratic constitution. But I maintain that actual revisions generally require interventions from critics, and major revisions require critics who stand, in some sense, outside the dominant political culture. Because actualizing a democratic regime's latent capacity for major revision is predicated on the identification of structural problems by cultural critics, the regime that is to maintain its flexibility must allow social space exterior to itself: if a political system could ever encompass the whole of society and the whole field of discourse, it would lose its capacity for internally generated change; no one would be able to point out that "the

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Emperor is naked” or that “2 plus 2 does not equal 5.” While this degree of encompassing may be impossible except in the realm of dystopian fiction, the claim that revisibility is among democracy’s attractions and strengths suggests that it is actually in the self-interest of a democracy (unlike brittle, nonrevisable authoritarian regimes) to defend and even to seek to enlarge space for criticism. Moreover, a democratic regime must allow the cultural critic to maintain his or her distance, to remain a partial outsider, if it is to remain truly democratic and avoid the totalizing tendencies inherent in every value-based system of social organization. In a direct democracy on the Athenian model, therefore, not only is freedom of speech a good idea but the power of the people exists in a symbiotic relationship with resistance to that selfsame power.1

If, in late fifth- and fourth-century Athens, δημοκρατία meant “the political power of the ordinary people” and if power includes control over the development and deployment of systems of meaning (including popular ideology and the rhetoric of public communication), then, for Athenians, criticism of the language of democratic government and of the assumptions of popular ideology could be a means of resisting political power.2 It seems probable that critics of the status quo existed at every level of Athenian society; it is not hard to imagine that in each village and neighborhood of the polis there were men and women who could be counted on to interrogate, humorously or angrily, various aspects of the current order of things. The voices of these “local critics” are now lost, and we cannot say to what extent they were able to (or desired to) get outside that order. But a number of Athenian intellectuals committed pungent and profoundly critical opinions to writing, and in the process they contributed to the construction of what we might well call an “outside.” Studying classical Athenian literature critical of the democratic regime thus offers access to one very important fragment of what was probably much more diverse and widespread resistance to political power. We may regret the loss of nonliterary forms of criticism. But if we hope to gain even a partial understanding of the link between Athenian democratic politics and unease with how the people’s political power was manifested and deployed, we must come to grips with the texts we have.

Exploring the symbiosis of democracy and criticism should be significant for intellectual historians and political theorists alike. For historians, it promises to furnish part of the deep context for some of the works of Pseudo-Xenophon, Thucydides, Aristophanes, Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle, among others. For the political theorist, looking at how classical democracy was criticized offers an alternative to the long-dominant but increasingly problematic paradigms of state socialism and individual rights/civil society—oriented liberalism. The history of political criticism in late fifth- and fourth-century B.C. Athens helps to explain how an attractive (in at least certain respects), revisable system of popular authority that was neither truly liberal nor truly socialist could be sustained, and how such a system might be resisted. Given the differences between ancient and modern styles of politics, studying Athenian democracy and its critics certainly will not offer the late twentieth century an off-the-shelf technique for reconstructing a theory of politics. But if the complex relationship among justice, political power, and resistance to power no longer seems adequately explained by paradigms of liberalism and socialism (either alone or in combination), then trying to understand politics in classical Athens may be worth our while.

There is, of course, nothing particularly original in studying “the critics of Athenian democracy,” and the ancient texts that lend themselves to such a study are well known. Some forty years ago, A. H. M. Jones pointed out the two key issues. First, although we have a good many classical texts in various genres that are critical of democracy, we have no surviving texts written with the explicit intention of explaining the principles on which Athenian democracy was predicated. Second, in the absence of theoretical defenses of democracy, understanding the “positive” argument an Athenian would make for democracy depends on a close reading of Athenian public rhetoric. While deeply impressed by Jones’ fundamental insights, I find his approach to “criticizing democracy” problematic. Jones argued that Athenian democracy was stable because it was dominated by “bourgeois” or “middle-class” citizens. I view δημοκρατία rather as a dynamic


2. I emphasize that the texts I address here (with the exception of Pseudo-Xenophon, sometimes dated as early as ca. 440 B.C.) were completed after the end of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.)—that acid test of democratic practice. This is a deliberate choice, made because my approach to criticism of democracy requires the prior establishment of the ideological context through analysis of public speech, and the surviving corpus of Attic oratory is overwhelmingly postwar. The relationship between democracy and “political” texts may have been rather different during the floruit of Attic tragedy in the fifth century; see, e.g., J. Peter Euben, The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).


system through which the mass of ordinary citizens \((\text{hoi polloi, to plêthos, hoi periêtes})\) (a) maintained personal dignity and political equality; (b) restrained the privileges and power of elites \((\text{hoi oligoi, hoi chrêstoi, hoi ploustoi})\); and (c) thereby protected themselves from certain forms of socioeconomic exploitation and political dependency.

Furthermore, Jones saw the debate over ancient democracy primarily in instrumental terms. For him, democracy was criticized and should be defended on the grounds of whether it allowed for rational decision making about issues of state policy and whether it provided a secure environment in which civil society could flourish and in which private goods (especially material prosperity) could be enjoyed by individuals. Jones argued persuasively that democratic equality and freedom neither led necessarily to poor policy nor threatened civil society and, thus, that the ancient critics were wrong to cast aspersions on the democratic government. But classical Athenian political life cannot be explained by a model of political behavior that assumes either a neat subdivision of the political realm into discrete categories of state, citizenry, and government, or a hierarchical differentiation between the (primary) private and (secondary) public spheres. The Athenian did not engage in political activity solely as a functional means to gain the end of guarding against threats to his property or to his private pursuit of happiness. Rather, the values of equality and freedom that he gained by the possession and exercise of citizenship were substantive, central to his identity, and provided a measure of meaning to his life.

It was this noninstrumental aspect of Greek political life that attracted the attention of Hannah Arendt, who provides a noteworthy example of a modern theorist looking to classical Greece to construct a political theory that was neither traditionally liberal nor socialist. For Arendt, the polis provided an ideal and explicitly public/political sphere for free human action and speech, for the "appearance" of human individuality through extraordinary deeds, and for the creation and collective maintenance of historical memory. To focus on the role of public action in creating the identity of the free and equal citizen, and on public speech as a form of political action, is both historically defensible and theoretically useful. But Arendt's Greek model cannot be adopted wholesale by the intellectual historian or by the political theorist interested in an empirical test of alternative models of politics. Arendt's polis, strictly divided between the private realm of necessity and economics and the public realm of freedom, action, and politics, had no place for social interaction that blurred the distinction between the citizen-warrior and the laborer-householder. Arendt's polis was an ahistorical ideal, based in large part on her own reading of Aristotle's *Politics*. Arendt's access to the polis was through ancient texts both critical of democracy and written in the context of the democratic regime. But, in common with many other readers before and since, Arendt largely ignored the context and accepted the criticism as a description of reality.

If there is anything new in my approach to Athenian criticism of democracy, it is a concentration on the context in which critical texts were produced: Athens' dominant political ideology and sociopolitical practices. I attempted to delineate that ideology and those practices in *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (1989). There I was concerned with how the ordinary citizens of Athens gained and held power through a form of ideological hegemony that constrained the public and private behavior of the elite (the wealthy, highly educated, and well born). Here I am concerned with how a few elite Athenians opposed democratic ideology through critical discourse. I hope that this meditation on the problem of "how to criticize," which is intended to prepare the way for a much more detailed assessment of the substance of individual ancient works of criticism, will hold some interest both for intellectual historians and for political theorists concerned with the "foundating generations" of the western political tradition. To focus on the critical force of works by Thucydides, Plato, and others as resistance to a socially constructed regime of power and discourse—rather than as instrumental critiques of how and why democratic governmental


9. There is some question whether Arendt actually believed in the polis she presents; see Tlaba, *Politics and Freedom*, 41-42.
institutions malfunctioned—is to suggest that western political theory first emerged in the context of a fruitful and relatively nonviolent struggle over the means of the production of political knowledge.

**CONTEXT**

Athenian political texts (e.g., Thucydides, Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Politics*) provided foundations for what was to become the dominant western tradition of political philosophy. Origins are necessarily discovered (or invented) only in retrospect. Yet as a result of their retroactive designation as foundational, Athenian political texts are typically read backwards: from the perspective of the philosophical tradition that eventually grew up from and around them, rather than against the political context in which they were written. Teleology is fatal to the enterprise of the intellectual historian, but the study of Athenian political texts (at least qua political texts) has long been the preserve of theorists and philosophers with a disciplinary tendency to be disinterested in original context. When it is noticed, the historical context for Athenian political writers is extrapolated from these selfsame authors. Thus the cockeyed picture that Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle offer of Athenian democracy as an inherently foolish system gone wrong is sometimes taken at face value and read as an “objective” description of Athenian practice.

While “historicist” readings are often frowned on in literary and theoretical circles, the primacy of context is a point of convergence for several analytic traditions. The so-called Cambridge school of intellectual history focuses on how political terminology is used and revised by writers in arguments with their literary predecessors and contemporaries. Even the most innovative writers appropriate preexisting vocabulary for discussing problems, but they often deploy that vocabulary in self-consciously innovative ways. In some periods (e.g., the eighteenth century A.D. and the fifth century B.C.), the ways in which terms are used in arguments change very rapidly. But even a text produced during a revolution can and should be situated in its own proximate context. Political writing thus becomes historically meaningful when read against the backdrop of terms, assumptions, and ideas hammered out in earlier and contemporary discussions. That backdrop is typically best illuminated by the writings of lesser (because less innovative and original) intellectual lights. A “Cambridge school” reading of Athenian political texts would require a reconstruction of the fifth- and fourth-century intellectual context: the conceptual apparatus available for modification by the authors of our surviving texts. This sort of contextualist approach to political thought is not entirely foreign to classical scholarship; something like it is, for example, employed by the “Begriffsgeschichte” school of Christian Meier.

But an approach that presupposes that the context for surviving texts was defined primarily by literary discourse cannot fully explain Athenian political texts if it ignores the role played by the Athenian démos. An exclusive emphasis on the elite literary context (or, alternatively, on “intertextuality”) will make it difficult for historians to link ideas with practices and events. It may lead them to fall into the habit of supposing that more or less fully worked out political theories must precede political practices. In the Athenian case, democratic practices were established well before any (surviving) text discussed democracy in abstract terms. A second consequence is that historical crises may come to be defined by elite perception: when the historian can show that contemporary intellectuals agreed that a crisis was occurring, are we then to assume that a real and general crisis persisted? Fourth-century B.C. Athens was long seen as beset by decline and disorder at least in part because writers such as Plato and Isocrates described it that way. The hypothesis that fourth-century Athens was characterized by a pervasive malaise is much harder to sustain if we look beyond the opinions of the literary elite to the social and political conditions of Athenian citizen society as a whole.

The “climate of intellectual opinion” approach is doubly problematic in the Athenian case. First, we possess few “lesser light” texts of

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10. By “Athenian political text” I mean a text that was written by an author who spent formative years in Athens and so wrote within a context defined in part by Athenian political discourse. Thus Aristotle (though not an Athenian) and Thucydides (though he did not necessarily write his history in Athens) both qualify as authors of Athenian political texts. For a critical assessment of the concept of foundations, see Benjamin Barber, *The Conquest of Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). For origins as retroactively constructed, see Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975).


13. C. Mosse, *La fin de la démocratie athénienne: Aspects sociaux et politiques du déclin de la cité grecque au Ve siècle av. J. C.*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), a book that remains fundamentally important, nonetheless tends to focus on decline and fall. The issue of Athens’ “decline” is not, one might point out, identical to that of the “crisis of the polis.”
the sort that have allowed students of early modern political thought
to define in detail the context of the major luminaries of the Renais­sance. Moreover, as Jones pointed out, we have several important
classical texts critical of democracy but no surviving texts that sympa­
thetically enunciate the theory on which Athenian democracy was
predicated. If we accept that in order to comprehend how political
terms were employed in classical Athens, we must read our surviving
political texts contextually, as interventions in an ongoing debate about politics, the question necessarily arises: Who defined the other
side of the dialogue? If Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle can be char­
acterized as critics of democracy, with whom were they arguing? The
absence of formal democratic theory in the text record has long both­
ered classical historians of ideas and has led to inventive efforts (e.g.,
by Eric A. Havelock and Cynthia Farrar) to find expressions of demo­
cratic theory lurking in extant elite texts. Though interesting as theo­
retical exercises, these efforts are unsatisfactory as intellectual his­
tory. The simplest hypothesis is that there are no surviving texts to
explain democratic theory because few such texts ever existed. And
the reason for this lacuna is not far to seek: in Athens, democratic ideology so dominated the political landscape that formal democratic
theory was otiose. The climate of opinion to which the authors of
critical political texts were responding was defined less by the rea­
soned positions of prodemocracy elite intellectuals than by democratic
popular ideology and public rhetoric.

To understand Athenian political literature we must extend our
contextual scope beyond the circle of Athens’ intellectual elite to ex­
plore the linkages between public discourse, knowledge, and power.
The idea that texts can fruitfully be read as products of complex ma­
trices of social relations which are in turn formed through the play of
power helps to define the relationship between Athenian political

14. Eric A. Havelock, The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 1957); Cynthia Farrar, The Origins of Democratic Thinking: The Invention of Politics in
96.

15. Although it is worth noting that Athenian dicanic (courtroom) rhetoric may actually be
more “theoretical” than often realized and may have functioned as a way of discussing demo­
cratic values in abstract as well as pragmatic terms. I hope to pursue this notion in future
studies.

16. This approach to power is particularly associated with Michel Foucault; see his Disci­
pline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House,
York: Random House, Vintage, 1980), and the essays collected in Power/Knowledge: Selected
York: Pantheon, 1980). It is worth noting, however, that in his own late work on Greek society,
Random House, Vintage, 1986), which focuses on how prescriptive philosophical and medical
texts “problematized” sexuality, Foucault made what Edward W. Said, “Michel Foucault,
1926–1984,” in After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledges and Postmodern Challenges, ed. Jean Arac
(New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 1–11, has called a “particular and over­
determined shift from the political to the personal” (8).
the goal of political equality and thereby arbitrated class tensions that elsewhere in Greece led to protracted and destructive civil wars. It provided a role for elite leadership within a political system that was based on frequent, public expressions of the collective will. But it also required elite leaders to remain closely attuned to popular concerns and prevented the formation of a cohesive ruling elite within the citizen body.

In democratic Athens there was no very meaningful separation between the realms of politics, political society (citizenry), and government. In the Athenian democracy, major government decision making (by Boule, Assembly, lawcourts, and boards of nomothetai ["lawmakers"]) was legitimate specifically because it was political. And thus there was no meaningful separation between supposedly objective and scientific truths of the sort used (so we are told) by modern political rulers when making "serious" decisions, and the subjective political truths of the sort modern political scientists find it expedient to present to the citizenry during elections and occasional plebiscites. In Athens, the general understanding held by the citizenry regarding the nature of society was the same understanding employed by decision-making bodies in formulating government policy for deployment in the real world. For most Athenians, the shocking "postmodern" conclusion that all knowledge is political (i.e., implicated in relations of power) was simply a truism; neither the possibility nor the normative desirability of apolitical forms of knowledge about society or its members ever entered the ordinary Athenian's head.

In the decades after the Peloponnesian War, this relationship between ideology and political power provided the grounds for a remarkably stable sociopolitical order. Athenian democracy was not based on a formal constitution or on a set of metaphysical/ontological/epistemological certainties but rather was undergirded by a socially and politically constructed "regime of truth" (i.e., an integrated set of assumptions about what is right, proper, and true). I propose calling that regime "democratic knowledge." The existence and practical functioning of democratic knowledge depended on the implicit willingness of most citizens to accept the political verities they lived by as "constative" (by which I mean that political and social "truths" were brought into being by felicitously performed speech acts) rather than as absolutes denoted by a transcendent natural or divine order. The authority of the demos was legitimated neither by "divine right" nor by "natural right"—which distinguishes it from the dominant early-modern and Enlightenment European explanations of sovereignty.

The Athenian political order was grounded in democratic knowledge. And democratic knowledge was predicated, in the language of J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, on the "conventional effect of a conventional procedure" rather than on an objective, metaphysical, or "natural" view of social reality; it was created and re-created through collective practices of public communication, not given by an external authority or discovered through intellectual effort. In the terminology of semiotics, democratic knowledge did not need to suppose that signifiers attached directly, permanently, or naturally to referents, only that signifiers pointed to commonly accepted codes and socially constituted meanings. This democratic and (in modern philosophical terms) pragmatic position allowed the Athenians to avoid the epistemological traps (and the political ugliness they can entail) of value-free relativism, on the one hand, and positivist absolutism on the other.

Athenian political culture was specifically based on collective opinion, rather than on objectively verifiable, scientific truths. By this I do not mean that the Athenians supposed that their collective opinion could cause the sun to rise in the west or alter other "brute" physical facts. But they regarded social facts as conventional and political, not homologous to the brute facts of nature. The expression edoxe toi démòi—"it appeared right to the Citizenry"—that such and such should be the case—defines the democratic approach to the relationship between social knowledge, decision, and action. A politics based on common opinion can be built from the bottom up and potentially allows for the integration of "local knowledges" (e.g., the specific practices of village, cult, or family life) into the broader community of the polity. As a result of the complex structure of Athenian political institutions, there was a constant give and take between center and periphery, between specific local understandings, local critics, and the generalized

17. For the definition of postmodern, see David Couzens Hoy, "Foucault: Modern or Postmodern," in Arac, After Foucault, 12-41. The modern horror at the politicization of knowledge is perhaps still best summed up in George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949); note that in Orwell's dystopia there remains a distinction between ideology (x + z = 5) and brute reality (x + z = 4), a distinction that is recognized by the rulers of society.

18. See Foucault, Power/Knowledge, 131: "Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true."

poliswide democratic ideology. This “system” (keeping in mind that it was not designed by any single authority, nor entirely rational in its workings) integrated Athenian processes of discussion and decision into a public way of knowing about society that was simultaneously a way of being a citizen, doing politics, and making policy.

The Athenian sociopolitical order was relatively stable because of the integrative tendencies and relative conservatism of popular ideology. Ideological conservatism allowed the Athenians the luxury of a degree of epistemic continuity adequate to provide a basis for collective decision making—Assemblymen and jurors employed as the premises of their deliberations opinions that were generally accepted as valid by the citizenry as a whole. Yet, in practice, the democracy was flexible, dialectical, and revisable. The frequent meetings of Assembly and people’s courts allowed (even required) contrasting, critical views to be aired publicly, and this process in turn periodically forced constative meanings (the assumptions used in decision making) to change in response to changing external circumstances. Thus democratic knowledge evolved over time (sometimes very rapidly) without precipitating a political revolution. Meanwhile, democratic ideology and institutional procedure allowed for practical decisiveness: reasonably intelligent, binding (although open to legal challenge at the initiative of any individual citizen) decisions on internal matters and foreign policy were made in the Assembly by the Athenian demos in the absence of ruling elites, genuine consensus, or complete and objectively verifiable scientific knowledge about details of political affairs.

The complex relationships among democratic knowledge, social practice, and critical political writing are, I believe, clarified by Austinian speech-act theory. Austin argued that speech is not only descriptive but performative. To the linguistic categories of locution (speech itself) and perlocution (the effect of speech on an audience), Austin added “illocution”—the intended force of speech that enables speakers to do things in the world. Austin showed that in ordinary language, description and enactment are not easily separated. The constative role of speech (to state what is so) is in practice inseparable from and a product of speech’s illocutionary, performative function (to make something happen). If description is a subcategory of performance, then the production of meaning and “truth” is a social process, accomplished by “felicitous” speech performances that are necessarily carried out in the context of accepted social and linguistic conventions. Sandy Petrey, who applies Austinian theory to the study of literature, points out that these conventions are reversible: to the degree that they are politically determined, conventions can be contested, or even overthrown by revolutionary action. But once again, even in the midst of a revolution, people do communicate. For speech to act, for human communication to be possible, conventions of some sort must persist. Returning to Athens, we can now see how the citizens enacted social, legal, and political realities when they voted in the Assembly and lawcourts: that which edoxe tōi dēmōi was constituted as true, for all social and political intents and purposes, through felicitously performed acts of collective decision and proclamation. When the Assembly votes for war with Sparta, a state of war is caused to come into existence by the Assembly’s proclamation; when the jury votes that Socrates is guilty, he is constituted a guilty man.

In speech-act theory, as in intellectual history, context takes center stage. The successful performance of a speech act depends on existing social, political, and linguistic protocols: a courting couple would not be made man and wife by a child’s proclamation that they were so; a judge’s statement does things that a child’s does not do because it is performed in the context of a set of conventions that are accepted as valid by the participants. The felicity of the speech act is proved by perlocutionary effects: the subsequent behavior of the relevant


23. This is explained by Austin’s Rules A.1 and A.2 (*How to Do Things*, 13–14, 26–33): A.1: [In order for a speech act to be felicitously performed], “there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.” A.2: “The particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.”
members of society. If, after the ceremony, our hypothetical couple acts like a married couple and is treated as a married couple by their society, we may say that the act of the judge who said “I pronounce you man and wife” was felicitous. And likewise in the case of a declaration of war by the Athenian Assembly or the conviction of Socrates. Thus the felicity of an illocutionary speech act is context dependent and sociopolitically determined.

But what of the situation in which a speech act is felicitous within a local subcommunity but infelicitous in the larger community (e.g., the case of a homosexual couple who enact a marriage ceremony)? 24 This potential conflict between “local” and “national” spheres was not discussed by Austin, but it is important for the historical analysis of critical discourse as resistance. The act of performing a speech act that the speaker knows will be infelicitous within the larger community can be read as an intentional act of resistance. 25 The act brings the conventions valid within the local community into overt conflict with the conventions of the larger society and thus exposes the partial and socially constructed nature of the broader context. This exposure is dangerous (and thus meaningful as an act of resistance) because it challenges the tendency of the larger society to equate convention with brute facts. Likewise, the promulgation of a system of knowing about society that a thinker recognizes will not be accepted by most within his or her community can be read as resistance to the dominant system of power and knowledge. 26

An “Austinian” analysis of politics may help us to understand why traditional Marxist theory, with its essentialist commitment to the basic reality of economic and historical “laws,” has been unable to explain the continued viability of capitalist societies in the face of the “contradictions” implicit in capitalist production: contradictions and class interests must not only be “revealed”; they must be felicitously performed if they are to have perlocutionary effects. Applying Austin to politics leads to an emphasis on political power as control of the means of symbolic production. It points to rhetoric as a form of political action, and to criticism of discursive context as a central project of political theorizing: those in power seek to create and maintain a stable context in which rhetorical statements by appropriate speakers will act in predictable ways; theorizing this relationship points out the contingency of the context in question and thus the possibility for major revisions in what speech acts will be felicitous and who will be an appropriate speaker. If, in a democracy (unlike most other forms of government), political power (i.e., the control of the means of symbolic production) is at least potentially discontinuous with economic power (i.e., the control of the means of economic production), then the sort of approach I am advocating might be particularly well suited to the historical study of democracy and its critics. 27 In Athens, where the ordinary people held political power, members of the wealth elites could be genuine political critics.

In Mass and Elite, I attempted to define the conventions whereby the debates and proclamations performed in Assembly and court­room could and did “do things” in Athenian society. In trying to understand the relationships of power between elites and masses of ordinary citizens, it is important to decide whether those conventions were the product of elite or demotic discourse. Was democratic knowledge simply a form of false consciousness or mystification that enabled an elite to control and exploit the lower classes of citizens? 28 I argue to the contrary, that the sociopolitical conventions dominant in late fifth-and fourth-century Athens were the product of a historical development whereby the citizen masses defined themselves as Demos and the Athenian political order as δημοκρατία. 29 As a result of this process, the Demos gained control of the public language employed in classical Athenian political deliberations. Thus the primary context for felicitous speech performance in Athens was defined by popular, not elite, ideology. And hence democratic knowledge and demotic social conventions sought to extend a form of rhetorical and even epistemological hegemony over all members of Athenian citizen society, including the elites.

The hegemony of popular ideology and public discourse was the basis of Athens’ political order. Athens was a democracy, not just be-

24. I owe this hypothetical example to Charles Hedrick.
25. Note that felicity here is clearly separate from “sincerity” and “comprehensibility.” The two gay persons were presumably sincere in their intention to be married. What they intended is more or less comprehensible to members of the wider community, but their act was nonetheless infelicitous in the context of the wider community, which does not acknowledge the validity of the status change asserted by the ceremony.
27. By “traditional Marxist theory,” I mean studies that focus on economic production and de-emphasize the state and ideology, e.g., G. A. Cohen, Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defense (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). Other forms of Marxist analysis, e.g., that of Antonio Gramsci, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and Louis Althusser do, of course, focus attention on politics and ideology.
cause the ordinary citizen had a vote, but because he was a participant in maintaining a political culture and a value system that constituted him the political equal of his elite neighbor. Through publicly performed speech acts, democratic institutions were implicated in an ongoing process of defining and redefining the truths used in political decision making and of assimilating local knowledges into an overarching democratic knowledge. It was that process and that overarching knowledge that elite Athenian critics sought to expose as problematic.

Power and Resistance

Though my respect and admiration for certain aspects of the Athenian political regime are by now clear, it is obviously essential to avoid adulation. Accepting ideology (often defined as the ideas of the dominant classes) as an important part of historical context, socialist theorists since Antonio Gramsci have emphasized his hegemonic role in obscuring "objective" material interests and in promoting stability in repressive regimes, a stability that primarily benefits the ruling class. Whether or not we adopt Gramscian categories, it is clear that the Athenian citizen did benefit materially from the democratic regime in ways denied to noncitizens. Thus, even if she accepts that denotive values operated to control the behavior of and to limit exploitation by elites within the society of the citizens, a modern critic might well argue that Athenian society as a whole was elitist, unjust, and unattractive, by defining what I have described as "democratic knowledge" as a hegemonic ideology that maintained the privileged position of a minority population of native-born, adult males at the expense of oppressed noncitizens.

How would an Athenian critic have responded to this line of reasoning? Plato famously suggested (Republic 562b—563c) that the excessive liberating tendencies of democratic culture extended well beyond the citizen body, to women, slaves, and even domesticated animals (cf. Pseudo-Xenophon, Athénaiôn Politeia [= Constitution of the Athenians 30). Eagleton, Ideology, offers an overview; on cultural hegemony, see Joseph V. Femia, Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

31. E.g., by his virtual monopoly on the right to own land (and thus to secure loans on land) and to be paid for various forms of government service. The advantages of citizenship were multiplied during the imperial era—see Moses I. Finley, Democracy Ancient and Modern, 2d ed. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 76-109—but were always considerable.

32. See Ober, "Polis as a Society," for further discussion of the issue of social justice.

How to Criticize Democracy

1.10—12). And in the Ecclesiazusae, Aristophanes comically turned over control of the Athenian state to citizen-women. It must, however, be said that, on the whole, Athenian critics of democracy (at least those who wrote texts that survive) were only peripherally concerned with the oppression of noncitizens. Nonetheless, various Athenian critics of democracy were concerned with showing that democratic ideology was a sort of mystification that obscured truths about the world—truths that were historically objective (Thucydides), natural (Aristotle), or transcendental (Plato). The attempt to establish disjunctions between knowledges founded on these various forms of "real" truth and democratic knowledge, with its emphasis on socially constructed truth, played a key role in Athenian political criticism. Thus, although the Athenian critics were far from "politically correct" by any conceivable modern (or postmodern) standard, documenting and assessing the success of their diverse and sustained criticism of knowledge-as-power might contribute to current political debates by establishing that resistance to power need not be futile. Athenian critical texts may therefore be extremely important subjects even for students of political history and theory who remain utterly unconvinced by the ideas developed in those texts.

If critical resistance was not ultimately futile, neither was it easy. For the prospective Athenian author of a text systematically critical of democratic culture (as opposed to the local critic of democratic practice), the issue was not how best to describe "what is functionally or instrumentally wrong with how this regime works." Rather, faced with the democratic tendency to monopolize the terminology of politics, he confronted the more basic problem of finding a vocabulary capable of being adapted to the expression of his criticism. How to break free of the equation between democracy and legitimate political rule? How
to explain why a rational reader should not find Athens' political system any more attractive than does the writer? How to articulate an alternative politics that the reader could be persuaded to prefer and (perhaps) actively to support?

Modern political theory might seem to suggest that the obvious starting point for the Athenian critic of democracy was the issue of sovereignty: Who actually rules and in whose interest? versus Who should rule and in whose interest? But the ugliness of the oligarchic governments of 411 and 404, regimes that in fact attempted to narrow the criteria for citizenship in Athens, may have tended to encourage late fifth- and early fourth-century critics to seek other lines of approach. Although Aristotle was crucially involved with the question of who did and should constitute the political authority, Plato focused on the source of popular authority: democratic knowledge itself. He offered a fundamental challenge to democracy by bringing into question the basic assumptions on which democratic knowledge rested; he questioned the validity of mass wisdom as a basis for judgment, the efficacy of public rhetoric as a prelude to decision making, and the felicity of the speech acts performed by public bodies. A second line of approach, emphasized especially by Thucydides, was to query the nature and function of the demos's kratos (i.e., political power itself). Given the interrelationship of knowledge and power, these two approaches can be seen as closely related; an attack on democratic knowledge undermined the demos's kratos, and an attack on the nature or use of kratos by the demos might in turn destabilize democratic knowledge.

Before the Athenian critic of democracy could offer an alternative to democratic knowledge and practice, he had first to identify a point d'appui that would be recognized by his intended readers (probably elite, but not necessarily antidemocratic) as legitimate. The problem was most frequently addressed by attempting to exploit the audience's recognition of incongruities in the matrix of assumptions and values that constituted democratic knowledge (as in the Socratic elenchus) or of contradictions between democratic ideals and the outcome of democratically arrived-at decisions (e.g., Thucydides' account of the Mytilenian Debate). Closely related was the search for new genres in which criticism could adequately be expressed. Finding a gap, or a "lack of fit," in democratic knowledge, and developing (or adapting) a literary genre suitable to exploiting inconsistencies were difficult tasks in light of the democracy's hegemonic tendency to obscure contradictions and its close relationship to the existing genres of drama and public oratory. Various solutions, only gestured at here, were devised by individual authors in the last decades of the fifth century and especially in the fourth.

In the Constitution of the Athenians, Pseudo-Xenophon took as his point d'appui the gap between the "real" interests of the elite and the interests protected by the democratic regime. Employing the trope of irony, he worked within (and perhaps originated) an editorial genre: a here-and-now discussion of actual political action and policy which freely employed the existing language of the democracy and which allowed the logic of the democracy to "speak for itself." In the hands of this author at least, editorial irony proved problematic. Pseudo-Xenophon's irony seems unable to stand up against the democratic discourse he introduces into his text. The reader comes to feel that the author has nothing better to offer than the system he claims he will not praise but evidently cannot help admiring. Not surprisingly (to those who take the power of ideology seriously) the tactic of allowing the vocabulary of democratic discourse and the assumptions of the dominant democratic ideology free rein in the text leads to a general collapse of the intended force of the author's criticism.

Thucydides took over from Herodotus the embryonic genre we call historiography and gave it a definitively political and critical stamp. By claiming to have reconstructed the "real" meaning and objective causes of the dramatic course of events that began in the mid-430s, Thucydides attempted to demonstrate the comparative ignorance and foolishness of the collectivities that made Athenian policy, as well as the incompetence of the democratic politicians who misled the masses and were misled by them in turns. Thucydides' political history sets up a contest between his austere, seemingly objectively based, historical way of knowing and emotion-laden, hopelessly contingent democratic knowledge; between his difficult, closely argued, written text and the easy-listening, illogical orations of Athenian politicians; between his readers, who were in the process of being educated in the complexity of political realia and Athenian Assemblymen, who thought only of power and their own pleasure. The narrative describes the horrors attendant on the confrontation between the great force (dunamis) generated and wielded by a dēmokratia and the stubborn, brute realities of a protracted war.

85. The centrality of the issue of sovereignty in modern theory is, in any event, an artifact of the political conditions of early modern Europe; see Ober, "Nature of Athenian Democracy."
For Aristophanes, genre was less of a problem; for the forms of comedy were well established. Moreover, the comic poet's audience expected him to criticize Athenian society. In Ecclesiazusae Aristophanes takes as his point of departure a comic "alternate Athens" and the incongruity between politically constituted identities and perceptible referents. He asks a funny question that has profound critical bite: Could Athenian women be constituted "males" if the Assembly enacted a decree that they, rather than biologic men, were to have the rights and responsibilities of citizenship? The play exposes the contradiction between Athenian belief in the power of the citizenry to constitute political realities by legal enactment, on the one hand, and in the naturalness of a world in which men alone were empowered political agents on the other.

Plato took the debate over politics to a more exalted plane. In the Republic he shifts from Socratic elenchus (in Book 1), a form of debate which assumes an interlocutor with real opinions (i.e., a connection to the ideological context) and which owed something to Athenian traditions of public debate, to a new generic variation of the dialogue form (in Books 2–10). In the later books, Socrates expounds to students a metaphysical and ontological argument for a utopian, authoritarian political order ruled by a class of philosophers who had "left the Cave" and so had gained a rigorous and accurate knowledge of reality. This approach enables Plato to work out a positive political program based on a formal distinction between mere opinion (doxa) and actual knowledge (epistème). Viewed from the perspective of the Republic's ontological epistemology, the problem was not merely that democratic knowledge failed to account for objective facts accessible to the careful observer (per Thucydides). Rather, the problem was that democracy's claims to be a legitimate way of knowing about society and a just system for making decisions were false because it had no way of testing appearances by reference to an external, metaphysical Truth (i.e., the Forms). A political regime based on mass opinion (the lowest sort of doxa) was thus not only likely to be sloppy in its judgments and capricious in its behavior; it was wrongly constructed by definition. The entire performative process of the speech act is ruled out of court and replaced by a reference-based morality. Justice becomes a fixed and absolute standard. Politics becomes a matter of foundation (an unreviseable although not indestructible order is built on the foundation of Truth), rather than a matter of practice (a revisable order exists in the action of felicitously doing).

Isocrates' point d'appui in the Areopagiticus is his fellow Athenians' nostalgia for the better conditions widely assumed to have pertained in the days of their ancestors. His approach is in some ways similar to that of Pseudo-Xenophon in that he adopts the overtly democratic genre of sympolitic oratory and borrows political language from democratic ideology. But like Thucydides and other Athenians involved in the "ancestral constitution" (patris politiae) debate, he employs a "historical" perspective. His ostensible goal is to recuperate Athens' pristine and ancient form of government and society—which turns out to be a highly hierarchical and paternalistic system that he specifically names démokratia. In appropriating genre, vocabulary, and name from the regime he intended to criticize, Isocrates demonstrates an audacious pride. He is confident that his rhetorical technē will allow him to transubstantiate democratic political slogans into an essentially aristocratic system of political values.

In terms of genre and critical stance (as in other ways), Aristotle's Politics is a work of synthesis. His point of departure is human nature. The final goal of the text (as we have it) is to derive the best possible regime from widely accepted postulates about human nature. While granting democracy a relatively high level of instrumental success in the regulation of class tension and recognizing the validity of mass wisdom in certain sorts of decision making, Aristotle's teleological naturalism allows him to conclude that workers simply cannot achieve true political aretē. The citizens of the best polis will thus naturally have to be an association of leisure aristocrats, thereby obviating the need to solve the intractable problem of proportionate equalities. The citizens' formal and normative education will ensure that decision making is based on formally rational "practical reasoning" (rather than democratic knowledge) and that their society, having achieved the telos toward which the polis was naturally tending, will not require revision.

Even after a much fuller exposition of the content of Athenian political criticisms than I have attempted here, we will be left with two supremely difficult questions: What were these texts meant to do: what was their intended effect on readers? And what did they do: what practical effect did they have on the form or content of Athenian democracy? The general term critic covers a broad range of intentions. Are we dealing with an irreconcilable enemy of the democratic order, or a democrat who believes that current practice is inconsistent with the highest democratic ideals? I would tend to push Pseudo-Xenophon.

37. I owe this insight into the distinction in literary forms to a paper by Mary Blundell, delivered at Princeton University in March 1992.
and Plato in the direction of the first category, Aristophanes toward the second, and leave Thucydides, Isocrates, and Aristotle somewhere in between. But attempting to fix authors on a hypothetical political spectrum is hazardous: Athenian political texts are complex and multivocal. The illocutionary force of a critical text need not be limited to the hortatory, admonitory, subversive, or openly revolutionary; Aristophanes (for one) manages to fit all of these voices and more into the scope of a short play.

The lines of communication between elite critics and the demos, between those partially outside and those inside the democratic regime, remain obscure. Yet our current inability to trace simple cause-effect relationships between text and political change does not (in and of itself) invalidate the proposition that criticism is a precondition to revision. It has often been pointed out that Plato’s utopia in the Republic could never have been realized in the real world. But the “practical” workability of theoretical notions is beside the point. By describing a hypothetical counterregime or a counterknowledge, based on a set of countertruths, the critical theorist helped to establish and maintain a discursive space outside the dominant regime. The literary speech act performed felicitously within the society of elite intellectuals might or might not ultimately achieve felicity in the broader political society of Athens. The actual effect on democratic practice of a given author’s criticism can seldom, if ever, be measured. But just as the Assembly brought a particular reality into being through the performative act of enunciating a psephisma, so the critic expanded the ground in which resistance to ideology was possible and fundamental change conceivable. And thus (perhaps unwittingly) the critic helped to guarantee the potential revisability of the democratic regime through the performative act of constructing an alternative political paradigm. Once again, a comparison to Marxist theory may be instructive. Whether or not the theorist succeeds in changing society in accordance with her own ideals, she provides conceptual resources in the form of original and challenging uses of existing terminology. Those cultural resources may be found useful even by advocates of change who reject the substance of the theorist’s argument in that they help to make (or keep) thinkable the possibility of a world profoundly different from the one we now inhabit.

Finally, what does the phenomenon of criticism of democracy in late fifth- and fourth-century Athens have to tell us about critics of modern democracy? Does the history of Athens lead us to conclude that conservative complaints on the subjects of “democratic hegemony” and popular culture should be read as part of a grand tradition of resistance? Should the conservative critic of democracy therefore be regarded as a particularly admirable, even essential, feature of modern political life? This would be the case only if modern societies were democratic in an Athenian sense of the term, that is, if the mass of ordinary citizens maintained an active control over most aspects of ideology, public discourse, governmental institutions, and the political agenda. Given the sovereign authority of the modern state, the thinness of modern practices of citizenship, and the top-down structure of mass communications and media, the idea that the citizenry could exert any sort of hegemony in a modern liberal democracy seems, on the face of it, chimerical.

Yet the notion that “democracy” once did and still should mean “the power of the people” is remarkably stubborn. And that notion may provide exactly the point of departure needed by the truly essential critics of modern democracy: those who refuse to accept that ever-expanding, hierarchical governmental and corporate power (and the knowledges they produce) are an inevitable and natural outgrowth of social complexity—or that they are desirable for a citizenry that hopes to live in a society characterized by justice, freedom, dignity, and equality. Given the residual revisability of democratic culture, it is perhaps not excessively utopian to hope that criticisms by educated elites of “democratic hegemony” might, some day in the future, once again be read as productive forms of resistance.

38. I hope to explore this issue in future work on the theoretical content of certain Athenian dicanic orations; see above, n. 15.