THE ATHENIANS AND THEIR DEMOCRACY


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Recent scholarship on the topic of classical Athenian democracy is remarkable both for its diversity of approach and its sheer volume. Moreover, this spate is highly opportune—if one assumes (as do the authors of the books under review) that classical scholars should be aware of the worlds of ideas and political realities that exist outside the borders of their discipline. A number of (non-classicist) political theorists have now rejected the arguments of the elitist school of political sociology (Pareto, Mosca, Michels, and their intellectual descendants), and are arguing that strong democracy (political egalitarianism of the sort that characterized Athenian ideology and practice—rather than the “thin” conception of the negative freedom of the individual that is often equated with democracy in the modern western world) is both desirable at the local and national level, and at least theoretically feasible. Meanwhile, dramatic political changes in Eastern Europe and elsewhere have helped to refocus attention throughout the world on what democracy means (or should mean) in both political and economic terms.

The coincidence of focus on Athenian and modern democracy is particularly felicitous in an era perceived by many classicists to be characterized by a

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pervasive disciplinary crisis. Classical historians must surely welcome the chance not only to learn from other fields, but to contribute substantially to a cross-disciplinary debate with wide-ranging "real-world" significance. If classical historians are willing to keep in mind a potential audience that includes non-classicists, the fruits of ongoing research into the nature of ancient democratic politics will be enthusiastically greeted in the wider intellectual marketplace. There is no doubt that contemporary political theorists care about the history of Athenian democracy and Athenian ideas about politics. Athens is not only the earliest democracy known to have evolved in a complex society, it is also the best documented historical example of a (relatively) large-scale direct democracy operating over time as a state government.

It is thus gratifying to note that each of these three books is simultaneously a scholarly contribution to classical studies and accessible to Greek scholars in other disciplines. Furthermore, although all three books deal with key aspects of Athenian democracy, there is relatively little overlap. Each author has a distinct approach and point of view; each asks different questions and refers to different bodies of evidence. Farrar combines political philosophy with a history of ideas about politics. Sinclair offers a history of political institutions and those who used them. Wood uses economic and political theory to rethink political aspects of social history.

Cynthia Farrar's *The Origins of Democratic Thinking* is intended as a history of ideas (278) that will be simultaneously a contribution to democratic theory and a spur to political action. The first chapter is entitled "Ancient reflections: a force for us"; her goal is to heal the "unease" (especially the hyper-individualism: 14) of modernity. According to Farrar, the political philosophizing of Plato and Aristotle has little to offer the contemporary world because they "retreated" from practical politics; Plato "abandoned the claims of autonomy and fused man’s social and his ethical identity" (256). Rather, "it is democracy, as conceived and lived by Athenians in the fifth century B.C., that offers at least the possibility of healing this spiritual and social fragmentation" (274). Fifth-century "democratic theorists" have much to tell us because they struggled in the real world of politics and citizenry with real issues, especially the freedom of the individual versus the community’s collective good.

Farrar argues that the western tradition of "democratic thinking" originated in fifth-century Athens. Thus democratic Athens is the context for the earliest examples of sophisticated theorizing about the political realm, and this theorizing has much to offer anyone interested in democratic political practice. To support this set of contentions, Farrar assesses the fragmentary surviving work of Protagoras, Thucydides, and Democritus. In Farrar's view, Protagoras, unlike Plato, refused to acknowledge the existence of a "real world" outside the world of seeming and appearance, and she points out the linkages of his epistemological stance with the processes of debate in the Athenian Assembly (62-64). Protagoras emphasized the beneficial socializing effect of polis life and his "man-measure" doctrine saw ordinary men’s experience and understanding as the "touch-stone of social values" (76). Protagoras is the world’s first democratic political theorist (77), but his man-measure theory separated the political realm from the social and so raised the possibility that individual and collective goods are non-congruent (99). By contrast, Thucydides’ text "shows that...well-being can be secured only in a political context and only by deploying principles of historical understanding" (130). It is a sort of moral education (137) which "does not merely express [democratic] principles; it embodies them" (133). Writing (in Farrar’s view) to refute Protagoras, Democritus argued in favor of a basic reality "which eludes and must elude man’s direct 'measurement'" (207). Democritus’ atomism attempted to offer solutions to problems of objectivity, self-sufficiency, and individual will. His thought had a strong political/ethical dimension; he relocated "the source of freedom and order to within the individual" (241) and "he believed in the capacity of the human mind to know truth as well as to act autonomously" (205). But "as a result of this emphasis on individual good...Democritus has difficulty establishing a strong connection between personal well-being and a genuinely political order" (193).

Each of these three writers is taken by Farrar to be an exemplar of democratic thinking, but the political thought of Protagoras and Democritus was, in her view, fatally flawed. Her prize for the first, best democratic thinker goes to Thucydides, whose "historical politics" is regarded by Farrar (2, cf. 13-14, 128) as "the strongest, most stable version" of democratic theory. "The possibility of concrete reflection revealed by this history is that embodied in Thucydides' demonstration of the value of his own history and of Athenian politics under Pericles as modes of prudent self-understanding" (14).

Farrar’s goal of rethinking serious problems of modern society in the terms of an ancient political model seems to me altogether admirable. If I find a number of Farrar’s arguments convincing, but there are also some serious problems with her approach. First, and most superficially: this is not an easy book to read. Farrar’s style is both dense and repetitious; she has a tendency to gnostic sententious that may wear on the reader’s nerves (e.g. “Prudence is historical and history prudential”; 188).

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A serious problem (from the perspective of the history of ideas) is that the “way of living reflectively and politically” for which Farrar argues (14) cannot be equated with democracy as it was “conceived and lived” by most ordinary Athenians, nor was that “way of living” prima facie advocated by the elite authors of the texts she analyzes. If Farrar’s preferred “way of living” is neither democratic by ordinary Athenian standards (as measured by their conceptions and practices), nor demonstrably the view advocated by the authors of the classical texts, the book’s utility as a history of ancient ideas will be nugatory, although it may still be interesting as political philosophy.

An inquiry such as Farrar’s must define the terms “democracy” and “democratic.” If Farrar were writing political philosophy per se, she might legitimately have employed definitions foreign to the experience of fifth-century authors. But since she intends a history of fifth-century Athenian political ideas, her definitions must, it seems to me, be grounded in the texts and their specific historical context. Farrar defines the experience of democracy, in the theories of her three exemplars, as “autonomous participation in the creation of order and unity under the tutelage of reason . . . guided by an elite in the interests of the whole” (267). If one were willing to grant a rather broad and loose definition of “reason,” “elite,” and “guided,” this might work as a definition of Athenian democracy as the ordinary Athenians understood and lived it in the late fifth and fourth centuries (the period for which we have texts by which to test the proposition). Farrar’s definition of the terms in question tends, however, to be quite narrow: although some forms of political reasoning can be taught to the many, the kind of reasoning necessary for true leadership is evidently accessible only to a highly intelligent and educated elite whose duty it is to shape and control (guide) the understanding of the mass of citizens.

As Farrar knows very well, educated elites will not always choose to guide the masses, and she supposes that without the guidance of reasoning elite leaders, democracy is impossible. This may explain why in some passages Farrar seems to imply that the Athenians lived democratically only for the twenty-some years of the prostatheia of Pericles. After the death of Pericles, a long decline set in and democratic thinking itself soon died out: “Thucydides’ successors as political analysts, like Pericles’ political successors, lost their nerve and succumbed to the degenerative force of circumstances; they turned away from the demands of leadership and history” (191). This statement seems to imply that Athenian democracy was the (rather fragile) product of Pericles’ unique genius—just as true democratic thinking was almost uniquely the product of Thucydides’ mind.

How does such an analysis hold up historically? There are no texts to reveal how ordinary Athenians, or their political leaders understood their government during the prostatheia of Pericles. But the speeches of the Attic orators demonstrate that Athenian citizen masses and politicians thought of Athens as a dēmokratia long after the death of Pericles. Athenian political practice persuaded educated, upper-class residents of late fifth- and fourth-century Athens (e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Isocrates) that Athens was in fact ruled by the dēmos. Neither the orators nor the critics of democracy defined dēmokratia as a system wherein the citizen masses were effectively taught or guided (in Farrar’s sense) by a benevolent, historically-minded elite. Thus Farrar’s idea of “democracy” is not the same thing as dēmokratia as it was “conceived and lived” by ordinary or elite Athenians in the late fifth and fourth centuries B.C.

But this is not a book about the fourth century, it is about the “Golden Age.” What of Farrar’s three “democratic thinkers” themselves? The problem with Protagoras, as Farrar admits (53ff.) is that most of what we know of his thought comes through Plato, a very hostile source. Farrar coins the happy neologism “Platagoras” for the character of Protagoras in Plato’s Theaetetus, and she demonstrates that the arguments of Platagoras and the historical Protagoras cannot be directly equated. Thus, the historical Protagoras’ actual political theory can be approximated only roughly. Platagoras is too weak a reed to lean very heavily upon—we will have to look elsewhere for a proper...
explication of fifth-century democratic thinking. In the case of Democritus we possess numerous fragments, but few are explicitly political/ethical in content. Farrar argues persuasively that there is indeed much that is implicitly political in them, but because the original texts from which the fragments were extracted are lost, just what Democritus was driving at often remains obscure. Thus, despite Farrar's very evocative arguments linking phenomenological/cosmological theorizing with social/political ideas in Presocratic thought, she is still a long way from establishing that there existed a concept of "democracy" in atomist thinking that could be set up as a theoretical alternative to the "demotic" understanding of démokratia contained in fourth-century rhetorical texts, an understanding which, as we have seen, is incommensurate with Farrar's "democracy." This leaves us with Thucydides, whose substantial (if fragmentary) text deals extensively with political life and explicitly with Athenian démokratia. Farrar argues convincingly that we will misunderstand Thucydides if we suppose that he is a historian in the modern disciplinary sense of the term. Rather he is to be read as a political analyst who intended to teach a particular understanding of how politics works. He teaches both by a narrative account of events, and by his associated analysis of the meaning of the events he describes. This must certainly be right, although Farrar seems to go rather too far in claiming that Thucydides' text was the theoretical equivalent of the practical functioning of Athens' teaching/guiding/controlling political elite: "In controlling our interpretation [my emphasis], it helps us to interpret" (189). This comment has rather frightening implications when viewed in Orwellian terms. Yet Farrar is especially good on the key issue of Thucydides' view of power as the ability of a people to act collectively (140). She is surely correct to say that in writing history, Thucydides "was responding to concerns raised by democracy," but is it equally correct to add that "his response was democratic: that is why he chose to write history" (126)? Were the social-political ideas expressed in Thucydides' history ever organized into a democratic theory of politics?

The obvious stumbling block in the way of Farrar's interpretation of Thucydides as a democratic thinker is that Thucydides' text never presents démokratia in a favorable light. Like Farrar, Thucydides admired Pericles. But he did not regard the Athenian politeia under Pericles as a true démokratia; rather it was "in reality" the rule of one man. (2.65.10: ἡ πόλις ἐστὶ τοῦ παρὰ τοῦ δημοκράτους ὑπαρχέται. Whether or not one accepts Thucydides' statement as a fair description of how Athens was actually governed in the time of Pericles (for the record, I do not), this passage certainly causes difficulties for Farrar's thesis that Thucydides was a democratic thinker who offered "a broader, deeper version of Periclean civic history" (278). It must be regarded as odd that democracy flourished most perfectly in Athens (according to Farrar) in just the period during which the finest political analyst of antiquity claimed that démokratia was a facade for a sort of monarchy.

13 Pericles calls the politeia of Athens a démokratia in the Funeral Oration (2.37.1), but this passage is certainly not Thucydides speaking in propra persona, however one comes down on the issue of the relationship between the speech that was given and the text as we have it.


16 The possible exception is Isocrates' anachronistic account of early Athenian démokratia in the Areopagiticus (not cited by Farrar). Although there is much in this text that is foreign to Farrar's analysis, Isocrates' vision of démokratia does incorporate a responsible, guiding, political elite.
Acute political understanding.17 Yet she often seems to lose sight of the real context in which Thucydides wrote and of his real intended audience. Thucydides was not, in any ordinary sense of the term (ancient or modern), a "democratic" thinker. He was certainly not writing for a mass audience whose members might be taught how to think historically and/or act prudentially. Rather Thucydides offered his elite audience a detailed explanation of what (in his view) was fundamentally wrong with demokratia.

Démokratia confronted Athenian elites with a political system that they could not control, and yet which seemed to work extremely well. I would readily concede that Thucydides intended to teach his (elite) readers and that he hoped to "control [their] interpretation." But the lesson he intended to teach, the interpretation he hoped to demonstrate as inescapable, was that démokratia was an inherently unstable form of political organization and one that, more or less predictably as a result of its own internal contradictions, pulled itself apart under the stress of a long struggle with a hostile non-democratic power. The intended force of Thucydides' political analysis of démokratia is critical. This is far from saying that Thucydides was a revolutionary oligarch; he was capable of equally sharp criticism of oligarchs.18 Thucydides' political-theoretical project (or part of it) was to challenge the way his elite audience—both those who were willing to live with democracy and those who hoped to overthrow it by force—thought about political power. In its critical stance, the intended force of Thucydides' historiography is akin to that of Plato's and Aristotle's political philosophy—as well as to that of Farrar's text, which cogently criticizes the failings of modern ways of thinking about the political order.

The validity of Farrar's criticism as political philosophy is for others to judge—I for one find it stimulating even when I disagree with it. But the book seems to me flawed as a "history of ideas" because it in some places ignores, and in others distorts, the broader context in which the ideas in question developed. The intellectualist approach to the texts is likely to end up imagining that there were only a few "real" people in ancient Athens—the "thinkers" and "leaders"—the other quarter-million or so inhabitants of Attica fade away into an amorphous and uninteresting mob of sheep-like "followers." This sort of conclusion fits all too neatly into an elitist model of political behavior.

R.K. Sinclair's Democracy and Participation in Athens focuses on public practices, rather than ideas about the public realm, and so provides a valuable antidote to intellectualist readings of Athenian political life. Those readers who are well up on recent scholarship on Athenian democratic institutions (especially the magisterial studies of M.H. Hansen and P.J. Rhodes) may not find a great deal that is startlingly new here, but this well-organized, clearly-written book is the obvious place for everyone else to begin. Chapter 1 is a brief overview of the historical evolution of democratic institutions at Athens. Chapter 2 deals with political leaders. Sinclair argues that the difference between Pericles and his political successors is less sharp than Thucydides would have us believe, since Pericles, like his successors, depended on wealth and rhetorical skill. There was a split between spheres of activity of stratégoi and rhetores in the fourth century, but Sinclair warns against overestimating the practical significance of the split. Chapter 3 treats the responsibilities (military, religious, political, judicial) of the citizen and shows that Athenian politics cannot be explained in terms of elite political leaders alone; we must also seek to explain the high level of active participation by ordinary citizens. Chapter 4 deals with the relative powers of major and minor archai, along with the boule, ekklesiá, and dikastéria. The Council of 500 is scrutinized particularly carefully and is shown to have been an important institution, but the bouleutai were, according to Sinclair, not a ruling elite and the ekklesiá remained sovereign. Chapter 5 is involved with demographics and with the ideological factors that he feels could have led to, or might have discouraged, large-scale participation. Chapter 6 demonstrates that both politicians and generals in Athens faced serious risks due especially to the legal procedures of eisangelia and graphe paranomón. Chapter 7 looks at the rewards of leadership: the chance of obtaining personal wealth was a factor, but more important was access to honor and power.

17 E.g. 128: "Thucydidean history appealed to what man is actually like, and the way the world actually is."


19 See, for example, 99: by studying politics, Protagoras allowed the link of society and state to be questioned, and so disintegration quickly followed; cf. 106.
Many of these positions, and others that Sinclair brings up in passing, now appear to be on their way to achieving the status of orthodoxy. But these positions were far from orthodox at the time that Sinclair was working on his book, and his detailed arguments will help to cement the new orthodoxy. Moreover, those who have not been following the (often abstruse) literature on these subjects will find Sinclair an excellent introduction and guide. Among Sinclair’s virtues as a guide is his tendency to take self-consciously middle-of-the-road positions on controversies (e.g. 113-114). But taking the middle ground does not always work. There seems to be an unresolved tension in this book between a conception of institutions (especially the boule and the diketeria) as substantive entities that govern in their own right (the analogue is modern government bureaucracies) and, on the other hand, a view of institutions as conduits for the expression and enactment of the unitary political will of the Athenian demos. There is, of course, some overlap between these two positions. Modern government bureaucracies gain legitimacy by claiming to rule by the consent of the governed and because they may be (at least partly) staffed by officials chosen (directly or indirectly) by the citizenry. Yet the two conceptions “institutions as government” and “institutions as direct conduits for the expression of popular will” cannot be fully harmonized.

The first, “institutionalist,” approach regards political and judicial institutions as primary loci of power, and sees the sum of institutional powers as the government. This approach thus leads to, even requires, an analysis of how institutional “powers” were “balanced” within the political system and lends itself logically to a prosopographical analysis of the (often self-perpetuating) elites who staff institutions. Sinclair sometimes leans in an institutionalist direction (e.g. 132). The second, “ideological,” approach emphasizes the directions of democratic decision-making. It regards collective, popular ideology as more important than either institutions qua institutions or the personal histories of the individuals who staff them. The “consent of the governed” and “separation of powers” are relatively meaningless concepts in the view of this second approach, because it supposes that in a direct democracy the citizens are not “governed” and political power is not subdivided. In the place of an analysis of institutions and prosopography, it demands a close study of political language, in order to show what it was that constituted the will of the demos, and in order to trace how the popular will was translated into individual and collective action within the evolving framework of institutionalized political structure. Sinclair leans toward this second approach in places (e.g. 138), but his analysis of Athenian ideology seems constrained by an over-reliance on “common sense” arguments, by which I mean that he assumes that the Athenians tended to think pretty much like us. Maybe they did—sometimes and on some issues. But often the Athenians did not think like us; an appreciation for the foreignness, as well as the familiarity of Athenian culture is necessary for understanding classical political life. Because this tension is never fully resolved, the book cannot remain a description of a political system. Of course this need not be a bad thing; a clear and judicious description is what many readers want and need.

A few minor complaints: there is a fair amount of unnecessary redundancy (e.g. we are told four times in three pages (107-9) that the Council of 500 met on about 260 days out of the year); and Sinclair sometimes states his own opinions as fact. The extended discussion of the Council’s influence (84 ff.) attacks a straw-man: the position that the Council was politically irrelevant and that the bouleutes never discussed important business. Who ever thought that? The footnotes (85 n. 34, 102 n. 107, 103 n. 113) seem to point especially towards A.W. Gomme’s short article on the Athenian Council as the source of the silly heresy, but Gomme never argued that the boule was irrelevant. Gomme may have over-weighted the fact that only a few speeches delivered in the boule have survived. But if Sinclair corrects Gomme on this (102), he should also acknowledge the strength of Gomme’s central argument: that the Council never came to dominate the Assembly because the bouleutes never developed a significant and independent institutional role.

20 E.g. the important socio-political effects of face-to-face interaction between citizens in the demos; the ideas that Athenian democracy worked quite well, and that its relative stability, not its ultimate failure is what needs explanation; the theory that the system of liturgies and charis was key to social stability.


22 This understanding fits Berlin’s model of “positive” freedom in that it sees citizens as establishing a collective mastery over the political realm. The institutionalist reading of politics, by contrast, demands an emphasis on “negative” individual freedom from governmental interference. Notably, Berlin, Four Essays (above, n. 2) xi-xii, 129, argues that the concept of negative freedom did not exist in classical antiquity; although see below on Wood’s assessment of eleutheria as freedom from coercive appropriation.

23 See, for example, 132-33 on stage fright; 18 where the emphasis on Athens as a competitive society seems to obscure important aspects of selfless cooperation (e.g. in phalanx and trireme).

24 E.g. 19 (the archaic heliaia), 35 (Persian maritime strategy in 469 B.C.), 127 (whether Demoethenes 21 was or was not delivered).

corporate identity. Sinclair emphasizes the anti-corporatist argument (102-103), without ever acknowledging it as Gomme's. Sinclair also manifests an occasional tendency to what might be called the "nuggets" mode of argumentation: picking out an individual and claiming his behavior in a certain instance was "typical"; or pulling a couple of passages out of their context in order to use them to demonstrate (e.g. and I believe wrongly) that wealthy Athenians were less likely to serve as jurors on the People's Courts than to attend the Assembly. Finally, although Sinclair is very interested in comparing how many wealthy and poor citizens participated in political activities, his emphasis on institutional powers seems to preclude delving into the question of how the life experiences of Athenians of various classes related to their tendency to participate or not to participate in the democratic processes of government.

It is the everyday life experience of ordinary, and especially rural, Athenians that forms the subject of Ellen Meiksins Wood's groundbreaking study of Peasant-Citizen and Slave. Wood deploys a model of historical explanation that borrows from a materialist Marxist tradition in its emphasis on the historical importance of the mode of economic production. However, Wood's analysis diverges sharply and self-consciously from orthodox Marxist materialism in that it regards political relationships as coexisting with production in the "base" of Athenian society, rather than seeing politics and ideology as "superstructure" and the result of "false consciousness." Wood posits that an exploited peasantry, whose labor produces a surplus that is subject to coercive appropriation by politically sanctioned authorities (landlords and/or the government) is the standard model of pre-industrial, pre-capitalist production. The Athenian social-economic system does not fit this pattern—Athenian peasants were subject to only minimal appropriation of their surplus agricultural production. This historical anomaly requires an explanation: what factors conspired to keep the Athenian elite off the Athenian peasant's back? Wood's thesis is that in classical Athens the political rights of citizens—peasants limited the degree to which they could be exploited (i.e. their surplus production appropriated). Because Athenian peasants were politically active citizens, the Athenian elite (the potential appropriating class) could not monopolize power. In Athens the political regime was discontinuous from the economic regime. Instead of a seamless "reality" in which the elite was perceived as "naturally" and thus legitimately possessing a conjoined and interwoven political power and power over the labor of dependents, the political power of the Athenian peasants allowed them successfully to challenge the elite's right to surplus production.

As a result of the splitting off of political from economic power, the Athenian smallholders enjoyed a way of life that in some ways approximated the peasant Utopia described by Eric Wolf: "the free village, untrammelled by tax collectors, labor recruiters, large landowners, officials." The Athenian peasant-citizen, unlike other peasants, was free from the duty to perform coerced labor; he was free from enforced dependency, and this, according to Wood, is the root meaning of the democratic term eleutheria. Moreover, this freedom had remarkable results: Wood argues that the stimulus for much of Athenian culture can be found in the freedom of the peasantry and the consequent reaction of the Athenian aristocracy to that freedom.

This is an original position. Classical historians may ask why, if Athenian society is essentially a peasant society, a regime of smallholder agriculturalists, the view of the Athenian masses as an urban "mob"—often out of work and therefore eager for employment in the trireme navy—has prevailed since the early nineteenth century? Wood offers an answer in her Chapter 1, where she traces "the myth of the idle mob" to the political debates of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. Wood points out that the prevalence of chattel slavery in Athens was depicted in William Mitford's influential History of Greece (1784-1810) as an evil which led to underemployment among ordinary citizens. Too much leisure among the lower classes led to the "turbulence" of radical democracy which fatally disrupted the "natural" hierarchical relationship between classes and so brought on decay and decline. As Wood shows, Mitford's notion of the linkage between slavery, citizen idleness, and democracy caught on fast, and was not limited to reactionaries: Karl Marx and his followers incorporated it in the theory of the ancient "slave mode of production." The "idle mob" thesis tended to be accepted uncritically as a given by Greek historians.

The ideological roots of historians' dogmas are complex and draw upon factors both external and internal to the discipline. Wood emphasizes external factors (especially Mitford's conservative political views). But we should remember that the idle mob thesis in "supported" by numerous passages in the ancient sources (e.g. Aristophanes and Plato) and that it gained wide currency at a time when the disciplines of both philology and history were realizing their

26 In one case (134), the exemplar is Plato—surely the worst possible choice for a "typical Athenian!"
27 124; cf. Ober, Mass and Elite, 134-38, 142-44.
28 Wood is relentless in attacking orthodox Marxist dependence on the "slave mode of production" as an explanation for ancient economy; see especially her discussion of the theories of G. E. M. de Ste. Croix: 64-80.
modern forms. One might speculate that a growing philological tendency to see properly established ancient texts as authoritative may have conjoined with a growing historiographical concern to "respect the sources." The method of source-criticism was not a useful corrective in this case, since most of the sources were closely contemporary to the phenomena they described, and they were mutually reinforcing. Thus the "scientific" tendencies of evolving disciplines, as well as a legacy of partisan, anti-democratic scholarship, kept the myth of the idle mob afloat. Only an analysis willing to separate "knowledge and honesty of the sources" from "history as it actually happened" could expose the myth. A more detailed historiographical assessment thus might nuance Wood's scenario but this chapter proves that historians must struggle with (rather than accept the dogma of past scholarship upon) issues of production. We must understand how both free persons and slaves worked and what their labor meant to the society if we are to understand the nature of Athenian democracy.

In Chapter 2 (based on her important article in AJAH 8 (1983)), Wood discusses slave labor and production. While the attempt to estimate the absolute number of slaves in Athens is probably futile, Wood demonstrates that it is wrong to suppose that lower-class citizens could not have participated in political life unless they owned slaves. Particularly important here is Wood's discussion of the analytical weight that must be given to the issue of surplus appropriation relative to intensification of agriculture. Wood does not deny that there is a link between democracy and slavery in Athens, indeed (61) "the relative unavailability of Athenian free producers for exploitation was itself a critical factor leading to the growth of slavery." But most slaves worked for rich men, and the countryside remained preeminently the domain of the peasant smallholder. The textual evidence that has been brought to bear on this issue remains ambiguous, but Wood has shifted the balance of the debate. It is up to those who suppose that there was widespread slave-ownership among non-elite Athenian farmers to make a positive case, either by deploying new theoretical arguments or new texts.

In Chapter 3 Wood considers some of the implications of "characterizing . . . Athenian democracy in terms of its exclusion of dependence from the sphere of production, instead of emphasizing . . . chattel slavery. In comparison to the conditions of other advanced civilizations of the ancient world . . . the absence of a dependent peasantry and the establishment of a regime of free smallholders stands out in sharp relief" (83). To explain how this anomalous state of affairs came about Wood sketches a (rather hypothetical) historical evolution of the relationship between politics and production from Mycenaean times to the classical period. Key for her scenario is the idea that the existence of exclusive


"communities" of laborers and appropriators could not survive the collapse of Mycenaean palace economies. In the absence of a political basis for exerting coercive force, landlords had to deal with laborers as individuals and classes within the same community (98). This system, which preserved hierarchy without preserving the ideology that had legitimated it, proved unstable and led to the crisis of the early sixth century. Solon solved the crisis by stripping the elite of the remnants of their extra-economic superiority. Thus he strengthened the civic community while leaving intact the economic dominance of landed wealth. Subsequent reformers, Peisistratus and Cleisthenes, worked according to the same logic and the result was the breakdown of opposition between village and state—a breakdown which Wood considers the foundation of democracy. Ironically, this development of an autonomous civic realm, while serving to protect the male peasant-citizens from dependence and appropriation, also hardened the distinctions between free and slave, and between male and female Athenians. While obviously an admirer of Athenian democracy (see esp. 4), Wood does not fall into the trap of polis nostalgia.

Chapter 4 argues that the peasant conception of freedom as absence of coercion and appropriation informs the central ideals of Athenian culture—even Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy: "the small producers of Athens were its cultural mainspring . . . in the challenge which they represented to aristocratic dominance" (169). If Wood is right, this suggests that Plato and Aristotle did not (pace Farrar) "retreat" from politics; rather, they actively engaged in an ongoing debate with democratic ideology. Wood's discussion of political philosophy (Protagoras, Plato, Aristotle) is rather impressionistic, but she shows clearly the need to read philosophical texts against the ideological context in which philosophers lived and to which their texts may have responded. This approach turns the intellectualist fallacy on its head. Rather than supposing that the masses respond to ideas offered by an intellectual elite, Wood suggests that Athenian elites were forced to respond to the ideas of the masses.

In explaining aristocratic literary culture as oppositional to democracy, Wood notes the fruitfulness of the debate between democracy and its elite critics. And in looking at aspects of this debate, she attacks some long-cherished shibboleths of modern scholarship: there was no assumption among the masses of Athenians that labor was in and of itself demeaning: "freedom as most Athenians conceived it implied, among other things, the freedom of labour, in contrast to the freedom from labour" (137). The search for an explanation for Greek "technological stagnation" is shown to be misguided (150 ff.), since a high rate of technological innovation is a modern development that can be attributed to the unique production (and, one might add, consumption) needs of a capitalistic society.

Few classical historians will accept all of Wood's general propositions. Textual evidence to support many points is lacking and she has depended over-much on a few secondary works. There is much that remains to be proved, and some of Wood's positions may not stand up. A few readers of this journal
might be tempted simply to reject Wood’s conclusions out of hand because she
is not a classicist and because she works from unfamiliar models. That would be
a great shame indeed: based on a mastery of political and economic theory Wood
has made a major contribution to the development of a new paradigm for
explaining the evolution and historical meaning of ancient Athenian democracy.
This paradigm sees material (production/consumption) and ideological
(culture/discourse) factors as inextricably intertwined and as fundamentally
important to processes of socio-political change and stability. It is a paradigm
that should keep students of Greek history productively at work—testing,
building upon, refining, and challenging its premises and claims—for years to
come.

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