Development and Political Theory in Classical Athens

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Abstract

Analyzing the birth of political thought in Greece uniquely as a response to democracy in Athens overlooks the economic, social and legal aspects of the profound transformation that Athens underwent in the classical period. That transformation did not merely affect political structures. Without understanding this larger transformation, we cannot adequately explain the development of Greek political thought. Between the late 6th and 4th centuries BC, Athens transitioned from an undeveloped limited access, "natural state" toward a developed open access society – a society characterized by impersonal, perpetual and inclusive political, economic, legal and social institutions that protected individual rights and sustained the polis' exceptional growth.

Some of those who witnessed this transformation first-hand attempted to grapple, often critically, with its implications for politics, social relations, and moral psychology. We show that Thucydides, Plato, and other Greek political thinkers devoted a considerable part of their work to analyzing the polis' tendency toward political but also economic, social, and legal inclusion. Such a tendency, as many of them recognized, made Athens stand out among other Greek poleis, despite the fact that Athens was a democracy, not because of it. Democracy, therefore, is not the only explanatory variable in these accounts.

Introduction

The usual story: the Greeks invented politics. The invention of politics owes its birth to the creation of a strikingly new form of political organization: the polis. In the world of the polis, the Greeks’ hopes and fears coalesced into a new discipline, which we now call political thought.

This account constitutes the basis of most recent introductions to Greek political thought. It is not wrong on the face of it, but political thought did not arise in Greece

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1 See e.g. Cartledge, 2000; Balot, 2001.
*merely* because Greece developed the ‘polis’ understood as a “self-governing political community.”

If the polis as such were a sufficient heuristic, then we should conclude that political thought had the same chances of flourishing in Athens as in Sparta or in Thebes. But, evidently, it did not. Although Greek political thought was not a *uniquely* Athenian phenomenon, in the 5th and the 4th centuries BC, it was *markedly* so.

In order to understand why political thought flourished in Athens, previous scholarship added a layer of specification. It was not the polis *per se* that determined the development of early political thought, but the polis as an organizational unit that enabled “communal decision-making to take place in public and among equals.”

Based on this definition, the more ‘communal, public and equal’ the decision-making process, the higher the chances for the development of political thought. Athens’ large-scale participatory democracy, then, offered the most fecund ground.

The notion that Greek political thought arose in response to the birth of the polis in Greece, and to the development of democracy in Athens, as crystallized in the work of such eminent figures as Jean Pierre Vernant, Christian Meier, and Moses I. Finley, is the dominant paradigm for Greek intellectual history.

Our goal is not to overthrow this paradigm, but to add greater texture to this thesis. We contend that analyzing the birth of political thought in Greece as a response to the development of democracy as a political form in Athens overlooks the economic, social and legal aspects of the profound transformation that Athens underwent in the classical period. That transformation, we argue, did not merely affect political structures. Without

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3 Cartledge, 2000, p. 11.
understanding the transformation “in the round” we cannot adequately explain the development of Greek political thought.

Between the late 6th and 4th centuries BC, Athens transitioned from a limited access, “natural state” toward an open access society – a society that had developed impersonal, perpetual and inclusive political, economic, legal and social institutions that protected individual rights and sustained the polis’ exceptional growth in aggregate and per capita consumption.⁵ Some of those who witnessed this transformation first-hand attempted to grapple, often critically, with its implications for politics, social relations, and moral psychology.

In this paper, we review certain aspects of the work of ancient Greek political theorists that sit uncomfortably within a paradigm that sees such authors primarily as ‘democratic dissidents.’ We believe that the Old Oligarch, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon were all to some extent critics of Athens’ democratic political reality. Nonetheless we suggest that a) an important target of their analyses was Athens’ transition to open access, a process in which the emergence of democracy as an especially strong form of citizen self-governance was only one (albeit important) part; b) their critiques of Athens’ open access order did not aim at ‘turning back the clock’ to reverse the transition, but rather aimed at molding a different form of open access that was consistent with the authors’ normative preferences.

In particular, we show that Thucydides, Plato and other Greek political thinkers devoted a considerable part of their work to analyzing the polis’ tendency toward political as well as economic, social, and legal inclusion. Such a tendency, as many of

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⁵ Carugati, Ober and Weingast (in progress); growth in consumption: Ober 2015. “Natural state,” “open access,” and “limited access” are terms of art developed for analysis of social order by North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009) and Cox, North and Weingast (2012); further specifications are offered below.
them recognized, made Athens stand out among other Greek poleis, *despite* the fact that Athens was a democracy, not *because* of it. Democracy, therefore, is not the primary explanatory variable in these accounts.

Moreover, we show that as these authors critically evaluated the practical and normative implications of Athens’ open access, they also internalized some of its fundamental features. Overlooking this phenomenon makes it difficult to explain, for example, why Plato set the stage of the *Republic* in the house of a metic in Piraeus. Attending to the open access phenomenon helps to explain why Plato’s and Aristotle’s ideal cities looked so different from Hesiod’s just city in *Works and Days*, from Sparta’s *eunomia*, and from Socrates’ small and healthy “First Polis” in *Republic* book 1 (criticized by Glaucon as a “city of pigs”).

Our investigation has two main implications. First, by enlarging the agenda that Greek political thinkers pursued in their writings, we hope to expand the focus of modern scholarship of Greek political thought beyond the sphere of the political as such, and toward a broader public sphere where politics, economics, law and society were intimately merged.

Second, by analyzing relevant aspects of the Greek’s political reflections as a response to Athens’ transition to open access, we emphasize the degree to which early political thought developed from the practical and normative challenges that open access societies posed to those who experienced such challenges first hand. In so doing, we highlight important aspects of continuity and discontinuity between Greek, early modern, and contemporary political thought.
Political thought, both contemporary and pre-modern, is concerned with institutionalized social cooperation – how cooperation at scale is achieved and sustained, and how the benefits arising from cooperation are distributed. But unlike contemporary political thought, its pre-modern counterpart exhibits a strong connection between what is now called positive theory—explanations of what makes social cooperation possible—and normative ideas—comparisons between how the world is with how the world ought to be based on a set of normative standards.

Contemporary analytic liberal political thought, at least in the West, seems to have found its golden standard: John Rawls’ political liberalism, predicated on value neutrality, human rights, and distributive justice, and for which stability can be taken for granted. By contrast, pre-modern political theorists lacked a single standard. They struggled with two fundamental questions: How can we make our society into a stably cooperative community? And how ought we to organize to make our cooperative community a good society?

Answers changed dramatically since the first time these questions were posed in ancient Greece. More specifically, these answers evolved “endogenously” in two ways: as a result of debates within the tradition of Greek political thought; and in response to a changing external environment.

In this paper we focus on a set of early responses on the part of several writers within the Greek tradition. We modify the standard account of ancient political thought as a struggle between competing views of what makes a stable cooperative society a good society—that is, a society that places the common interest above the factional interests or aggregated personal preferences e.g. of ‘the many’ or of ‘the few.’ Instead, we reinterpret

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critical aspects of Greek political thought as a response to a specific phenomenon—that is, development (economic, social, and political)—in the absence of a widely shared normative standard.

By problematizing the telos of development—that is, the idealized vision of democratic liberalism as the actual or aspirational ‘end of history’—we hope to spark new interest in both ancient Greek political thought as such, and in the relevance of the Greeks’ positive and normative reflections for contemporary, undemocratic and illiberal “natural states” whose residents have little hope, and perhaps little interest, in approaching the democratic liberal telos.

This contribution is meant as a theoretical complement to a companion paper, “Is Development Uniquely Modern?” (Carugati, Ober, and Weingast, in progress, henceforth CO&W). There, we illustrate how Greece’s best documented and most dynamic polis—that is, Athens—transitioned from conditions typical of the natural state to conditions typical of an open access society. Here, we reconstruct how Athenian political thinkers approached, grappled with, and conceptualized the transition and its limits when compared with different views of the good society.

The paper proceeds as follows. In section one, we discuss the theory of development that constitutes the framework of our investigation: Cox, North, Wallis, and Weingast’s (henceforth, CNWW) theory of development as the transition from natural states to open access societies. In section two, we briefly illustrate the history of Athens’ transition to open access. In section three, we reinterpret critical passages of the work of a set of key Greek political thinkers, including Thucydides, the anonymous writer known as the Old Oligarch, Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon. Our conclusions follow.
1. CNWW’s Theory of Development

Cox, North and Weingast (2015, henceforth CNW), drawing on North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009, henceforth NWW), propose a new approach to the problem of defining and explaining development.

NWW define development as the transition from limited access to open access. As we explain more fully below, limited access societies, unlike open access ones, restrict entry to political and economic institutions based on the actors’ identity. Natural states develop (when and if they do) into open access societies via three “doorstep conditions”: rule of law for elites, perpetuity for the state and other organizations, and political control over the means of violence. CNW argue that, in order to exist over time, all states need to solve the problem of violence. Natural states and open access societies, however, solve the problem of violence in different ways.

To limit the threat of violence, natural states structure the polity and the economy in ways that induce the powerful ̶ i.e., those endowed with violence potential ̶ to cooperate rather than fight. Cooperation relies on rent-creation:⁷ powerful individuals and groups cooperate by limiting access to rent-producing organizations in the polity and the economy. Successful cooperation can only be achieved if rents are distributed according to what CNW term the ‘proportionality principle:’ since more powerful groups have higher expected values from fighting, inducing them to cooperate requires that they receive rents in proportion to their violence potential.

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⁷ In economics, rents are the returns on a productive resource in excess of the costs necessary to maintain that resource productive, or, alternatively, the returns “to an economic asset that exceeds the return the asset can receive in its best alternative use.” (NWW, 2009, p. 19).
These conditions yield a series of implications for natural states. First, powerful individuals and groups must directly control the economy and the polity in order to create and distribute rents among themselves. Natural states are thus personal. Second, because frequent shocks alter the distribution of violence potential, maintaining order requires equally frequent adjustments in the distribution of rents. For these reasons, natural states lack perpetuity. Third, because expanding benefits to those deprived of violence potential would cut into the pool of rents available to those with violence potential, natural states lack inclusion.

In sum, in CNW’s terms, the natural state is an equilibrium in which the solution to the problem of violence is to manipulate political and economic institutions so as to protect the privileges of actors endowed with violence potential. Such a constraint to the development of political and economic institutions, however, hinders growth. For this reasons, the authors term such an equilibrium the “violence trap.”

In contrast, “development” – understood as the transition from a natural state to an open access order – requires solving the problem of violence in ways that allow for open access to organizations, which in turn promotes competition and sustains economic growth. Whereas natural states are personal, non-perpetual, and exclusive, open access institutions are impersonal, perpetual and inclusive: that is, their membership, lifespan, and composition do not depend on the identity of the participants. Open access societies do not eliminate rent-creation, but they undermine the logic of the proportionality principle in ways that significantly constrain the kind of rent creation that benefits only a narrow section of society. As a result, political power, economic opportunities, and
material goods are distributed more fairly, across a broader portion of the population, in open access societies than in natural states.

The central question in CNWW’s investigation is the following: if the natural state is an equilibrium—that is, if the natural state is a stable arrangement (as history unmistakably demonstrates)—how do states develop beyond the low-performing level of the natural state?8

The transition from limited to open access, from undeveloped to developed conditions of social order, requires first attaining three “doorstep conditions”: namely, rule of law for elites, perpetuity for the state and other organizations, and consolidated, political control over the sources of social violence. Societies attain the doorstep conditions when elite relationships, their organizations and the distribution of violence potential are subject to the principles of impersonality, perpetuity and inclusion. Open access is achieved when these principles obtain beyond the level of the elite, that is, when non-elites are included in the category of those who can openly enter and make use of high-value institutions and associated relationships.

In the next section, we summarize the history of Athens’ transition to open access – a transition that we document more extensively in CO&W.

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8 Escaping the violence trap requires a particular kind of change in the natural state environment that induces elites to cooperate without distributing rents in proportion to their violence potential. According to CNW, such ‘changes’ are usually prompted by one of two occurrences: first, the appearance of an external, especially military, threats to the natural state environment that forces elites to cooperate; and second, the opportunity to increase rents. However, no teleology informs the transition and societies that take steps toward open access are always liable to fall back on previous conditions, particularly as a result of shocks. See CNW (2012); CO&W (in progress).
2. A Bold New World: The Development of Open Access at Athens

Between the late 6th and the 4th century BC, the polis of Athens transitioned from being a relatively marginal natural state where political and economic institutions were in the hands of small elite of birth (the Eupatridai, i.e. those with noble fathers) to becoming a prosperous, open access society governed by a large, participatory democracy. In the course of this period, Athens achieved the three doorstep conditions: first, the polis established the rule of law for elites by developing laws, courts and procedures to check the power of its political leaders; second, Athens structured key political and military institutions as perpetual organizations (most notably, the army and the Council of Five Hundred); third, the polis achieved consolidated political control over the sources of social violence by coordinating centralized and decentralized law-enforcement institutions to detect and punish violations of community rules.

But Athens’ transition out of the natural state order went beyond the doorstep conditions in many relevant respects: Athens established some of the mature forms of open access—that is, impersonal, perpetual, and inclusive institutions—in the political, as well as in the economic, legal, and social sphere.

Whereas impersonality and perpetuity were the hallmarks of Athens’ institutions, inclusion is more complicated. In terms of the ancient world, Athens was remarkably open; yet it remained partially open when compared to modern open access societies, with varying degrees of inclusion across different institutions. For example, the polis enfranchised all adult males who could claim Athenian lineage, but political participation

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9 In CO&W, we divided Athens’ development into three main phases: the achievement of the doorstep conditions in the period leading up to the democratic revolution of 508 BC; the 5th century expansion of access to citizen actors well beyond the elites; and finally the 4th century extension of critical forms of inclusion to economic, legal and social institutions beyond the citizen body.
remained a privilege of the native male citizen, to the detriment of both women and foreigners (yet, by the same token, participation was extended well beyond ‘the elite’). Conversely, in the spheres of the economy, law and society, Athens extended critical forms of inclusion to actors beyond the citizen body, allowing foreigners, resident aliens, and even some slaves to litigate claims in court, to protect their bodies and property against abuses, to form civil associations, and, as we will see, to criticize the status quo.10

What sparked Athens’ transition toward open access? And what were its consequences?

In CO&W, we attributed part of the explanation for Athens’ transition toward open access to two interrelated conditions: first, the political sociology of the citizen body – the fact that powerful elites and ordinary citizens shared in the regime – and next, the fiscal requirements of democracy. Particularly in the post-imperial 4th century, open access enabled Athens to successfully weather military and other shocks and sustained the polis’ remarkable levels of aggregate and per capita economic growth.

In the next section, we refer these questions to those who witnessed the transition first hand. In particular, we ask: Did the Athenians themselves conceive of a social order predicated on open access to institutions as something conceptually distinct from the social order typical of limited access, natural states? Did they perceive a causal relationship between open access and state performance? Was there, in short, anything resembling a “theory of development and social orders” in the classical Greek world that might, at least hypothetically, have influenced policy in Athens and in other city-states?

10 CO&W, (in progress); Carugati, 2015.
3. Ancient Greek Theories of Open Access

In this section, we argue that several classical Greek political theorists clearly recognized that, by the later 5th century BC, the Athenian social order was distinctively different from other (Greek and non-Greek) social orders in that it offered much wider access to institutions.

The Old Oligarch and Thucydides, writing in the imperial 5th century, saw that opening access to institutions could be positively correlated with state performance and they had theories for explaining the correlation. Plato and Aristotle, writing in a post-imperial era and at a time of profound changes and frequent shocks, attempted to reframe Athens’ open access to moderate its excesses with a view to enhancing stability. In the middle of the 4th century, Xenophon embraced open access for some categories of non-Athenians, and suggested how to further expand it in order to foster Athens’ prosperity.

a. The “Old Oligarch”

A short pamphlet written by “the Old Oligarch,” an anonymous Athenian writer of the third quarter of the fifth century BC, explains the working of democracy at Athens. The Old Oligarch’s imagined reader is a non-Athenian aristocrat who regards Athens’ democracy as the inherently inferior political rule of inferior people – the poor, ill-educated, uncultured masses of non-elite citizens – and therefore the reader supposes democracy is an altogether inferior regime.

The Old Oligarch shares his imagined reader’s moral disdain for the Athenian citizenry, but he explains that, when the masses designed and enforced democratic rules, they acted self-consciously and rationally in their own collective interest. Because the
Athenian masses provided the primary labor force for the Athenian navy, and because the navy was the essential tool of imperial resource-extraction, the masses were the main motor of Athens’ power and prosperity. As such, they were able to negotiate a large role for themselves in the control of key state institutions.

For the Old Oligarch, the people’s capacity to secure compliance to the regime on the part of elites is based on their collective capacity to enforce collective judgments through popular institutions, such as the assembly and the law-courts, lucrative offices, and the Council (Pseudo-Xenophon, *Constitution of the Athenians* sections 1.2-3, 1.6, 3.2). He also points out that the masses ensured for themselves access to cultural resources formerly monopolized by the elite: He mentions that because sacrifices, shrines, banquets, temples, gymnasia, and baths were now public, “the rabble has more enjoyment of these things than does the wealthy elite” (2.10). All of this, he assures his reader, is self-conscious and in the collective self-interest of the many: were the elite, counterfactually, to be in charge, they would establish laws in their own interest, forbid non-elite citizens rights of free speech and assembly, and “as a result of these excellent measures the people would immediately be enslaved” (1.9).

The Athenian system, the Old Oligarch tells us, is ‘rational:’ the masses rule to foster their interests. But the Old Oligarch also recognizes that Athenian elites were not simply in thrall to the many; he notes that some persons who were “not by inborn nature democrats,” nonetheless were “genuinely on the side of the democratic regime” (2.19-20). The Old Oligarch criticizes this behavior as arising from moral depravity, suggesting that some elites believed that it was easier to hide wickedness in a democracy than in an oligarchy. Yet, the Old Oligarch also recognized that if Athens as a state became far
stronger and wealthier by expanding the privileges of citizenship to the masses, it followed that at least some Athenian elites benefitted from the expansion as well.

But the benefits accruing to actors beyond the masses did not stop at the Athenian elite. The Old Oligarch observes that at Athens (and, by implication, *not* in non-democratic states with which his imagined reader is familiar) slaves and foreigners were accorded protection against insulting violence: At Athens one may not strike a slave or a foreigner. The reason he offers is that at Athens, lower-class citizens were indistinguishable from slaves or foreigners, and so the law, enforced by the mass of citizens in their own interest, forbids striking slaves and foreigners in order to protect citizens. He then adds a specifically economic reason for this law: well-to-do slaves, engaged in commerce, will not be good stewards of resources if they live in fear of mistreatment – and thus their masters will be denied a share of the profits: “for this reason we [Athenians] have set up equality between slaves and freemen and between resident foreigners and citizens” (1.10-12). He (somewhat redundantly) underlines the point: “The city needs resident foreigners in view of the many different trades and the fleet. Accordingly, then, we have rationally set up a similar equality for the resident foreigners” (1.13).

The Old Oligarch was no fan of democracy, as his comments about the assumed depravity of demos-loving elites make clear. Yet, reading the pamphlet as nothing but a criticism of democracy misses part of the point. The Old Oligarch sharply identifies the pinnacle of the Athenian system—that is, the mass-manned navy—as responsible for protecting the city and sustaining Athens’ empire-driven prosperity. Because of their critical role, the masses controlled key political institutions, control that allowed the
masses to make policy in their own interests. The masses’ interests, however, produced relevant spillovers when the interests of external actors, be they commercially oriented elites, foreigners or slaves, happen to coincide with theirs. And those spillovers are recognized as drivers of economic prosperity.

The Old Oligarch’s analysis is a cogent account of the roots of Athens’ material success in the imperial period. He may not have liked it, but he surely understood how Athens differed from most other poleis.

b. Thucydides

The extensive scholarship on Thucydides and his work has tended to characterize him as a historian – indeed, as one of the fathers of history. He has long been recognized as a pioneering theorist of international relations. As a theorist of internal politics, he has most often been characterized as a critic of democracy.¹¹

Broadening the interpretive scope, we consider Thucydides a lucid political theorist of development. Thucydides wrote something that we would now call ‘history’ not just “for its own sake,” but in order to understand the past in ways that would allow him (and his readers) to predict the general shape of future social and political conditions and to plan and act rationally based on that understanding. Accordingly, Thucydides reconstructed the history of “the greatest movement yet known in history” to recover the roots, and document the consequences of a new phenomenon: Athens’ fifth century transition to open access and the threat that such transition posed to the rest of the Greek world.¹²

¹² Thucydides as a political theorist: Ober, 2006; Ober and Perry 2014. Quote: Thuc. 1.1
Athens in the age of Pericles, for Thucydides, was a new beast. As such, Athens deserved attention. But the analytic attention that Athens commanded did not depend on the fact that the polis was a democracy. Thucydides was very familiar with Athens’ practice of large-scale, public decision-making carried out by a mass of random people sitting on a hillside. He developed a sophisticated theory of how that practice could go wrong, when the relationship between speakers and audiences diverged from an ideal of the virtuous political expert (the model is Pericles) giving advice and moral encouragement to a receptive body of citizens. But his purpose in describing Athens’ decision-making process is not only to criticize democracy, but also to document and explain how it worked – and how it failed.13

Thucydides tells us that he decided to document the history of the Peloponnesian War because he saw that the war was going to be the “greatest movement yet known in history.” And the war was going to be the greatest movement known in history because of “the growth of the power of Athens (τοὺς Αθηναίους ἠγοῦμαι μεγάλους γιγνομένους) and the fear (φόβον) which this inspired in Sparta,” which led to the mobilization of all of Greece.14 The fact that at the outbreak of the war Athens stood at the head of an ‘empire,’ as well as the fact that Athens was at the time governed by a democracy, are secondary aspects of Thucydides’ reconstruction. The problems that arise from the observation that Athens had an empire require an understanding of a prior problem: how did Athens get it?

The answer to this fundamental question Thucydides put, most memorably, in the mouth of the Corinthians, who thus describe the difference between Sparta and Athens:

The Athenians are addicted to innovation, and their designs are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution; you have a genius for keeping what you have got, accompanied by a

14 Thuc. 1.1, 1.23.
total want of invention, and when forced to act you never go far enough. [3] Again, they are adventurous beyond their power, and daring beyond their judgment, and in danger they are sanguine; your wont is to attempt less than is justified by your power, to mistrust even what is sanctioned by your judgment, and to fancy that from danger there is no release.[4] Further, there is promptitude on their side against procrastination on yours; they are never at home, you are never from it: for they hope by their absence to extend their acquisitions, you fear by your advance to endanger what you have left behind.\textsuperscript{15}

Sparta, for Thucydides, was a peculiar type of natural state – one whose elites looked to preserve their privileges and who were most fearful of change. But, by the same token, Athens was a very peculiar open access society, driven by an almost reckless thirst for action and acquisition.

By virtue of this thirst, Thucydides tells us through Pericles,

\begin{quote}
We throw open our city to the world, and never by alien acts exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing, although the eyes of an enemy may occasionally profit by our liberality: trusting less in system and policy than to the native spirit of our citizens; while in education, where our rivals from their very cradles by a painful discipline seek after manliness, at Athens we live exactly as we please, and yet are just as ready to encounter every legitimate danger.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The same features that made Athens great, as Thucydides almost presciently documented, also threatened its very survival. What Thucydides does not tell us is that Athens recovered from the crippling defeat in the Peloponnesian war, and it did so \textit{without} turning its back to the open access policies that had supported its earlier imperial expansion. In the 4\textsuperscript{th} century, Athens further extended access to institutions, weaving non-citizens more tightly into the polis’ institutional fabric in order to boost the economy.

In the post-imperial 4\textsuperscript{th} century, Athens’ policies presented a massive challenge to those who perceived the extension of privileges beyond the elite as a fundamental threat to political stability and order. Athens-resident political thinkers, most notably Plato and Aristotle, grappled with these problems and struggled to provide an alternative to the profound transformations that Athens’ policies were bringing about. At the same time,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{15} Thuc. 1.70. With Ober, 2010a.
\textsuperscript{16} Thuc. 2.39.1.
\end{footnotesize}
neither Plato nor Aristotle called for a return to the natural state. Both philosophers were men of their time, who attempted to reconfigure, rather than reject *en bloc*, Athens’ open access.

Plato and Aristotle were each, in principle, hostile to opening access to institutions on an equal basis to those who were unequal in relevant ways: in terms of status (free/slave, native/foreign male/female) or virtue. They each associated open access with democracy – and especially with democracy at Athens. Plato and Aristotle were also, however, deeply opposed to highly personalized “natural states” – they characterized authoritarian regimes (tyrannies and *dunasteiai*) as the least desirable forms of political order. Much of Greek political philosophy was devoted to the problem of discovering general principles of “good order” (*eunomia*) that would allow the development of a stable, high-performing, but non-democratic constitutional order – a just and good state that would be capable of defending itself against hostile rivals and would not be subject to devolving quickly into an unjust, low-performing natural state.

Both Plato’s and Aristotle’s ideal cities are rooted, perhaps most unexpectedly, on key elements of Athens’ open access.

c. Plato

In the opening scene of the *Republic*, members of Athens’ elite (Glaucon, Adeimantus, Charmides, Clitophon, and Socrates) convene with philosophically-minded non-Athenians (Polemarchos, Thrasymachos, Kephalos, Lysias and Euthydemos) in Kephalos’ house in Piraeus to discuss the nature of justice and the ideal city.
Why are elite Athenians mingling with non-Athenians while discussing the features of the ideal city? And why do they meet in Piraeus, Athens’ harbor town, the symbol of Athens’ socially diverse, mass-dominated, commercial society?

In *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1962), Karl Popper famously identified Callipolis, the ideal community described in the *Republic*, as the epitome of a tribal, closed society, akin to (and inspired by) contemporary Sparta. Yet, the setting of the dialogue sits uncomfortably with this interpretation.

We might be tempted to interpret the setting of the Republic merely as a product of Plato’s realistic narrative, or as the antithesis to the ideal city, as it emerges from the dialogue. Yet, we argue, Callipolis shares with contemporary Athens critical features. These features, moreover, are not relegated to the dialogue’s initial setting.

The connection between Athens and the ideal city emerges first in Socrates’ description of what Glaucon later calls a ‘city of pigs.’ The thought experiment begins with a farmer, a builder, a weaver, a cobbler and a doctor, each doing that at which each excels. But because the necessities of life go beyond food, shelter and basic health, Socrates’ city soon expands: in fact, “it’s almost impossible to establish a city in a place where nothing has to be imported.” (370e) In the span of a few lines, Socrates’ self-sufficient city of “four of five men” (369d) has come to include merchants, “a marketplace and a currency” (371b) for exchanging basic foodstuff. Finally, after Glaucon’s objection that a city without “delicacies” to eat and couches to lie on is fit only for pigs, the city is further enlarged with the inclusion of many other professions, notably including a specialized military class – the Guardians (372 b-374a).
Plato’s fundamental organizing principle of justice in the *Republic* is that each individual resident “minds his own business” – that is, each is to stay strictly within his or her own domain of activity and does not meddle in the affairs of others (370a-c). This principle of justice-as-uniqueness-of-occupation (432a-b) is what ultimately produces the specialized Guardian class of professional warriors and, eventually, the tiny ruling class of Philosopher Kings.

Despite its hermetically sealed social stratification into producers, warriors and rulers, Callipolis is far from a closed, ‘tribal’ society. First, Callipolis features a wide variety of essential economic roles, including retail and wholesale traders. Second, women are part and parcel of Callipolis’ essential Guardian class, a remarkable innovation for a pre-modern society. For Plato, Callipolis’ stratification is a necessary means to secure a critical good that contemporary open societies seek to promote: the welfare of *all* of its diverse residents (420b), rather than the welfare of elites at the expense of others.

However, Plato recognizes that his solution to harmonizing stability and justice in Callipolis leads to the creation of a special military caste with a monopoly on the effective use of violence. Absent special conditions, CNW’s ‘proportionality principle’ predicts that the guardians will seek rents from their other residents proportionate to their violence potential. The “auxiliary” Guardian class is distinct from, but in coalition with, a ruling class of philosophers with a monopoly on political knowledge. If those with monopolies on political knowledge and violence act as they are expected to under proportionality, they pose a vital threat to the ‘welfare of all.’ Plato is well aware of the problem: explicitly noting that the warrior-guardsians might, if not restrained, exploit the
other classes. This is the ostensible reason that so much of the *Republic* concerns the special education and radical institutions concerning property and family that are meant to restructure the incentives of the auxiliary Guardians and Philosopher-Kings so as to sustain, in equilibrium, the principle of ‘welfare of all.’

While Plato’s solution will not satisfy contemporary liberals, Callipolis, with its embrace of specialization and diversity, protection of property rights (for non-guardians), concern for restraint of the military class, and distinction between fundamental law and ordinary policy (425d-e), can perhaps be better understood as an attempt to build a ‘just Athens,’ rather than a ‘failed Sparta,’ as Popper suggested.

d. Aristotle

Stability and justice are at the heart of Aristotle’s political thought, just as they were at the heart of Plato’s. In the *Politics*, Aristotle sought to combine ideal theory, aimed at a community in which the welfare of all will be advanced, with practical recommendations for improving and stabilizing existing regimes.

Like Plato, Aristotle saw violence, especially when associated with regime change, as a primary threat to political stability. Like Plato, Aristotle was concerned with the problems of perpetuity, noting that both the laws and the makeup of military forces must be properly aligned with the actual distribution of political power within the regime (i.e., the proportionality principle). Unlike Plato, Aristotle recognized that monopolizing political authority and violence potential in classes of persons legally deprived of private property and individual familial attachments was fundamentally impracticable. In a well-ordered Aristotelian regime, all citizens take an active part in ruling and being ruled over

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17 Plato *Republic* 375b, 416a, 421a.
“in turns”—a phrasing that captures both aspects of impersonality and perpetuity. Aristotle’s practical suggestions for regime stabilization focus on how institutions could be designed to reduce the opportunity of the dominant group (whether elites or masses) to exploit others. In his best possible regime (the “polis of our prayers” in book 7 of the Politics), Aristotle specifies that all citizens will also perform military service in turns, and each citizen will own two plots of land, one of them near the state border, in order to equalize incentives to respond to cross-border incursions by rival states.

But who gets to be a part of the ideal-city? Whereas Plato based social stratification on the existence of different human natures performing tasks at which they naturally excelled, in designing his best possible polis, Aristotle groups the residents in two categories: on the one hand, the citizens – assumed to be native, adult, male, and Greek -- on the other hand, everyone else, that is, women, children, resident aliens, and slaves. Although each of these subsidiary groups will be ruled by somewhat different principles, ruling will be a jointly-held monopoly of the citizens

Aristotle’s ideal city is an aristocracy of adult males whose survival, and whose ability to dedicate themselves to political education and activity, depends on a class of unenfranchised laborers who produce that which the citizens need. But ‘the polis of our prayers,’ like Callipolis, is neither a closed access, tribal society, nor is it similar to Hesiod’s ideal city of self-sufficient farmers. Insofar as all native adult males are citizens, who rule in turns, Aristotle’s polis is a democracy – albeit one of a very special kind, insofar as all citizens are leisured.18

Among the problems that Aristotle is trying to solve in the Politics, one demands attention: by the middle of the 4th century, many Greeks did not center their lives as being

18 Ober, 2005.
devoted primarily to ruling and being ruled in turn, tilling their fields (or even managing those who did so) under the scorching Greek sun, military service, and pious performance of religious duties. Among these, a good many lived, like Aristotle himself, as non-citizens in Athens, where they chose the pursuit of wealth over the exercise of citizen rights in their own native poleis. Although Aristotle deplored the choices of those who sought “unlimited” wealth through commercial enterprise (Politics, book 1), he ultimately ranked a life of active contemplation as superior to a life of political activity (Nicomachean Ethics book 10). The lives of Aristotle’s citizens in the “polis of our prayers” must certainly have had substantial space for contemplative activity, and presumably also for the kinds of economic activity that did not fall into the blameworthy category of “unlimited” acquisition.

In the Oeconomica, a short treatise on household and state management, an anonymous “Aristotelian” author writing near the time of Aristotle tackles the issue head-on. For [Aristotle], a household is composed of human beings, and ‘goods and chattels’ (1343a).

Of occupations attendant on our goods and chattels, those come first which are natural. Among these precedence is given to the one which cultivates the land; those like mining, which extract wealth from it, take the second place. Agriculture is the most honest of all such occupations; seeing that the wealth it brings is not derived from other men. Herein it is distinguished from trade and the wage-earning employments, which acquire wealth from others by their consent; and from war, which wrings it from them perforce.19

[Aristotle] agrees with Hesiod, whom he explicitly cites, that of occupations, agriculture is the most natural, not only because it produces ‘wealth…not derived from other men,’ but also, [Aristotle] continues, because agriculture establishes between man

19 [Arist.] Oec. 1343a
and land the same relationship that pertains between mother and child, and because “agriculture contributes notably to the making of a manly character.” (1343b)

Notwithstanding the primacy of agriculture, however, men do dedicate themselves to those occupations that ‘take second place.’ On the issue of wealth getting, then, mankind is divided between (good) household managers and (bad) retail traders, who pursue money for the sake of money. [Aristotle]’s preferences, as the passage above makes clear, lay with the land. But [Aristotle]’s problem seems to be that people have choices, and that these choices can be, and are, ‘freely made.’

Like Plato, Aristotle attempted to square stability, justice, and what he regarded as a reasonable level of prosperity in the ideal city. And, like Plato in the Republic, Aristotle in the Politics (book 7), acknowledged the need for imports and exports, and a commercial marketplace. Both philosophers reached radical conclusions, including strict rules meant to prevent “mixing” between status groups, that aimed at averting what they perceived as destabilizing effects of Athenian openness: chaotic pluralism and material abundance. Xenophon’s Poroi, to which we now turn, offers a very different perspective.

e. Xenophon

In the imperial fifth century (when the Old Oligarch, for example, was writing), Athens depended economically on both free trade with, and from rents extracted from, non-citizens: subject states filled Athens’ coffers with imperial tributes; foreigners filled Athens’ market with goods; metics and slaves boosted Athens’ economy through their work in the manufacturing, agricultural and mining sectors.

Athens’ dependence on non-citizens was redoubled in the fourth century, when the imperial rents that had boosted Athenian prosperity suddenly dried up. The defeat in
the Peloponnesian war led to the loss of the empire, which meant that the city could no longer count on imperial tributes. The siege of Athens in 405/4 BCE and the costly peace that followed, paired with the establishment of the predatory government of the Thirty, severely degraded Athens’ military defenses (namely, the city’s walls and navy) and damaged the polis’ commercial infrastructure (particularly the facilities and manpower of Piraeus). In the last phase of the war, the long Spartan occupation of strategic areas in the Attic countryside prevented the exploitation for Athens’ (relatively meager) agricultural and (abundant) mineral resources.

In order to survive the dire economic repercussions of military defeat, Athens had to find new sources of state revenue. In the immediate aftermath of war, the polis proved up to the task, as its speedy recovery testifies. Yet, the problem of boosting revenue streams in a post-imperial era remained ever present in the 4th century. As the century progressed, Athens turned more and more decisively toward its non-citizens. But unlike in the 5th century, the polis could not rely on coercion to attract foreign merchants, traders and workers to its shores. To compensate, Athens began to devise incentives in the form of institutional reforms aimed at lowering transaction costs in the market and by bestowing privileges on non-citizen economic actors.

A mid-fourth-century pamphlet entitled *Revenues*, by the Athenian polymath, Xenophon, makes Athens’ economic reliance on non-citizens explicit. The pamphlet contains a series of recommendations to further incentivize non-citizens’ activity in the polis’ economy.$^{20}$

Along with an implausible scheme to import vast numbers of publicly owned slaves to work in the mines, Xenophon argues that Athens should and could increase tax

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$^{20}$ See, further, Ober 2010b; Carugati 2015, chapter 5.
revenues by making the city even more desirable to foreigners, and thereby increase “imports and exports, sales, rents, and customs” (Xenophon, Revenues 3.5). Among other measures, Xenophon emphasizes the value of open and fair access to public institutions: He urges that state officials responsible for adjudicating disputes over commercial exchanges be given prizes when they produce especially just and prompt settlements (3.3), noting that this remedy would cost nothing beyond “benevolent legislation and regulations” (1.6). But he also recommends substantial state capital investment in infrastructure – in hotels, mercantile halls, an increased stock of available houses, and shops in both Piraeus and in the central city. These “would be an ornament to the state, and at the same time the sources of considerable revenue” (3.12-13).

Some policies that bear a strong resemblance to Xenophon’s proposals were actually implemented: in the middle decades of the 4th century, Athens set up new courts to hear and speedily adjudicate maritime commercial disputes. Most notably, in these new maritime courts, non-citizens had standing, contrary to common Athenian practice.

To what extent Xenophon’s proposals were influenced by, or influential upon, actual policy is unknown, but he clearly grasped the relationship between open access, the incentives of foreign traders, and the value of increased trade to the Athenian state.

4. Conclusion

In the 5th and 4th century BC, Athens’ transition toward open access stimulated the emergence of a new way of thinking about social order. Educated elites began to reflect on the organization of existing political communities and to evaluate such communities’ inner workings based on their own conceptions of what constituted a ‘good’ or even the
‘best’ polis. As they struggled to understand the causes and consequences of Athens’ (and perhaps also other Greek poleis’) transition toward open access, Greek political thinkers often questioned or rejected Athens’ political system. But their reflections went well beyond the role, function, and limits of democracy per se.

The Old Oligarch, Thucydides, Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon, among others, grappled with notions of citizenship, inclusion, justice, stability, power, and performance. In particular, they evaluated the threat that pluralism and wealth accumulation posed to the stability of citizen-centered governments and the well-being of their polis residents. Yet, our analyses of these political theorists shows that each engaged with the movement towards more open access, rejecting the possibility of a nostalgic or utopian return to the ‘life of Hesiod’ - that is, a simple life of self-sufficiency. The rapid expansion of the “First Polis” of Plato’s Republic, into a large, socially diverse, and economically sophisticated community is paradigmatic of that rejection: Plato, and his fellow Athenian intellectuals, felt the pull of a nostalgic return to “small, simple, healthy” community, but the writers we have considered here each recognized that no such return was either possible or desirable. Theirs was not the only possible response: Diogenes of Sinope and his fellow Cynics, for example, rejected the political, legal, and social institutions that enabled Athenian development. And, under different political, economic and social circumstances, Hellenistic Stoic and Epicurean philosophers chose quite different paths.

This paper has not aimed at offering a comprehensive review of Greek political thought. Instead, we selected a series of relevant passages from major Athenian writers that, we contend, can be better understood through expanding the ‘polis and democracy’ framework to an open access, development framework.
Our investigation yields two important results. First, we show that the open access framework allows us to disentangle vital elements of the Greeks’ reflections on economic aspects of social order, reflections that were previously subordinated to the analysis of political structures. In so doing, we hope to spark new interest in the economic, as well as the social and legal aspects of Greek political thought.

Second, we highlight elements of continuity and discontinuity between the ancient Greeks’ reflection and contemporary political theory. We contend that political theory, in ancient Greece, as in modern open access societies, constitutes a critical response to the theoretical and practical limits of development. In the 20th century, the apparent victory of liberal democracy against totalitarianism enshrined its success as a normative standard. In the 21st century, as our open access liberal democracies struggle with growing inequality and new forms of pluralism, it may be time to return to ancient Greece. The Athenian writers we have surveyed briefly here remind us that “returning to the Greeks” need not be motivated by nostalgia nor need it take the form of a reactionary impulse to turn back the clock to an imagined simpler era. Rather, a reengagement with Greek social thought offers a way to think seriously about what development means, who benefits from it (and who does not), and how the benefits of growing prosperity might be squared with both a commitment to justice and attention to the sources of social stability.

Works Cited


