

## ONE

### A CLOSED COMMUNITY OF SELF-GOVERNING CITIZENS

WHEN AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENTISTS speak of democracy today, they generally have in mind a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections, a system that also protects the human rights of all citizens, and one that adheres to a rule of law, in which the laws and procedures, memorialized in a written constitution, apply equally to all citizens.

By these criteria, the world's first democracy wasn't properly a democracy at all. At the zenith of its political glory in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., Athens did not choose its government by holding elections, nor did it protect the human rights of its citizens, as it lacked any notion of such rights, nor were the fundamental powers of the Athenian polis enshrined in a comprehensive written document.

What Athens did have is a community in which every citizen was expected to participate directly in the political life of the city—and far more actively than in any known modern democracy. At the height of democracy in Athens, in the mid-fourth century, an assembly of citizens, open to all, met at least forty times a year. All political offices were held by ordinary citizens, selected by lot, and all legal judgments in the city's courts were reached by large juries of ordinary citizens, similarly selected. And all this happened in a comparatively large commercial city that dominated the eastern Mediterranean world for nearly two centuries.

Despite this apparently impressive record of accomplishments, most ancient authorities reviled democracy in Athens. Plato, perhaps the most widely admired writer in antiquity, and someone who lived under democratic rule in the fourth century, criticized the false beliefs that prevailed in a city governed by public opinion rather than true knowledge, and he deplored the “insolence, anarchy, wastefulness, and shamelessness” that the prevalence of false beliefs facilitated. The historian Thucydides, another citizen of democratic Athens, who chronicled the Peloponnesian War with Sparta that had begun in 431 and ended with the defeat of Athens in 404, essentially blamed the power of the ordinary people of Athens, and their susceptibility to manipulation by mendacious orators, for this catastrophic outcome. As a result of critics like Plato and Thucydides—not to mention subsequent political developments, from the Macedonian empire of Alexander the Great to modern European monarchies that claimed absolute sovereignty as a divine right—nobody much cared about the Athenian political system for almost two thousand years, nor about democracy as a form of government.

In the centuries between the rise of Rome and the fall of the Bastille, the world's first democracy was left largely unexamined, and possible justifications for it were rarely considered. Even in contexts where the idea still circulated, among trained jurists and experts in political philosophy, democracy was normally

disparaged as the worst of the simple forms of government, inferior to both monarchy and aristocracy. It was only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe and the United States that a sweeping reevaluation of ancient democracy took place—helping to transform the main currents of political thought and institutional development, first in the West, and then around the world.

The reevaluation of Greek democracy continues. As a result of recent research and ongoing discoveries of previously lost documents, most notably a detailed description of Athenian political institutions likely compiled by Aristotle and his students, and unearthed in Egypt only in 1879, scholars today know much more than Plato or Thucydides conveyed about the nature of the various democratic institutions of Athens—including how radical their implications really were.

Modern scholars have also skillfully interpreted the surviving texts of Athenian orators, which contain idealizing paeans to democracy, if not a systematic political philosophy. Thus Demosthenes, perhaps the most famous Athenian orator, praised his city's democratic way of life for its "spirit of compassion for the helpless, and of resistance to the intimidation of the strong and powerful; it does not inspire brutal treatment of the populace," nor does it encourage "subservience to the rulers of the day."

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ATHENS WAS ONE of roughly one thousand Greek-speaking political units, towns scattered in the countryside and along the coasts of the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Black Seas, "like frogs around a pond," as Plato put it. The territory of Athens was roughly the size of the modern American state of Rhode Island. It was the most populous polis in ancient Greece. Though the exact number of total residents, including slaves, foreigners, women, and children, is impossible to determine, and fluctuated dramatically over time, experts estimate that there were perhaps as many as sixty thousand citizens in 431 B.C., and about thirty thousand a century later—and that the number of adult male citizens represented around a tenth of the entire population of Attica. The majority of these people resided in rural inland villages; the rest lived either in the port of Piraeus or in the urban center of Athens, the two most thickly settled regions.

Democracy made its surprising appearance in Athens in an archaic context where some neighboring civilizations (such as Persia) had a king ruling over a relatively large realm, and where most of the smaller Greek-speaking city-states were ruled either by monarchs claiming divine sanction; by secular tyrants ruling by brute force; or by a small group of nobles or rich citizens—an "aristocracy," as Greeks called it if this elite was civic-minded, or an "oligarchy," if it was merely self-interested.

Insofar as ordinary citizens (the *demos*) had a role to play in the archaic polis, it was by acknowledging the authority of their leaders, sometimes (as in Homer) simply by shouting their collective approval in public assemblies before a crucial battle. The earliest forms of popular participation in Greece seem to have been

plebiscitary—citizens acclaimed or formally elected a leader, but the leader, having secured popular approval, was then free to exercise power as he saw fit.

According to the pioneering fifth-century Greek historian Herodotus, who is one of our main sources for what little we know about these things, Athens took its first steps toward more robust forms of self-government under the leadership of Solon, who served as an archon or city magistrate in 594/3 B.C. He was legendary for enhancing the power of the city's ordinary citizens, abolishing the practice of debt slavery—and then renouncing power, leaving the city for ten years, thus abjuring the customary spoils of high office.

Solon's reforms were not universally popular. In the decades that followed, Athens was in frequent turmoil, mainly caused by feuds between rival dynastic families with clashing political programs. A period of relative stability began in the middle of the sixth century, when a war hero named Peisistratus seized power and established a tyranny, with the support of most poor Athenians. By levying taxes on wealthier citizens, the tyrant was able to embark on an ambitious public works program, erecting new monuments and buildings, and also devoting public funds to supporting a variety of religious cults and civic festivals. After his death in 527, the tyranny survived for another generation until Cleisthenes, a scion of the powerful Alcmaeonid family, rose to political prominence in 510.

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A NOBLEMAN of uncommon ability, Cleisthenes was ruthless, wily—and blessed with a bold political imagination. Banished as a child along with other members of his extended family because of their ongoing resistance to the rule of Peisistratus, he came of age in Delphi, the site of the Temple of Apollo and the seat of the Pythia, the high priestess regarded as the vessel of Apollo and the oracle most widely consulted in the ancient Greek world. While residing there, the Alcmaeonids won a contract to rebuild the Delphic temple. In a shrewd act of philanthropy, Cleisthenes convinced his kinsmen to pay for extraordinarily fine marble columns for the new temple façade out of the family coffers. Their generous gift put Delphi in the family's debt. Shortly afterward, Cleisthenes personally intervened with the Pythia. He arranged for the oracle to advise Sparta to topple Athens's tyrant, and so free the city from the iron grip of his family's enemies. Schemes like this were typical in archaic Greece.

As a result, a large army of Spartans led by their king in 510 B.C. succeeded in toppling the Athenian tyrant Hippias, triggering several years of elite infighting in Athens. By then, the growing mobilization of popular support by Athenian political rivals had unleashed what one historian speculates was a gradual "process of steady expansion of political equality," from "the narrow circle of only the noble" to the broader ranks of wealthy citizens, who in turn sought increasingly explicit support from the poorer citizenry.

It was apparently in this charged context that sharp conflict erupted over whether or not to define the Athenians as a people with the collective capacity to exercise political power directly. In 508, Cleomenes, an oligarch who hoped

to reverse the growing power of poorer Athenians, outmaneuvered Cleisthenes to become archon—the city’s highest civilian official in those days.

Contesting that result, Cleisthenes began to mobilize popular support, in part by publicizing an elaborate program of political reforms, meant to give *more* power to ordinary citizens. His enemies in turn asked the Spartans to return to Athens, this time to drive Cleisthenes and his allies into exile, to install their army on the Acropolis, and to ensure by force that an oligarch and his allies would be able to rule Athens at will, as an ally of Sparta. Once again, Athens seemed on the verge of spiraling into violence and civil war.

Before the arrival in Athens of King Cleomenes’s troops, Cleisthenes and his family and elite followers decamped, as anticipated.

But what happened next came as a shock. Instead of acquiescing in the foreign occupation, the ordinary citizens of Athens, as if spontaneously, converged on the Acropolis and surrounded the Spartan army, laying siege to the citadel. It took only three days to drive the Spartans from the city—an outcome that suggests the popular uprising had numbers and force on its side.

Though there is no scholarly consensus on the significance of this event, one modern historian, Josiah Ober, does not shrink from comparing the Athenian uprising of 508 to the storming of the Bastille that would launch the French Revolution in 1789. The result in Athens, according to Ober, was also a “revolution,” in the modern sense of a new beginning, a political upheaval that inaugurates a radically new political order.

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“ALTHOUGH ATHENS had been a great city before,” writes Herodotus, “it became even greater once rid of its tyrants.” Summoned back to Athens after the people had repulsed the Spartans, Cleisthenes turned to the Assembly, or Ekklesia, derived from the Greek word meaning “to summon,” because citizens were summoned to meetings by a trumpeter or herald. Under the tyrants, the Ekklesia had been an essentially passive body, but Cleisthenes sought to invigorate it in order to authorize his ambitious plans for reforming the city’s institutions. Henceforth all new legislation in Athens had to be validated in the Assembly, which was now open to *all* citizens, no matter how poor. (At the time, the Athenian citizenry consisted of free-born males over the age of twenty-one with a native Athenian father.) An amphitheater was built for the Assembly, a meeting place called the Pnyx, situated on a rocky slope in central Athens.

In the most audacious aspect of his reform program, Cleisthenes entirely reorganized the body politic. Athens’s traditional kinship groupings had long given de facto political power to a few wealthy families who worshipped a divine ancestor and controlled the relevant priestly offices. Cleisthenes set out to undermine this system by creating an entirely new set of ten civic “tribes.” He assigned each a new eponymous hero to worship and stipulated that its members would be drawn from each of the three broad subregions of Attica: the shore, the plain, and the uplands. Membership in a tribe was now determined more or less arbitrarily, instead of by birth or physical proximity.

One result of this new organization was to bring much closer together hitherto quite separated areas of the polis, and also to break up the regional power bases that had driven political conflict in recent decades. Another result was the creation of a new civic religion that enabled all citizens, not just the members of dynastic families, to join in the worship of a heroic ancestor, and to share in the organization of worship.

The newly empowered Assembly would be steered by an expanded Council of 500, with each tribe providing fifty members. Any citizen over the age of thirty was eligible to serve. Councillors had to take an oath and submit to preliminary review and then a final audit, as a check against wrongdoing. Infantry troops were similarly organized into tribal regiments—and “one of the first things that most forcibly struck outside observers about post-Cleisthenic Athens was how much more militarily successful it quite suddenly became.”

At the same time, Cleisthenes laid a new stress on broadly based civic festivals. These events helped to knit the new civil order together symbolically, by periodically convening a very large group of people—citizens, but also women, resident aliens, even visitors from other cities—in public rituals that dramatized the new civic virtues of *isonomia* (equality under the law), *isegoria* (equal ability to speak in public), and *isokratia* (equal power).

The most important of these festivals had become the City Dionysia, celebrated annually in Athens for five days at the end of March. The Dionysia climaxed with public performances of dithyrambs (choral hymns dedicated to Dionysus), tragedies, and comedies, with the poets and their elite patrons competing for prizes.

According to the myth behind the festival, a certain Pegasos of Eleutherai in the distant past had brought to the nearby city of Athens a statue of Dionysus, the most volatile of the Greek gods, associated with the cult of the bacchae, female worshippers of the god and participants in the ritual bacchanalia. The Athenians, however, failed to honor the god’s statue appropriately. Angered by their effrontery, Dionysus cursed the Athenian men with a chronic genital affliction that could be relieved, according to an oracle, only by expiating the affront through an appropriate ritual observance.

As it evolved in Athens, a central role in the festival’s ritual atonement of the city’s guilt came to be played by its ephebes, young men between the ages of eighteen and twenty, who were sufficiently wealthy to afford armor and who were undergoing mandatory military training to become hoplites, the armed infantrymen who had long formed the backbone of the city’s military forces. Each City Dionysia opened with a reenactment by the ephebes of the advent of Dionysus. The proceeding included a sacrifice at a hearth altar and a torchlight procession bearing the statue of Dionysus to an amphitheater on the south slope of the Acropolis. A parade the next day was even more lavish. Priests and honored participants carried a variety of offerings to the god: carved phalluses, bowls, loaves of bread, and other objects of religious significance. Ephebes marched in military formation as acolytes of the god, blurring the lines between defending the city by armed force, attending a civic festival, and participating in

a religious ritual. Upon arrival at a sacred district next to the amphitheater, a number of animals were sacrificed, and other, bloodless offerings were made.

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WITHIN THE THEATER during the Dionysia, seating was set aside for the epebes, a reminder of the critical role played by its soldiers throughout Athens's history. But the best view was reserved for the Council of 500, seated by tribes. This arrangement underlined the paramount role that ordinary citizens now played in civic affairs, as a result of perhaps the most critical of all the innovations commonly credited to Cleisthenes: namely, his introduction of an annual drawing of lots to determine who would serve that year on the Council. This was a striking departure from the previous practice of selecting political officials by letting prominent men of noble birth (like Cleisthenes) vie for popular support with help from their networks of wealthy friends and clients.

To anyone accustomed to the importance of periodic elections in most modern democracies, the use of a lottery to select a city government seems counterintuitive. But drawing lots to seek the advice of the gods was a common practice in ancient Greece, as it was in many other archaic cultures; so was the use of a lottery to assure fairness (as still happens today in the selection of juries for court trials in many places). At the same time, Cleisthenes put the lottery to a novel *political* use, and he reinforced its impact by stipulating that a citizen could serve on the Council of 500 only twice, nonconsecutively. By combining rotation in office with a random selection process, the lottery nullified the corrupting advantages otherwise conferred in elections by wealth and family prominence. That is why Aristotle regarded elections as an essentially *oligarchic* political device, whereas he thought that selection by lot was quintessentially democratic.

Holding an annual lottery to staff the Council ensured that almost every Athenian citizen, at least once in his life, would participate in governing the city—just as the seating arrangement at the City Dionysia ensured that he would be publicly honored for this service. Over the course of the fifth century, more and more of the city's offices would be filled in annual lotteries open to even the poorest of its citizens, turning the device into a defining feature of the first democracy.

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THE WORD that Athenians later in the fifth century retrospectively applied to the institutional reforms inaugurated by Cleisthenes—*demokratia*—described a novel and still-evolving political form, in which ordinary citizens (*demos*) all had equal access to *kratos* (political power). By the end of the century, there were perhaps several hundred Greek settlements besides Athens that had adopted a form of democracy, some of them allies of Athens and some forced by Athens to adopt democratic institutions modeled on its own.

Slowly but surely, lotteries were used to fill more and more Athenian offices. In 487/6, the lottery was introduced to select the city's chief magistrates, the archons. To this trend there were two significant exceptions—the city's board of

ten generals and its board of ten treasurers, officials responsible for military and financial affairs. Both groups were chosen in elections (and, in the case of the financial officials, there was a property qualification prospective officeholders had to meet as well). Election was the device used in these cases because the city wanted to have experienced merchants overseeing the city's finances, and shrewd strategists leading the city's armed forces, not just any random commoner. It therefore deployed an undemocratic political method in order to produce a meritocratic outcome.

In any case, the power of all the city's officials, whether randomly selected by lot or elected by a vote, was gradually subordinated to the power wielded by the Assembly when citizens met face-to-face in the Pnyx. The polis in Athens began to eclipse in ethical significance the *oikos*, or household—a fraught transition, represented dramatically in the *Antigone* of Sophocles.

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IN ORDER TO preserve the perceived purity of this powerful new community, membership was restricted by a number of formal exclusions that became more rigorous as the regime became more democratic. As time passed, the criteria for citizenship were tightened to ensure that no resident aliens had any access to political power; neither, of course, did women or slaves. As a result, only a small fraction of the Athenian population participated in politics. The significance of this exclusivity was incalculable: the citizens of Athens were encouraged to think of themselves as a chosen people, an example for the rest of mankind. The myth of Athenian autochthony—a strong form of nativism, stressing that citizens must spring from the land—enabled even the poorest citizen to regard himself as well-born.

All native-born male Athenians enjoyed political equality by law. At the same time, there were other marked inequalities among them—of status, of wealth, and of education. Aristotle, a careful analyst of the structure of Greek city-states, sorted the free citizens into two categories: a large group of ordinary citizens (the *demos*, or common people), and a smaller group of extraordinary individuals, aristocrats distinguished by family pedigree, ownership of property, cultivation, and civic achievements.

Such individuals enjoyed no special privileges *de jure* in democratic Athens. Instead, elite citizens bore special burdens: they were expected to help finance the city's warships and to help pay for the city's dramatic festivals (a distinctively Greek form of voluntary taxation, organized around the institution of "liturgies"—the Greek word *leitourgia* literally means "public service"). These public contributions brought glory to some wealthy citizens and enabled them to stand out in the Assembly and other public settings. By the mid-fifth century, it was also common for elite citizens to learn from hired experts how to speak persuasively in public—this was a preliterate society that revolved largely around the spoken, not the written, word. Still, it is a bit misleading to call such eloquent leaders of the Assembly "politicians," as Athens, lacking any such specialized way to make a living, lacked any such word for those members of the elite who chose to devote their free time to public life; in democratic Athens, profiting from politics was in fact a criminal offense.

Despite the advantages they continued to enjoy even after the reforms of Cleisthenes, distinguished Athenians who hoped to lead the demos nevertheless had, unavoidably, to come into direct and ongoing contact with the crowd of ordinary citizens who regularly convened in the Assembly. Any aspiring leader needed to court the common people and find ways to persuade them to undertake a concerted course of action with some measure of consistency. Success in this task generally required having some kind of extraordinary talent, whether as a persuasive speaker, a political tactician, or a military strategist.

Only a few men in some measure combined all of these talents—and that is surely one reason why a handful of famous leaders loom so large in most histories of Athenian democracy.

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MY FIRST EXPOSURE to ancient democracy came as a schoolboy, through reading the funeral oration of Pericles. In assigning the text, a passage from Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*, my sixth-grade teacher explained the somber occasion—an annual oration, held at the city's military cemetery, to commemorate the soldiers killed in combat in the first months of what would become a lengthy war with Sparta.

She also stressed the larger purpose of the speech, to sum up the virtues of the city these soldiers had died for, a society, not unlike our own United States, she suggested, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal, and she directed our attention to the following passage:

“Our constitution,” says Pericles, “does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves”—a reference to the radical novelty of Athenian institutions. “Our city is called a democracy because it is governed by the many, not the few”—one of the earliest, and simplest, definitions of the new political form. “In the realm of private disputes everyone is equal before the law, but when it is a matter of public honors each man is preferred not on the basis of his class but of his good reputation and his merit”—an indication of the egalitarian spirit that prevailed in the city.

By the time he delivered his funeral oration, Pericles, according to the ancient Greek biographer Plutarch, had earned the nickname “Olympian,” because of the admirable nobility of his character and the blameless way he had exercised power, with unwavering civility and self-restraint.

His pedigree was distinguished. His mother was a niece of Cleisthenes, while his father, Xanthippus, although briefly exiled, was renowned for leading the Athenian forces that annihilated the Persian fleet of Xerxes at Mycale in 479, a year after the first Greek victory over the invaders at Salamis.

As a member of the Alcmaeonid family, Pericles had access to some of the most celebrated teachers of the day: Plutarch reports that he learned from Zeno of Elea, a logician renowned for his paradoxes, and Anaxagoras, a naturalist who offered novel explanations of eclipses, rainbows, and meteors.

In 472, shortly after he had come into his patrimony after the death of his father, Pericles was asked to serve as a *choregos*, or producer, at the City Dionysia for Aeschylus, who had been chosen as one of the three playwrights to produce three tragedies and a satyr play for that year's festival. The names of *choregoi* were inscribed on the annual victory lists alongside the names of the winning poet and actors—and in 472, Pericles and Aeschylus were both awarded first prize for *The Persians*.

The play focuses on the Greek triumph at Salamis and its aftermath. It recounts the anger of the gods at the hubris of Xerxes, whose attempt to conquer the Greek people ends in humiliation and defeat. But the play also commemorates the glorious victory of the Greeks over the barbarian foe. In the words of a Persian messenger bearing grim tidings:

The rest of their array moved out and on,  
And to our ears there came a burst of sound,  
A clamour manifold.—*On, sons of Greece!*  
*On, for your country's freedom! strike to save*  
*Wives, children, temples of ancestral gods,*  
*Graves of your fathers! now is all at stake.*

Salamis was a naval engagement, and its outcome proved the prowess of the Athenian fleet of triremes, so-called because of the arrangement of rowers in three tiers down each side of the swift boats. As many as ninety oars on each side, each manned by one rower, enabled the warships to reach a speed of ten knots in short bursts. The poorest citizens in Athens manned the oars of these long boats—and their crucial contribution to the city's emergence as a regional and eventually an imperial power earned them ever more direct access to political power, and the gratitude of the city's leaders, as Pericles attested in his funeral oration to honor the war dead: "No one, moreover, if he has it in him to do some good for the city, is barred because of poverty or humble origins."

As soon as he was eligible, at the age of thirty, in 464, Pericles was elected to serve as one of Athens's ten generals. That year he commanded a fleet of ten triremes on an expedition into the Corinthian Gulf, where he defeated an army of Corinth's neighbor Sicyon. Some historians think that his skill as a naval officer helps to explain his first appearance the following year as a key political actor. In 463, Pericles brought charges against the most prominent of the city's elected generals, Cimon, accusing him of taking bribes from the King of Macedon (apparently to prevent an Athenian attack). At the time, Cimon and his aristocratic supporters were also facing a domestic political challenge from a political newcomer named Ephialtes, who favored giving more power to the lower classes. (Eminent Athenians routinely used litigation as a form of political harassment.)

Cimon's trial for bribery ended in his acquittal. But a few months later, while Cimon was abroad, leading what turned out to be an unsuccessful Athenian

effort to help Sparta suppress a revolt by their Helots (the city's slave-warriors), he faced a different kind of democratic ordeal. His absence cleared the way for his opponents to push political reforms through the Assembly under the leadership of Ephialtes, with the help of followers like the young Pericles.

Ephialtes represented a new kind of Athenian leader: a man without wealth who was regarded as upright and incorruptible, a man *from* the people offering himself as a leader *of* the people. His most important reform was to take away the remaining judicial powers of the Athenian Aeropagus, the city's council of elders, an aristocratic body originally consisting of former archons. The vetting of members of the Council of 500 before and after they had served their annual terms in office was now transferred to the Council itself, while jurisdiction over criminal cases was transferred to popular juries chosen by lot. Officials were now accountable to the demos, not to a dynastic power elite.

Hoping to avert an open civil war, Ephialtes persuaded the Athenians to send Cimon into exile upon his return to Attica. Once a year, the ordinary citizens of Athens were given the opportunity to cast out a compatriot, if they chose. On the appointed day, citizens would assemble in the city's agora, its central marketplace, and write a name on a potsherd; if more than six thousand potsherds named the same person, he would be required to leave Athens within ten days and remain in exile for ten years—a process known as “ostracism.”

All of these reforms were contentious. Shortly afterward, in circumstances that remain obscure, someone murdered Ephialtes—and Pericles emerged as his foremost political heir. But his consolidation of power was gradual. It was only in later decades that his authority became unrivaled, due to his acknowledged gifts as an orator in the Assembly—and, equally important, his leadership of the city's armed forces as the most prominent of its *strategoï*, or elected generals.

Under Cleisthenes' reforms, the city's ten elected generals jointly exercised command of the city's military forces, deciding strategy by majority vote; each general held his presidency in turn in daily rotation. There were no property qualifications to stand for election, but because the city normally favored men with some level of education, most generals came, like Pericles, from wealthy families. Generals could serve consecutive terms in office, if reelected: Pericles was first elected general in 464 and held the post almost continually from 443 until his death in 429.

Generals in these years played an outsize political role, if only *ex officio*. They had the right to attend meetings of the Council of 500 and to propose that it convene the Assembly. And they were often asked to address the Assembly when it deliberated over whether or not to engage in a war—a constant concern.

By the time that Pericles emerged as the city's undisputed leader, Athens had amassed the eastern Mediterranean's most feared military machine, an armada of battleships backed up by a large infantry. Its armed forces enabled Athens to create a formidable empire in the mid-fifth century, exercising a far-flung hegemony over a variety of maritime colonies and vassal Greek city-states.

Pericles proved himself in combat and helped his troops win numerous typically sanguinary campaigns, most notably against the rebellious citizens of Euboea (446), in Samos (441–439), and in Aegina (431). Although Pericles was praised by his supporters for his judiciousness and restraint as a general, he was blunt in his defense of Athenian imperialism, telling the Assembly in one speech recorded by Thucydides, “Remember, too, that if your country has the greatest name in all the world, it is because she has never bent before disaster; because she has expended more life and effort in war than any other city, and has won for herself a power greater than any hitherto known.”

Athens’s growing empire in these years enabled Pericles to finance a number of domestic reforms that strengthened the democratic character of the city. One innovation was to introduce daily pay for the city’s armed forces. According to Plutarch, Pericles sent out “sixty triremes annually, on which large numbers of the citizens sailed about for eight months under pay, practicing and at the same time acquiring the art of seamanship.” He also increased the number of military garrisons assigned to subject city-states, a system that also helped the poorest of citizens. One recent historian has estimated that almost fifteen thousand individuals were supported directly in these ways by the Athenian empire. Pericles initiated a large number of public works projects, persuading the Assembly to construct new monuments and sacred buildings, creating jobs for a large number of local craftsmen. He also introduced a fund that enabled ordinary citizens to receive a per diem payment for serving by lot as a juror in one of the city’s courts, or as a magistrate on the Council. As the French historian Vincent Azoulay remarks, Pericles was in these ways able “to redistribute wealth to the people on a scale never before seen in history.”

Perhaps as a result of these reforms, citizenship in Athens became an even more jealously guarded privilege. (Increasing the number of citizens of course would risk diluting, if not destroying, the newfound fiscal benefits of democratic citizenship.) In addition to excluding slaves, women, and resident aliens, the Athenians passed a law in 451/450 decreeing that it was no longer enough to have a citizen father to qualify for Athenian citizenship; one needed to have a native-born mother as well. The high point of democratic egalitarianism in Athens coincided with the imposition of new, and quite restrictive, norms of citizenship, along with a renewed stress on the mythic autochthony of the Athenian people, sprung from the soil of Attica.

Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, asserts that “the growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm that this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable.” Pericles himself led the Athenians into what turned out to be a prolonged and ultimately disastrous war with Sparta—but not without sharp opposition, a reminder that his power was always circumscribed by his need to cooperate with the city’s other nine generals, and by his ongoing accountability to the citizens of the Assembly.

The crowd could turn suddenly, as Pericles well knew (his father, after all, had been briefly ostracized). Ordinary citizens in the Assembly routinely resorted to vocal interruptions and heckling, trying to throw an orator off his stride. When they gathered “in assemblies, courts, theaters, army camps, or any other common meeting of a multitude,” the Athenian demos, Plato reports, would

“blame some of the things said or done, and praise others, both in excess, shouting and clapping; and besides, the rocks and the very place surrounding them echo and redouble the uproar of praise and blame.” (The place where the Assembly convened, the Pnyx, means “squeezed tight together.”)

Large crowds packed into confined public spaces may have served as a visible check on the power of any one orator—they certainly can make for impressive political theater. But they don’t necessarily promote nuanced deliberation about complex issues, as many modern popular mobilizations, and also the direct democracy of the Swiss rural communes (*Landsgemeinden*), would confirm in practice.

The power of the demos was absolute, and it often changed its mind: it was for just this reason that critics considered democracy a uniquely unstable form of government. The citizens in assembly were perfectly free to reject previously approved laws, even to establish completely new institutions (as witness their adoption of the sweeping reforms of Cleisthenes). As M. I. Finley reminded readers in his classic study *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, “There were no theoretical limits to the power of the state, no activity, no sphere of human behaviour”—public or private, sacred or secular—“in which the state could not legitimately intervene provided the decision was properly taken for any reason that was held to be valid by the Assembly. Freedom meant the rule of law and participation in the decision-making process, not the possession of inalienable rights.” In 430, a few months into the war with Sparta, with the city under siege by the enemy and a plague ravaging those inside the city walls, the Assembly turned on Pericles, blaming him for their plight and eventually relieving him of his duties as *strategos*.

The citizens soon enough repented of their decree and reinstated Pericles as general. But within weeks, he was dead, a victim of the plague that eventually killed nearly one-third the population of Athens.

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“THE ATHENIAN COMMUNITY during the Periclean time must be regarded as one of the most successful examples of social organization in history.” So wrote the British scholar (and avid supporter of empire as a liberating force in world history) Alfred Zimmern in 1911, in his classic account, *The Greek Commonwealth*. And so I was told by my sixth-grade teacher, who encouraged her students to admire Periclean Athens along with Republican Rome and postwar America—all political systems in which ordinary citizens wielded a just measure of political power, I was taught, whether directly, in democratic assembly, or indirectly, by popular voting for public officeholders.

Years passed before I discovered that my textbook image of Pericles was not widely shared in antiquity, nor was my teacher’s admiration for Athenian democracy. On the contrary: the prevailing tradition in the West, up until the late eighteenth century, was hostile to democracy.

It is worth recalling that most Greek cities in this period were aristocracies or oligarchies, governed by a small group of men who claimed the right to rule on

the basis of noble birth or wealth, or both. The anonymous author of one of our earliest sources on Greek politics, probably written sometime in the second half of the fourth century A.D., put his views this way: "Throughout the world the aristocracy are opposed to democracy, for they are naturally least liable to loss of self control and injustice and most meticulous in their regard for what is respectable, whereas the many display extreme ignorance, indiscipline and wickedness, for poverty gives them a tendency towards the ignoble, and in some cases lack of money leads to their being uneducated and ignorant." In other words, citizens free from want, and with the leisure time to become educated, are better political decision makers than those less fortunate—this was the crux of the case for aristocracy as an ideal form of government.

Athens, in contrast, let the poorest of its citizens participate in almost every level of government. By empowering an impoverished multitude in this manner, the city, critics charged, had in fact created a new kind of tyranny, a collective tyranny of the majority, a kind of "dictatorship of the proletariat" in which the Assembly and democratic orators in concert had created a redistributive regime that doled out money and patronage to the ordinary citizens who manned the imperial fleet and staffed the city's juries and civil offices.

Thucydides, though he admired Pericles as an exemplary political leader of the aristocratic type, was no fan of Athenian democracy. He nevertheless documented some remarkable public debates among the Athenians in his history of the Peloponnesian War, offering evidence of the strengths as well as limitations of the city's democratic institutions in action.

For example, Thucydides recounts how the Assembly reacted in 427 to the news that its armed forces had suppressed a bloody revolt at Mytilene. The armed uprising, fomented by an erstwhile ally with the connivance of its enemy Sparta at a time when Athens had yet to recover fully from the plague, was not the sort of act likely to excite feelings of clemency toward the rebels. In an initial meeting of the Assembly, Thucydides reports that Cleon, the most powerful popular leader after the death of Pericles, had no trouble convincing his fellow citizens to mete out the harshest possible justice, by summarily executing all the men of Mytilene and enslaving the women and children.

A master of abusive insults—some say "he was the first to shout when addressing the people"—Cleon was ruthless in his dishonesty and preening in his self-confidence. Thucydides says he was "the most violent man at Athens, and at that time the most powerful with the people." He was, in the eyes of the chronicler, a pernicious new style of popular leader (literally, *demagogos*)—a bombastic and vindictive man whose prevailing emotions, of anger and pique, he could make contagious in public settings.

In ancient Greek, before the derogatory appropriation of the term by Plato, *demagogos* meant, literally, "leader of the people"—and in this purely descriptive neutral sense, Pericles was in fact the most acclaimed leader of the people in fifth-century Athens. As Thucydides himself emphasized, the Athenian democracy flourished when incisive leaders as self-possessed as Pericles played a central role in popular decision making—and floundered when power-hungry agitators pandered to popular passions.

In his account of the Athenian deliberations over what to do with Mytilene, Thucydides proceeds to describe in detail how the demos, as it sometimes did, underwent a dramatic change of heart. The Assembly was reconvened the next day to reconsider their original decision. Cleon was this time answered by one Diodotus, who urged mercy and a calm reconsideration of what policy best served the city's interests. (Nobody questioned its right to slaughter the men and enslave the women and children.) After hearing the arguments of Diodotus, the Assembly revoted, and chose, by a narrow margin, to spare the people of Mytilene—for reasons of geopolitical prudence, not out of any humanitarian sentiment. (Admittedly, no such happy outcome occurred in the even more hair-raising episode involving the Athenian genocide of the Melians a few years later, though that policy was executed not by the Assembly but by the city's presiding officials on-site.)

The episode gives us a vivid glimpse of the demos in action—and Thucydides, despite the not unreasonable outcome in this case, was not at all reassured by what he saw.

On the contrary, the inconstancy of the crowd confirmed his view that ordinary people, quick to anger and vulnerable to flattery, had little interest in, or ability to learn, or act upon, the truth. In his opinion, the best leader in a democracy was someone like Pericles, who “led the multitude rather than being led by it ... Whenever he saw the people were unjustifiably confident and arrogant, he would cow them into fear with his words; on the other hand, when he saw them unreasonably afraid, he would turn them back to hopefulness once more.” It is in this context that Thucydides remarks that Athens under Pericles was a “democracy” in name only; in reality, it was a city “governed by its first citizen.”

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IN 404 B.C., the Peloponnesian War ended in the defeat of Athens, the dismantling of its empire—and, briefly, the destruction of its democracy. Shortly after the city surrendered to Sparta, the so-called Thirty Tyrants came to power and quickly disbanded the Council of 500, dissolved the Ekklesia, and started to execute citizens they regarded as political enemies. Among the tyrants were two prominent disciples of the city's most famous philosopher, Socrates—a reminder that the rise of democracy in Athens coincided with the birth of philosophy as a distinctive way of life.

As tensions flared in Athens, Socrates tried to stay above the fray, supposedly telling friends that only a shameful regime would deliberately murder large numbers of citizens. Among his followers were not only members of the tyranny like Critias and Charmides, but ardent democrats like Chaerephon, who had asked the Delphic oracle years before whether there was anyone wiser than Socrates. (The answer was no.)

Late in 404, a civil war broke out in Athens. The following spring, Critias was killed in a skirmish. Six months later, the Thirty Tyrants were driven from Athens, democracy was restored, and a political amnesty was decreed—a pioneering venture in public forgiveness and an effort to defuse the divisive,

potentially destructive impulses that were never far from the surface in democratic Athens.

Unfortunately, the amnesty didn't stop enemies of Socrates from bringing charges in 399 against the old man, alleging that the putative seeker of wisdom was an arrogant dissembler, guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth. At his trial, Socrates defended himself against these charges by recalling his puzzlement that Apollo, speaking through the oracle of Delphi, had suggested that nobody was wiser than Socrates. Assuming, as a pious man would, that the god spoke truly, Socrates proceeded to question whomever he met about his knowledge of things. He discovered, as he told the jury, that most of his fellow citizens, even the greatest and most accomplished among them, were in fact unable to defend their beliefs about the best way to live, or the nature of a good society.

As he spoke, Socrates took evident pride in the fact that he had become someone *extraordinary*—and his perceived haughtiness posed a real problem to jurors who expected a measure of deference to customary views and beliefs. (The city's democratic orators, besides defending the right of anyone to speak in the Assembly, routinely praised the value of consensus, or *homonomia*—literally, same-mindedness.) When he turned to the accusation that he had corrupted the young, Socrates responded more sharply still, with taunts: “Do you know anyone who is less a slave to bodily desires than I am? Do you know anyone more free?... Could you plausibly regard anyone as more upright?”

Plato and Xenophon, two eyewitnesses who wrote accounts of the trial, agree that Socrates was defiant, even insolent in his self-defense, which wasn't helpful when some ordinary citizens already distrusted his air of superiority. The large jury of his peers—probably 501 citizens—found Socrates guilty by a slim margin. This verdict was perfectly legitimate by the norms of the city's democracy. But in the eyes of his philosophical followers, his trial and subsequent execution (by drinking a poisonous tea made of hemlock) was a grotesque miscarriage of justice—and an important piece of evidence in the case some of them would subsequently make *against* democracy.

The most important of these critics was Plato. In his dialogue the *Republic*, Plato shows Socrates in happier days, in prolonged conversation with two young friends, arguing that most people—“the many”—have “no knowledge of true being, and have no clear patterns in their minds of justice, beauty, truth” (in the Victorian paraphrase of Benjamin Jowett). Only a few people—those who love wisdom, the philosophers—have reliable knowledge and clear conceptions of justice, beauty, and truth. These observations lead Socrates, in the course of the imaginary conversation Plato depicts, to suggest that philosophers should become kings in a properly ordered polis, for (as Jowett puts it) “they are lovers of the knowledge of the eternal and of all being; they are lovers of truth and haters of falsehood; their desires are absorbed in the interests of knowledge.”

Yet as every reader of Plato's dramatic dialogue knew, Socrates had been condemned at Athens, not crowned a king. Asked by his interlocutors in Plato's dialogue how a polis could ever treat a lover of wisdom unjustly, Socrates

answers in a parable—striking images are a crucial part of Plato’s power as a writer.

In this parable, Socrates asks his audience to picture a ship, and to imagine an owner at the helm, someone who “is bigger and stronger than everyone else on board, but he’s hard of hearing, a bit short-sighted, and his knowledge of seafaring is equally deficient.” The owner is a poor helmsman, and the sailors can plainly see his failings. They begin to quarrel among themselves about seizing control of the ship, with each of them supposing that he might make a better captain. Realizing they have strength in numbers, they corner the shipowner and try to force him to hand over the ship. Failing at first, they seek help from another eminent man of wealth and privilege on board, someone who is “clever at persuading or forcing the shipowner to let them rule.” And when this silver-tongued man convinces the owner to hand over the helm to him, the sailors all cheer. Praising him (in Plato’s words) as a “navigator,” a ‘captain,’ and as ‘one who knows ships,’” they dismiss anyone else as useless: “They don’t understand that a true captain must pay attention to the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds, and all that pertains to his craft, if he’s really to be the ruler of a ship.” Even worse, Socrates concludes, if anyone on deck in such a fraught situation should claim that *he* knows how to navigate properly, by consulting the heavens, the mutinous sailors would surely jeer, and hurl insults, and call him a “stargazer, a babbler, and a good-for-nothing.”

The charismatic captain in this parable is a demagogue. The unruly sailors represent the demos—and the stargazer is a philosopher, ridiculed and reviled instead of properly revered.

“The problem was that democracy pandered to desire,” David Runciman remarks in a shrewd recent study, summing up some of Plato’s many qualms about democracy: “It gave people what they wanted day to day, but it did nothing to make sure they wanted the right things. It had no capacity for wisdom, for difficult decisions, or for hard truths. Democracies were founded on flattery and lies. Democratic politicians told the people what they wanted to believe, not what they needed to hear. As Plato put it, they took their failings and dressed them up as though they were virtues.”

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**ALCIBIADES**—A WARD of Pericles, the prize pupil of Socrates, and a demagogue of the first rank (in both the neutral and pejorative sense of the term)—reportedly called the Athenian democracy an “acknowledged folly.”

Despite this dim estimate of its value, democracy would endure for almost a century after the death of Socrates. As Thucydides remarked, “It was no light matter to deprive the Athenian people of its freedom”—surely one reason why Athenians quickly restored their democracy.

In the years that followed, democracy in Athens evolved and, in many respects, flourished. Its democratic institutions were refined and reformed. If anything, the restored democracy of the fourth century seems to have produced ever more intensive participation by a dwindling number of full citizens. And even though

the city had lost its empire, the regional power of the city remained considerable. Its continuing success has led a number of modern historians to argue that Athens by ancient standards was “a remarkably efficient State,” if not quite the imperialist paradise imagined by Alfred Zimmern.

Throughout the fourth century, the city remained the most vital center in the ancient world for scientific research and rival philosophical schools. In part as a result of this flowering of inquiry associated above all with the academy of Plato and the subsequent lyceum of Aristotle, we know much more about the Greek democracy in its final decades than we do about its functioning under Pericles, or during the Peloponnesian War.

The key piece of the puzzle appeared only in the final decades of the nineteenth century, when a papyrus scroll was discovered in Egypt containing the text we now know, somewhat misleadingly (since no Greek polis had a comprehensive written document similar to the Constitution of the United States) as *The Constitution of Athens*. (The Greek word *politeia*, sometimes translated as “constitution,” refers to a community of citizens and how it is structured, via customary rituals and unwritten norms, as well as publicly posted laws.) This document, likely the work of one of Aristotle’s students, though commonly attributed to Aristotle himself, and therefore included in modern editions of his complete works, dates from the end of the fourth century B.C.

Reading this document is a sobering experience for anyone enchanted by the glories of Athens that Pericles depicted in his funeral oration. In her widely influential study *The Human Condition*—and in the context of praising Pericles and his oration—Hannah Arendt claims that the Greek “*polis* was supposed to multiply the occasions to win ‘immortal fame,’ that is, to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show who he was in his unique distinctness.”

Inspired by Arendt, a series of armchair political philosophers in the decades since have sung the praises of Greek democracy for its putative embodiment of “the political,” understood as a dramatic struggle staged for appreciative spectators, which would increase the chances that “a deed deserving fame would not be forgotten.” At the same time, Arendt asserted that “the Greeks, in distinction from all later developments, did not count legislating among the political activities. In their opinion, the lawmaker was like the builder of the city wall, someone who had to do and finish his work before political activity could begin.” In such an idealized conception, the essence of Athenian politics is taken to be lofty oratory and memorable confrontations between outstanding actors competing for glory.

*The Constitution of Athens* tells a different, and far less romantic, story about the everyday democratic meaning of “the political,” and about the actual political practices prevailing in Athens from roughly 350 to 322 B.C.

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PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT public duty of every native-born Athenian man throughout this period was military service. In the second half of the fourth

century, the city's ephebes—by now including every native-born Athenian boy over the age of eighteen—had to undergo several years of training, learning how to fight in armor and how to use the bow, the javelin, and the catapult. After a public display of his mastery of the martial arts, each citizen received a shield and spear as a gift from the city, and then was asked to patrol the countryside and man the city's guard posts, becoming a full-fledged citizen only after two years of mandatory military service. Once a citizen, a young man could participate in the city's Assembly (Ekklesia), but not yet the city's Council of 500.

The Council met every day except for festival days and an indeterminate number of days regarded as "inauspicious." In a typical year, the Council met about three hundred days. Meetings were normally held in a Council house, located in the southwest corner of the agora next to the city archive and a monument to the city's eponymous heroes, where public notices were posted. For roughly one month at a time, all of the councillors from one of the city's ten districts were treated as a standing committee in more or less permanent session and sharing the duty to watch over the Council chambers at night. Councillors all received a per diem.

The Council prepared the agenda for the Assembly and reviewed every matter to be put before the people. It audited the performance not just of the previous year's councillors, but of all city officials. It was in charge of awarding contracts for any public works (such as repair of the city walls, the erection of new temples, or the construction of new warships). It supervised all the other city boards, including those handling the city's finances; the health of the city's horses; the fitness of its armed forces; the provision of welfare to disabled Athenians; the integrity of the city's coinage and of its market weights and measures; the execution of criminals; and so on. The Council also received all envoys from foreign states—it was responsible for international relations.

The Council's agenda was in part fixed, requiring it to review at regular intervals the city's income and expenditures. Foreign policy had to be discussed at specified meetings. Ongoing review of major public works occurred at specific intervals. Voting was normally by a show of hands, and the results were estimated visually.

Being a councillor was (to put it mildly) a demanding task. It was especially onerous for citizens who lived outside the city walls and who had to travel on foot to and from daily meetings; for many, the per diem barely covered the cost of their food and lodging, if they chose to stay away from home. There is evidence that by the second half of the fourth century, some seats on the Council, when the population of Athens was declining, needed to be filled either by peer pressure or compulsory enlistment. Participation was obligatory (just as jury duty is today in many modern liberal societies).

Four days before the Assembly convened, according to the norms in effect at the time, the Council posted an agenda. Meetings of the Assembly began at dawn, so citizens from outside the city needed to be en route before sunrise. Attendants handed each participant a token, which was handed back when pay was distributed after the Assembly meeting was over.

The proceedings invariably began with a sacrifice. A pig was slaughtered and dragged around the Pnyx to purify the site with its blood. A herald gave a prayer, followed by a curse upon any participant who would seek to mislead the demos. He then asked, "Who of those above fifty years of age wishes to address the assembly?" Only after the Assembly had heard from its elders were other citizens invited to speak.

Meetings had to end by dusk, and proceedings could be stopped at any time by stormy weather, as rainfall was regarded as a bad omen. Questions of divine dispensations were taken very seriously; there is at least one attested case where the Assembly, unable to settle a dispute involving land use, sought the consul of Apollo at Delphi, and sent an embassy to consult the Pythia (Apollo, according to the oracle, advised leaving the land in question fallow).

Like the Council, the Assembly in the fourth century often had a fixed agenda. In those days, any citizen, if he chose, could charge under oath that an orator had improperly persuaded the Assembly to adopt a decree that was illegal (*paranomon*); if convicted by a popular jury, the decree was vacated and the orator found responsible for misleading the demos was fined. Any citizen could similarly impeach the conduct of any elected general or treasurer.

At the start of a new annual cycle of Assembly meetings, according to an account given by the orator Demosthenes (384–322), "the Herald having read prayers, a vote shall be taken on the laws, to wit, first upon laws respecting the Council, and secondly upon general statutes, and then upon statutes enacted for the nine Archons"—the ceremonial chief magistrates of the city, chosen by lot—"and then upon laws affecting other authorities." This meant that citizens annually could reconsider—and suggest revising—the laws governing the city.

Roughly once a month, the Assembly, according to a fixed agenda, voted on whether all officeholders were properly doing their jobs; they reviewed the state of the city's relations with the gods; they confirmed that the city had sufficient stocks of grain and that the homeland was secure militarily.

For some important matters, such as promulgating a new law or conferring an honorary citizenship, the Assembly required a quorum of six thousand at two successive meetings—so there was pressure to participate in this forum, too. And this was not the end of the pressure. In addition to the Council and the regular Assembly meetings, citizens had to staff up the juries of the courts. Every year, the city impaneled by lot six thousand potential jurors, who were all citizens over the age of thirty with no public debts. Jurors for a specific court case were drawn by lot from the bigger list. Juries varied in size, consisting of between 501 and 1,001 citizens. A number of courtrooms surrounded the agora, in order to process an escalating number of trials (caused in part by a growing number of commercial disputes in Aristotle's day, which the courts were expected to adjudicate). In the second half of the fourth century, scholars estimate that courts were in session between 150 and 200 days a year. Being randomly chosen as part of the city's annual jury pool in those years was almost as onerous as being randomly chosen to serve as a councillor.

Although some details of how the democracy worked in this period still remain obscure, this much seems clear: from 350 to 322, the era for which we have the most direct evidence, Athens had ensured equality of political access for all of its citizens by devising an astonishingly complex municipal government. “Never before or since in world history has such an elaborate network of political institutions been created and developed to run a very small and fairly simple society,” claims the Danish historian Mogens Herman Hansen, perhaps the greatest modern expert on Athenian democracy.

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IT SEEMS to have been true that this extraordinarily intricate form of amateur self-government largely worked—but making it work was a punishing task. The Cambridge historian Paul Cartledge calls it “participatory democracy with a vengeance.” Aristotle’s famous assertion that man is a political animal certainly applied to the citizens of fourth-century Athens.

Toward the end of the century, there was a proliferation of meetings. Chronic, potentially polarizing tensions between rival groups of citizens were “an inevitable cost of the democratic decision-making mode.” The Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt, in his prickly nineteenth-century lectures on Greek civilization, lamented the constant recourse to jury trials at Athens, and the city’s “spirit of feverish litigation,” not least as a means of political score settling, replete with grandstanding public speeches alleging crimes that were often amazingly ill-defined—the trial of Socrates for impiety being the most notorious example of this aspect of Athenian democracy.

By the time Aristotle’s team compiled *The Constitution of Athens*, the active citizen population of Athens was perhaps half of what it had been under Pericles, making the demands of participation more all-consuming than ever. Under Pericles, the Athenians had created a closed community, with the rights of citizenship available to only a privileged (and dwindling) few—and that fact alone made the city increasingly vulnerable to conquest by outside forces.

This is not the place to recount the decline of Athenian democracy. Of the causes for its eclipse, perhaps the most important involved the rise of an expansive new imperial power to the north, Macedonia, which from 338 onward exercised effective hegemony over the entirety of Greece, including Athens. The kinds of moral flaws and lack of wisdom in a democracy stressed by Plato had little to do with the decline of Athenian independence (though his criticism had everything to do with the subsequent marginalization of democracy in the Western tradition of political thought).

Democracy in any case didn’t disappear overnight. In Athens, the first step came in 321, when Antipater, Alexander the Great’s successor as leader of Macedonia, imposed a minimum wealth qualification for holding Athenian citizenship. When the Macedonian Empire began to fall apart, it was replaced by a succession of regional multistate empires that competed to rule over vast swaths of territory. Meanwhile, for some years to come, some Greek cities, including Athens, maintained regimes that were nominally democratic, even

when they were effectively ruled by local elites controlled by garrisons and governors who represented distant monarchs.

As Paul Cartledge has summed up the situation in the Hellenistic period, “the constitutional trend in political actuality was firmly toward various shades of oligarchy.” Yet if only as an ideological fig leaf, “*demokratia*” continued to be used to describe Hellenistic Greek city-states that were neither monarchies nor tyrannies and had some degree of independence from relevant regional powers. Even more potentially confusing, this vague usage (Cartledge calls it a “calamitous verbal collapse”) was extended in the first century A.D. by the application of the term *demokratia* to the Roman Empire of Augustus (perhaps on the grounds that Augustus claimed to preside over a “restored” Republic, or perhaps because he had assumed for life the title, and power, of a tribune of the common people, the *plebs Romana*). By the mid-second century A.D., Aelius, a famed orator, could declare, in the ode “To Rome,” that “there has been established through out the world alike a democracy—under one man, namely the best ruler and controller.”

So “democracy” survived as a word for almost any type of ostensibly “popular” republic, however authoritarian or mixed with monarchic elements its constitution might be; just as the same word, much more rigorously defined by serious students of politics, survived as a word for direct rule by ordinary citizens, a form of government widely associated with the danger of mob rule.

At the same time, the memory of real democracy in its most radical forms in Athens was preserved in a variety of ancient texts. There it lived on not just as an object of systematic criticism, in the philosophical works of Plato and Aristotle, but also as an imagined community, preserved in the extant public speeches of demagogues like Pericles and Demosthenes.

Yet however vivid some of these oratorical paeans to “democracy,” the equally vivid images of democratic disorder in Plato, combined with his sustained arguments against it as a reasonable form of government, would make an even deeper and much more lasting impression. What Alfred North Whitehead said about the European philosophical tradition applies with even greater force to the Western tradition of thought about politics: “the safest general characterization” of each “is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”

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AS A COLLEGE STUDENT in the sixties, I found Plato’s conclusions deeply offensive—so repugnant, in fact, that I had to struggle to rise above my democratic prejudices and seriously engage the substance of his various arguments against popular self-rule. At the same time, inspired by the work of Hannah Arendt, and her romantic picture of the glory of public life in ancient Greece, I found myself yearning for a more active and direct form of democracy than that on offer in the United States. A wish for a more perfect democracy was part of what first inspired my interest in both radical activism and political philosophy. Faced with the skepticism of critics like Plato, I took heart from John Stuart Mill’s argument, based in part on the example of Athens (and also the historiography of the great Victorian champion of Athenian democracy, George

Grote), that participation in political life is, in itself, edifying, a “school of public spirit” in which citizens come to appreciate their common interests.

There is certainly something to the idea that participation in politics can forge a shared civic culture. But as the history of Athens (and other, subsequent democratic movements as well) shows, intense political participation can also breed conflict and polarization (what the Greeks called *stasis*), so that faction, sedition, even civil war are chronic threats. The case for such participation isn't as clear-cut as Mill implied.

And while the Athenian regime was certainly admirable in its capacity to draw all citizens equally into public affairs, it is impossible to ignore the many classes of people it simultaneously excluded from active citizenship. Even worse, these exclusions became more strict with the passage of time. The solidarity of the Athenian democracy came to depend, in part, upon claims of exclusivity codified in terms of consanguinity. In sharp distinction to the Romans, who extended the rights of citizenship to their allies and subjects as the empire grew, Athens maintained (with a few exceptions) its citizenship as a privilege open only to a chosen few.

Athenian-born women were largely kept out of the public eye, with the notable exception of participating in civic festivals and sacred rituals, and serving as the high priestess of Athena Polias. Resident aliens also played little role in public affairs, though some were allowed to make expensive contributions to the city (a source of status and not just a form of taxation).

The slave population was large, perhaps a third of the overall population of Athens at any time, and hugely important: some labored under terrible conditions in the city's silver mines, others were skilled craftsmen, and still others were lucky enough to be trained functionaries. In fact, many administrative tasks under the democracy throughout its existence were relegated to *demosioi*, slaves owned by the city—public servants, literally—who supervised elections, maintained archives, tested the coinage, and served as clerks, accountants, street cleaners, even as policemen. But even as relatively privileged public servants, slaves had a vulnerability that citizens did not: if they failed to do their jobs properly, they could be whipped. (A stele unearthed in Athens in 1970 stipulates fifty lashes as the prescribed punishment for a public slave tasked with testing the currency who “does not sit at his post or test according to the law.”)

In democratic Athens, any citizen was free to speak his mind when the people assembled—but that freedom coexisted with a drive toward unity and consensus, in a community where collective single-mindedness was prized as a demotic virtue, perhaps because sharp dissension was in practice such a chronic threat. A certain fear of nonconformity seems to have been one factor behind the guilty verdict of the citizen jury that tried the philosopher Socrates.

At the same time, Athens, in its heyday, was almost always at war. It wasn't as obsessed with cultivating the martial virtues as Sparta, where the army stood at the center of civic affairs—but Athens was an aggressive regional power, and its recurrent mobilization of citizens to combat external enemies produced a

distinctively democratic ideology, a vision of the soldier-citizenry as a band of brothers, of one mind and one purpose, its solidarity forged in combat.

In thinking about Greek democracy, one may choose to minimize such tensions and contradictions, and celebrate instead the extraordinary fact that all the citizens of Athens, at the height of its democracy, exercised virtually unfettered power, directly in the Assembly and the popular courts, and by random selection to staff up virtually all of the city's other offices.

By concentrating on the lofty rhetoric of Pericles, and the many cultural accomplishments of Athens in its prime, Mill and Grote, and later authors like Zimmern and Arendt, were able to inspire widespread admiration for the world's first democracy among educated readers. In this way, the reevaluation of ancient Athens helped to turn democracy itself, against long odds, into a plausible, even praiseworthy, form of government, first in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century—and subsequently throughout the world.

By then the French Revolution had made it clear that Athens would not be the last example of a democracy based on citizen-soldiers poised to shed blood. Fraternity, solidarity, and the kinds of virtues forged through conflict and struggle would prove alluring for a number of subsequent democrats of different persuasions.

At the same time, some of the most thoughtful modern proponents of democracy would press to make its promise of collective freedom dramatically more universal and inclusive—and, ideally, more pacific—than anything the Athenians had imagined possible.