

Athenian Democracy: something to celebrate?

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How did Athenian democracy work? How do you run a state where all important decisions are made at meetings open to all citizens, where most of the magistrates are elected by lot, and where there is no Civil Service to speak of? How, more particularly, do you manage this when the citizen body is 30,000 to 50,000 strong and spread over 2500 sq. km. – about the area of Derbyshire? The referenda in Denmark in 1992 and 1993, and the riots in Copenhagen which followed the second, have drawn attention to the difficulties attendant on opening up even a single issue to decision by the whole enfranchised population. How then did Athens manage to put all its business through meetings open to any citizen without creating impossible tensions and frustrations or ending up always taking the course of action which would cause everybody least trouble?

In proposing an answer to this question, I shall draw attention not simply to the institutions of government, and the rules, explicit or tacit, under which they operated, although I believe those to be important,¹ but also to the nature of the Athenian community more generally. I will argue that Athenian democracy depended crucially on the homogeneity of the citizen population, a homogeneity which was consciously cultivated – and cultivated at the expense of individual freedom – and which created not just the context for the effective working of democracy but also the unique environment for the production of classical tragedy and comedy.

The institutional key to Athenian democracy does not lie in the Assembly, for all that the Assembly was the prime democratic body. It seems very unlikely that a change in the precise rules governing attendance at the Assembly – increasing or decreasing the number of people who could be accommodated in the assembly place on the Pnyx hill, raising the age from eighteen to twenty-five or thirty, changing the arrangements about who presided – would have had any serious effect on how democracy worked. The key institution was surely the Council.² The Council of 500 in which all ten of the artificial tribal units created by Cleisthenes

c.507 B.C. were equally represented, was, more importantly, a body on which members of every community in Attica, every *deme*, always served, in numbers more or less in proportion to the size of the community. The voices of those from the furthest-flung village, the voices of those close to the land border, the voices of those in whose midst were the crucially important Athenian silver mines worked by large numbers of slaves of foreign extraction, the voices of those from communities isolated in inland mountain valleys – all these voices were there for the hearing. And they were there for the hearing on all the business of the state; for, with some exceptions but no systematic exceptions, it was the Council of 500 which chewed over all business that was to be discussed by the Assembly, and made more or less definite recommendations about what the Assembly should decide. No recommendation was made to the Assembly without someone from each of the communities in Attica having been able in principle to have a say, and to have a say in a body which, though large, had time enough for real deliberation. The Assembly did not always accept the advice of the Council, but it rarely formulated detailed decisions different from those recommended by the Council without referring the matter back to the Council in some way or other.³

The Council was not a government. It was not at all like the British Parliament. There were representatives of each community, but those representatives were chosen by lot (from whoever volunteered), not by election; they served for only a year at a time and not more than twice in a lifetime. The representatives were under no obligation to ‘represent’ their community in any formal way, and the scrutiny which they faced at the end of their period of office did not give disappointed members of their community any chance to complain that they had not acted and spoken in the local interest. Nor did the Council provide continuity; indeed it guaranteed that what came to the Assembly had been screened by a body that was constantly changing: no one could serve for two consecutive years or more than twice in a lifetime. Numbers were no doubt sufficient to ensure that in general there was a similar mix of old and relatively young (you had to be over thirty), of radicals and conservatives, each year, but no single voice could be consistently prominent in the Council. There is some talk of groups cooperating over political office and law court cases, but Athens had nothing like a party system, and although scholars occasionally suspect that a member of the Council was acting as a front-man for a more prominent individual, it seems unlikely that this happened in any systematic way.

Such continuity as Athenian politics enjoyed was provided not by the Council

but by those who spoke in the Assembly. Once the suggestion of the Council had been read out to the Assembly, the 6000 or so Athenians gathered on the Pnyx were asked, 'Who wants to speak?' Anyone could take up this invitation, and there may well have been unknown faces addressing the Assembly on some issue or other at most of its meetings; but some men spoke more often than others. It was these men – some of whom gained public stature from holding repeatedly one of the few offices (the most important of which was General, which could be held more than once or twice) – who carried the corporate memory and made some degree of consistency of principle and practice possible. Democracy could not have worked without this élite, but this élite was more important for providing principled advice than for providing expertise of any technical sort.⁴ It was upon principles, and not on technical information, that crucial Athenian decisions depended – decisions about going to war, how to carry on war, whether and how to punish offending allies or ineffective generals, and even about the level of tribute allies in general should pay. Different individuals attracted popular attention and popular acclaim in different ways: some paraded their own private life and achievements, as Cimon paraded his generosity to those who lived in his home village⁵ or Alcibiades his extravagantly successful participation in the chariot race at the Olympic games⁶; some paraded the high moral stance displayed in their prosecutions on charges of deceiving or defrauding the people, or advertised the way in which they embodied the popular view and the popular interest, as Cleon seems to have done⁷; some came to rely on their own track record of successful advice and successful military campaigns, as Pericles did⁸; yet others, no doubt, consciously espoused radical or conservative causes, whether the conservatism was religious, as in those who stirred up a backlash against the men responsible for mutilating the herms in 415, or political, as in those who made the 'ancestral constitution' their slogan in 412/11 (and a single man might embrace both of these opportunities, as Peisander did).⁹ But the variety of gambits for gaining support led to very much the same position, a position of authority on matters of political principle, not a position of authority on matters of technical detail. The practical enactment of Assembly decisions was the responsibility of the Council or of particular magistrates; Thucydides, at least, could believe that the Assembly was happy enough to decide on a course of action the practicality of which it was far from confident about, in the knowledge that if it was not practical it was only really the General, who had to carry the decision through, who would suffer.¹⁰

The 'amateur' status of the Council, the body which framed decisions and

oversaw their execution, and the crucial part played by those who spoke in the Assembly, men who were in very important ways non-responsible, goes some way to explaining how Athens prevented government ever becoming so technical a matter that men who came but occasionally to the Assembly could take no effective part. It does not, however, explain why politics never became dominated by warring factions, opposing each other for ideological reasons largely independent of any particular issue in hand. There clearly were times in the fifth and fourth centuries when significant groups of Athenians felt themselves politically frustrated, but all the signs are that those groups were usually small and those occasions relatively infrequent.

To explain the effectiveness of such open government we have to look beyond institutions, beyond even the way those institutions were used, to the broader social set-up. And the most crucial feature of Athenian society is its strongly corporate nature. Athenians were, from the moment of birth, given identity as – perhaps only as – members of a whole series of overlapping groups. True to some extent of both sexes, this was particularly true of those who were potential full active citizens, the males. Within the first week or ten days of life an Athenian boy was the focus of attention in a household ritual, for which relatives gathered around the hearth of the house, and was given a name which most regularly reproduced the name of some (preferably paternal) relative, or at least had much in common with such a family name. While still a small child, a boy was introduced to the wider group of the *phratry*, a group once again kin based but extending well beyond immediate kin. It was as a member of the phratry that a boy celebrated his coming of age and readiness for military service. Phratries had no direct institutionalized political role, but they remained very jealous of the privilege of membership, and, by developing complicated rules for the scrutiny of those who claimed the right to become members, stressed their corporate importance¹¹.

At the age of eighteen an Athenian boy became a citizen by being recognised as a member of the local community, the *deme* (there were 139 or 140 of these), in which his paternal ancestor at the time of Cleisthenes had registered himself, and it was with members of the *deme* and as a member of a tribal regiment that the young boy would see military service¹². In the later part of the fourth century, at least, a regular period of such service followed for two years immediately upon registration in the *deme*. *Deme* decisions and *deme* debates are likely to have been the first issues which a young boy heard about and could understand, and the structure of government of the *deme*, the manner of conducting meetings, the

language of decision-making – all these gave experience of how politics was carried on by the city as a whole. Demes enjoyed a very considerable degree of independence – they had their own calendar of festivals, ran their own finances, honoured those they chose to honour. It is quite likely that certain ways of thought found in both deme and city decrees (e.g. ‘we are honouring this man to encourage others to show like ambition in order to gain like reward’) were actually forged in the deme, where individual generosity could make a lot of difference, and exported from deme to city. But to be a member of a deme and a citizen was also to be a member of a tribe (*phyle*). Tribes too had elected and allotted officials, ran their own finances and had their own cults. But what gave tribes their identity was that they were the unit of military service: it was upon your fellow tribesmen that your life immediately depended in the hoplite line, and it was with your fellow tribesmen that your name would appear, starkly, on its own without the name of your father or of your deme, in the city’s public lists of those who died in war if you did not resist the thrust of the enemy. Not surprisingly, some Athenians, faced with threat to life not in the military line but in a lawsuit, chose to appeal to their fellow tribesmen to speak on their behalf in court.¹³

In all these ways, as members of these overlapping groups, the Athenian citizen was nurtured to feel corporate responsibility and to espouse corporate interests. Growing up was not a matter of liberation from the stifling care of the family group to an independent individual life, but of growing into ever larger groups with ever wider responsibilities. As the phratry was but a larger version of the family, so the body of citizens in the Assembly was but a larger version of the body of demesmen in their agora. Together, however, phratry and deme, family and tribe accustomed the Athenian citizen to membership of corporate groups which were not based on any criterion beyond being Athenian: descent was important for family and phratry, but only in a much weaker sense for deme and tribe; local origin was important for the deme, important in a rather weaker sense for phratry, and overridden in the tribe. Athenian citizens were accustomed to working in groups from an early age, but not to group interests of any particular sort.

There was a negative side to the corporate community of Athenians, too, however, which was perhaps even more important in ensuring its homogeneity. Athens systematically excluded from citizenship the unfree, those who had once been unfree, those of foreign or (from 451 B.C. on) part-foreign birth, juveniles and females. However these exclusions were rationalized (and only in some cases can we reconstruct the views of Athenians on the matter), the effect was to reduce the

range of views represented in the Council and Assembly in important ways.

Exclusion of slaves and ex-slaves from the citizen body meant the exclusion of those who were the exploited workforce, of those who did, or had done, menial or degrading tasks at the beck of others. Domestic labour, with all its visible degradation of the labourer, and heavy labour in the frightful conditions below and above ground in the Athenian silver mines, were both the preserve of slaves alone. Use of slave labour in these areas meant that there were few areas of life in which one Athenian citizen visibly oppressed another by forcing the other citizen to do a job which he regarded as beneath him. In this way the fiction of citizen equality was made possible, and the range of experience which a citizen suffered was restricted. Citizens varied enormously in their wealth, but no one, however poor, lived entirely at the beck and call of or under the thumb of another citizen.¹⁴ Rich and poor enjoyed very different life-styles, and the very rich who showed off their wealth were liable to be regarded askance for doing so, but the division between rich and poor was not a relationship of direct exploitation of the latter by the former. (Indeed the rich often complained it was they who were being exploited by the poor!)

Entrusting heavy 'industrial' labour to slaves, and in particular labour in circumstances where individual freedom was clearly curtailed, helped to maintain a citizen prejudice in favour of landed wealth which also placed limitations on the acceptable variety of citizen views of the world. Not all Athenians owned land, and fewer still lived entirely off the products of land which they owned; a significant number of wealthy Athenians lived from money-lending and the profits from workshops manned by slaves; nevertheless, the fact that few Athenians were directly obliged by other citizens to live in conditions which precluded having a stake in the land enabled the ideology of the citizen land-owner to be maintained. This was an ideology which could assume that all citizens enjoyed the benefits of the lumpy seasonal labour demands of the agricultural year, so that they had leisure to take part in public life, whether religious or political, and which maintained unquestioned the value of investment in land and the 'naturalness' of leaving much trading and even craft activity to foreigners resident and non-resident. That ideology provided an unchallenged bench-mark against which political views would be tested; and any view which assumed that mercantile interests (as opposed to interests in food supply) were to be taken into account had to overcome the barrier of this prejudice.¹⁵

Excluding women from citizenship was basic to the limited construction of the

citizen. Women's life was fundamentally different from the life of men. Women were only introduced to corporate groups beyond the family in particular restricted circumstances, if they were introduced at all. The rituals which marked female maturation seem to have involved representatives of year groups rather than every Athenian woman. Women's life and labour were home-based and spent as much in the company of slaves as in that of free men. Nurture, as well as parturition, was a female prerogative. This different experience of life was respected and reflected in women's religious roles: women held some of the most prominent priesthoods and regularly took part in cult activities. But this different experience of life was allowed to inform political debate and influence the discourse of politics neither at the level of the city nor at the level of deme, phratry or tribe.¹⁶

It is, of course, always in the interests of those who have and wish to maintain political power to believe in the system which has given them that power. So it was in the interests of Athenian citizens not to question the institutional or ideological basis of the democratic system. It would be naive to imagine that Athenian democratic ideology or democratic exclusiveness or corporate experience just 'happened'. Demes and tribes were created and given a political role at a particular moment in time (it is the 2500th anniversary of that moment that was so widely celebrated in 1992). The same may have been true, at an earlier moment, of phratries; Athenian citizenship rules were changed to increase the exclusiveness of the citizen body in 451/0 B.C. and further tightened up in the fourth century; the mythology of 'autochthony' that helped sustain that exclusiveness seems to have been more or less consciously developed in the later part of the fifth century.¹⁷ (Athenians were not unaware of the possible economic advantages of giving resident foreigners a better deal,¹⁸ but did nothing about it.) But it would be equally unrealistic to suppose that there was no examination of the logic behind democratic rule, and while for many Athenians the fact of having power may have been much more important than the ability to come up with a philosophical justification for it, we should not underestimate the importance of the philosophical defence of democracy in creating or increasing confidence in the system.

Traditionally scholars have held that there was no democratic theory at Athens, that Athenians simply got on with the business of governing themselves without worrying about how to defend their régime philosophically. That philosophical opposition to democracy is better represented in our extant sources than philosophical defence of democracy does not mean that no one was interested in democratic theory; indeed it might be held to imply that there *was* democratic

theorizing. What has, until recently, been overlooked is that the theories of knowledge which can be attributed to some pre-Socratic philosophers, and which Plato engages with in a number of dialogues, themselves constitute an argument for democratic rule.¹⁹ In particular, Protagoras' theory of knowledge – that all know, that some know better than others, that men can be brought to know better by argument, and that political debate is a matter of improving people's judgement, not of changing wrong views for right – is as fundamental to confident democratic practice as is his more obviously political claim that all men have by nature a sense of shame and of justice.²⁰ The sense of frustration felt by the minority when they lose a debate will be greater if they lack confidence in the procedure by which the decision was reached. The evidence that we have suggests that seriously frustrated groups were relatively rare during the fifth and fourth centuries, and that such frustrations occurred in circumstances which were unusual not only in the direct hardship which the democratic decisions imposed, or were likely to impose, on particular sections of the community, but also in the state of the philosophical debate. Aischines famously records that Socrates was executed for his friendship with Critias and Theramenes, two of the men behind the oligarchic coup at the end of the Peloponnesian War: the possibility that Socratic questioning of the philosophical basis for democracy may indeed have had direct political consequences is not at all lightly to be dismissed.

We should see a mutually supportive relationship between theory and practice in Athenian democracy: arguably, community upbringing, with the constant imposition of group values, along with the exclusions and the prejudices, made theory tenable; and together the theory, the exclusions and the prejudices made the institutions operable. But democratic institutions were not all that the lifestyle and beliefs of Athenians made operable: there is a case for thinking that some, at least, of the achievements of Athenian art and drama were equally dependent on the homogeneity of the Athenian citizen body.

Scholars have long debated the question, which Athenians attended the Assembly, which Athenians manned the lawcourts. Were the lawcourts a preserve of the well-heeled? Was the Assembly dominated by the city poor? The argument mustered above suggests that those questions may well not be worth asking: whoever attended Assembly and manned courts, all Athenians are likely to have reacted to many issues in very similar ways.²¹ Indeed the *relative* homogeneity of the Athenian citizen body and of their reactions may have been the only thing that made possible lively political and forensic debate which nevertheless did *not* result

in the formation of political parties or pressure groups. But that same homogeneity will have had consequences for the way in which Athenians reacted to other forms of expression – and in particular to drama and to art. If the experience of being a citizen effectively restricted the range of reactions which were likely to be occasioned by political debate, it will also have restricted the range of reactions to contests on stage. The Athenian tragic and comic poets wrote, on the whole, for an Athenian audience, and no doubt largely, if not exclusively, an Athenian citizen audience. Even allowing for the factors of self-selection which determine the shape of any audience, the Athenian audience may have been historically unusual in the undistorted way in which it reflected the views of the whole politically enfranchised population.

Literary critics and art historians often make assumptions about audience and viewer reactions. In many cultures it is necessary to question just how unified a reaction it is reasonable to assume, and more particularly how reasonable it is to generalize from the likely audience reaction to popular attitudes and beliefs in general. The viewing public for much modern art is a self-selected one whose attitudes and assumptions would be repudiated by the majority, and much the same goes for many contemporary theatre audiences. But there is a serious possibility that the degree of divergence between the select audience in the theatre and the mass of the citizens was at Athens relatively slight, that ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture were not strongly differentiated, and that innovative theatre and innovative art had a potential impact on mass and not simply on élite views.

This possibility that, although self-selected, the audience in the theatre (or the dikasts in the lawcourt) was not peculiar by comparison with the citizen body as a whole, suggests that the relationship of Athenian drama, and perhaps also forensic oratory and public sculpture, to political life may have been particularly close. The issues to which a theatre audience would react, would be precisely those to which the Athenian citizen body as a whole would react, not issues which reflected some restricted agenda. We should therefore expect Athenian drama to offer a mirror to the whole Athenian citizen world in a way in which no modern drama could be expected to.²²

That drama should offer an undistorted impression of the world of the Athenian citizen has further implications, however, for the maintenance and promotion of citizen homogeneity. Drama, literature, and art which cater for a restricted public with peculiar interests tend to promote the separate interests of those restricted publics and increase the degree of diversity within a society. Conversely, art forms

which cater for an unrestricted public are likely to increase rather than threaten the homogeneity of that public. This is no doubt all the more likely to be the case if the art form is one subject to public competition, as is the case with Athenian drama.

Athenian citizens came in all shapes and sizes; they differed markedly in wealth, in the degree to which they were involved with non-Athenians, in their education, and in their private life. I have argued here that, despite this, the Athenian citizen body was peculiarly homogeneous, and that its homogeneity was created and preserved by a variety of means, institutional and social. Without the dominance of corporate organization, on a more or less uniform model, at every level of society, without the exclusions which restricted the class range and experiential range of the citizen body, without the availability of a theory to justify democratic practice, and perhaps without the reinforcing effect of highly political arts, it would arguably not have been possible to make democracy work in its Athenian form, in which political decisions are in the hands of an ever changing set of self-selected members of the citizen body.

Modern western society, which is so keen to regard itself as democratic, does not have the same ways of incorporating individuals, increasingly (and rightly) prides itself on not having the exclusions and the prejudices to be found in Athens, and has little confidence in that Athenian philosophical support for democracy. Athenian democracy went part and parcel with an Athenian way of life which we would judge illiberal, culturally chauvinist and narrowly restrictive. It was, essentially, the product of a closed society. As such it cannot offer us much of a model for the running of an open society. It is not at all clear that democracy, in the Athenian form, is worth celebrating. Observing the narrowness and exploitative nature of Athenian democracy, we should be challenged to stop taking cover behind 'democracy' as a term at which only cheering is allowed, and instead to ask seriously how we might attain the political openness (and cultural achievement) of Athens while taking pride in a society that is heterogeneous and determinedly open.²³

NOTES

1 On all Athenian institutions and the way they operated, in theory and practice, see M.H. Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes* (Oxford 1991); on the non-institutional background to democracy see J. Ober, *Mass and Élite in Democratic Athens. Rhetoric, Ideology and the Power of the People* (Princeton 1989).

- 2 See P.J. Rhodes, *The Athenian Boule* (Oxford 1972, reprinted with corrections and additions 1985)
- 3 Thus the very badly drafted decree (R. Meiggs and D. Lewis, *A selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions* (Oxford 1969, reprinted with additions 1989) no.44) establishing a priesthood of Athena Nike and building works in her sanctuary, which seems to have been formulated in the Assembly, is amended in the Assembly to ensure that members of the Council have oversight of the detailed building decisions. And when an individual gets on his hind legs about some particular matters of detail in relation to a recommendation from the Council, the Assembly sends him back to sort it out with the Council and then bring it back at a later date to the Assembly (cf. *ibid.* nos. 49 and 73).
- 4 On this issue I disagree somewhat with the classic paper by M. Finley, 'The Athenian demagogues' *Past and Present* 21 (1962) 3-24 reprinted in M. Finley, ed., *Studies in Ancient Society* (New York and London 1974) ch.1, and in *Democracy Ancient and Modern* (2nd edition London 1985), ch.2
- 5 [Aristotle] *Constitution of the Athenians* 27.3, Plutarch *Life of Cimon* 10
- 6 Thucydides 6.16
- 7 Thucydides 3.37 and Aristophanes, *Knights*.
- 8 Thucydides 2.60-4
- 9 Thucydides 6.8-9, 53, 60-1, 8.54, 68; Andokides 1.36, 43; [Aristotle] *Constitution of the Athenians* 29.
- 10 Thucydides 4. 28.5 on the sending of Cleon to Pylos.
- 11 See *IG* ii2 1237
- 12 On demes see R. Osborne, *Demos. The Discovery of Classical Attika* (Cambridge 1985) and D. Whitehead, *The Demes of Attika* (Princeton 1986)
- 13 For the line of argument rehearsed here see R. Osborne, 'The demos and its divisions' in O. Murray and S. Price, eds., *The Greek City* (Oxford 1990) 265-94
- 14 On this see R. Osborne, 'The politics and economics of slavery at Athens' in C.A. Powell, ed., *The Greek World* (London 1995) and compare P. Millett, 'Patronage and its avoidance in classical Athens' in A. Wallace-Hadrill, ed., *Patronage in Ancient Society* (London and New York 1989) ch.1
- 15 Compare D. Whitehead, *The Ideology of the Athenian Metic* (Cambridge 1977)
- 16 See P. Vidal-Naquet *The Black Hunter* (Baltimore and London 1986)
- 17 See N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens. The Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge, Mass. 1986) and E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian - Greek Self-definition Through Tragedy* (Oxford 1989).
- 18 As is apparent from Xenophon's *Ways and Means*, written in the 350s.
- 19 The fundamental revisionist work here is C. Farrar, *The Origins of Democratic Thinking* (Cambridge 1988).
- 20 Protagoras' theory of knowledge is best known from Plato's *Theaetetus*, his theory of human nature from Plato's *Protagoras*.
- 21 For an argument specific to the courts which points in the same direction see S.C. Todd, 'Lady Chatterley's Lover and the Attic orators: the social composition of the Athenian jury' *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 109 (1990) 146-73.
- 22 On the political aspects of drama see especially the contributions to J.J. Winkler and F.I. Zeitlin eds. *Nothing to do with Dionysos?* (Princeton 1990).
- 23 This paper originated as a contribution to a double-act with the Rt. Hon. J. Enoch Powell on Democracy Ancient and Modern organised by the Centre for Hellenic Studies at King's London and the Anglo-Hellenic League. I am very grateful to Averil Cameron for the invitation to speak, to Enoch Powell for stimulus on that occasion, to Paul Cartledge and the editors for improving the written text, and to Arnd Kerkhecker for making me think about the implications of this for literary critics.