

Greek Democracy

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1. Rule by the people: the trajectory of an idea

Democracy in the modern world rests on concepts that can be traced back to ancient Greece and more specifically to ideas that prevailed in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. The very words used in modern European languages to name this system of government are borrowed from the Greek *dēmokratia*, a compound designating people-power (*dēmos*, *kratos*). (*Dēmos* is ambiguous: a fundamental point we will return to in section 3.) It retains that meaning in contemporary political discourse: a democracy is a political system in which power is authorized by and answerable to the people. If we believe, as many people now do, that political power *ought* to be so authorized, because this is the best, perhaps the only legitimate, form of government, then we should recognize how close we are, on this score, to the citizens of ancient Athens and other early democracies.

But although democracy is now widely (though not universally) accepted as the ideal to which nations should aspire, it was, both in the ancient Greek world and for much of European history, a bitterly contested institution, praised by some and despised by others. In the ancient world, critics of democracy developed a full and systematic account of its defects. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates depicts democracy as nearly the worst form of rule: though superior to tyranny, it is inferior to every other political arrangement. (As we will see, however, he speaks favorably of several democratic institutions in his later work, *Laws*.) Aristotle classifies democracy, along with oligarchy (rule of *oligoi* – the few) and tyranny, as a deformed constitutional arrangement. Several other authors in antiquity (though certainly not all) had a similarly low opinion of democracy, based not on airy abstractions but on their first-hand experience of how democracies operated.¹ (Plato and Aristotle resided in Athens for long portions of their lives. Plato was an Athenian citizen, though Aristotle was not.) For many of these critics, the problem was not simply the way Athens – the largest and most powerful democracy of its time – was ruled. It was a more general critique than that. Many Greek city-states of the fifth and fourth centuries were regarded as democracies (most others were oligarchies, ruled by a wealthy elite).² According to their critics, it was the very fact that these cities were democratic that made them poorly governed.

Greek democracies did not merely have critics who were opposed to them *philosophically*; some of their critics were active enemies who sought to overthrow them. Athens itself was the scene of two anti-democratic revolutions, one in 411 and the other in 404 B.C. The trial and conviction of Socrates in 399 on the charge of impiety is often seen as rooted, at least to some extent, in his anti-democratic principles and his association with active opponents of Athenian democracy.³ Many other Greek democracies were short-lived and were replaced by other political

systems. Aristotle's theory of political faction and revolution in Books V and VI of the *Politics* proposes an account of why democracies and other constitutional arrangements are sometimes overthrown, and how they can best be preserved.

Greek defenders of democracy were aware of how vulnerable their political system was, and how important it was to be vigilant against its enemies. That is one reason why Socrates was brought to trial. Similarly, many people in our time are concerned that democratic states are becoming increasingly undemocratic, and that they are ruled not by collective decisions in which all people have an equal voice, but by concentrations of wealth and manipulated international markets. Others, however, argue that democracies are inherently defective, and that markets normally provide better solutions to social problems than do the heavy, inept, unstable hands of democratic governance.

Ancient criticism of the way democracies operate and of the ideas on which they rest nourished an anti-democratic tradition that stretches over long periods of European history. Athens in particular, being the best known ancient democracy, was regarded by many later thinkers as a model of what a political system should avoid.⁴ Sparta and republican Rome, with their mixed and balanced regimes, which gave only a limited voice to the people, were often regarded as far superior models. Niccolo Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacque Rousseau, and James Madison all regarded the democracy of Athens as a prime example of an inherently dysfunctional constitution. It is only in the nineteenth and twentieth century that Europeans began to give credence to the idea that democracy is the best or only legitimate form of government. Even so, as democracy began to take hold in Victorian England, it was criticized by eminent thinkers, among them Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, and Matthew Arnold. And although Marx and Engels were partisans of the masses – the enchained “workers of the world” – their ultimate goal was not to establish democratic government but to destroy capitalism. With its destruction, the state will wither away and human relationships will finally be free and non-exploitative. Among philosophers of the early twentieth century, it was primarily John Dewey who championed democratic ideas and institutions. But he faced prominent opponents, particularly the journalist, Walter Lippmann, who drew upon his experience of the way public events are distorted in the newsroom to reach the conclusion that the masses are inevitably poor decision makers.

In spite of the long history of intellectual opposition to democracy even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it continued to gather strength in many parts of the world. Communism and Fascism impeded its growth, and during the Cold War the United States and other democracies found it expedient to forge alliances with tyrannical anti-Communist regimes. But Communist governments in Eastern Europe fell in 1989, as did the government of the Soviet Union soon after. The trend of the past few decades has been decidedly democratic, and in recent years aspirations for popular sovereignty have transformed the autocratic regimes of several Arab states. It is not far-fetched to say that we live in a democratic age, despite the fact that large populations are not democratically ruled, many democracies are fragile, and many

states commonly classified as democracies can better be described as oligarchies governed by wealthy elites. In many parts of the world today, to call a method of decision-making undemocratic is to speak disparagingly of it. And for many contemporary philosophers in the West, the guiding assumption of political theory is that an ideally governed society would be democratic. John Rawls, the leading political philosopher of the twentieth century, takes democratic governance to be part of the framework of any just society.⁵ In the canon of major political theorists of Western philosophy that begins with Plato, he is the one whose democratic sympathies run deepest. It is no accident that he lived and wrote in a democratic age.

2. Problems for democratic theory

But even if our age can be called democratic, that does not mean that there is no need for reflection about its core concepts and its history, or no need to give a hearing to the complaints of its many critics. The debate about democracy that began in ancient Greece is far from over.

One important component of that controversy takes as its starting point a book published by the economist Kenneth Arrow in 1951, *Social Choice and Individual Values*. It had already been discovered in the eighteenth century by de Condorcet that sometimes there is no answer to the question, “what is the choice of the group?” even when there are clear answers to the question, “what is the choice of each individual in the group?” Suppose the group must decide between A, B, and C, and that there are three equal factions, with rankings as follows:

First faction:	1 st choice A	2 nd choice B	3 rd choice C
Second faction:	1 st choice B	2 nd choice C	3 rd choice A
Third faction:	1 st choice C	2 nd choice A	3 rd choice B

Should A be chosen over B? Yes, because two factions prefer A to B. Should B be chosen over C? Yes, for the same reason. Should C be chosen over A? Yes again, for the same reason. Every alternative *wins* in a *two*-way comparison. But should A be chosen in a *three*-way comparison? No, because two thirds of the people prefer something else. Should B be chosen? No again, for the same reason. Should C be chosen? No yet again, for the same reason. Every alternative *loses* in a *three*-way comparison.

It would be misleading to say that the problem is merely that there is no clear winner. For it is equally true that when there are two candidates and each receives half the vote, there is no clear winner; but it would not offend our sense of fairness to select one of the candidates by flipping a coin. A coin-coss, by contrast, would strike us as an unfair way of choosing between A, B, and C, because two thirds of the population prefers some alternative to whichever of these alternatives is selected.

The “impossibility theorem” that Arrow published as his Ph.D. thesis and then later circulated in his book is far more complex than the one just described, but

the “Condorcet voting paradox” nonetheless gives the flavor of what Arrow proved. His argument begins by laying down several seemingly obvious criteria that any procedure ought to satisfy, if it is to be an acceptable method for aggregating individual rankings to produce the collective ranking of the whole group. Several of those criteria seem to be conditions of rationality, and others seem to be conditions of fairness. (As an example of the latter: no choice of the group must be based simply on the choice of one of its members). He then proved that it is impossible for any procedure to satisfy all of those conditions.

Why is this a problem for *democratic theory*? Because the idea that the people should rule has no clear meaning unless we have a way of translating the will of each individual into the choice of the group. Clearly, the voting paradoxes of de Condorcet and Arrow do not create a problem for someone like Hobbes, who thinks that monarchy is the best form of government because there is always a clear answer to the question of what the monarch decides. “A monarch cannot disagree with himself, out of envy, or interest; but an assembly may; and that to such a height, as may produce a civil war.”⁶ Hobbes of course did not see what de Condorcet and Arrow later saw, but the voting problems discovered by de Condorcet and Arrow would not arise if democracy were not the locus of nearly inevitable disagreement among voters.

Arrow’s result has been widely accepted, and although some question one of his premisses, no one doubts that his conclusion follows from them. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, he had a deep influence on the political science and economic professions in the United States. Whether rightly or wrongly, his impossibility theorem has had the effect of making democracy seem an elusive and problematic notion. Those who took it to heart used it to show the ease and frequency with which “the will of the people” is the result of manipulation. As one recent author says, “Arrow’s theorem casts a very long, dark shadow over democratic politics ... All voting systems have some normative blemish and all voting systems can be manipulated. ... Social choice theory tells us that for most policy issues, there is some coalition of actors who jointly prefer some other outcome. ... Stability in politics may well be an arbitrary feature of an institutional arrangement, with losers attempting to dislodge winners of their temporary authority. ... This has certainly raised fears among many about the legitimacy of laws in a democracy.”⁷

Another factor that has led some members of the academy to be disenchanted with democracy has nothing to do with Arrow but everything to do with a problem that disturbed Plato: there is widespread ignorance among ordinary citizens, who are easily manipulated by demagogues. The French sociologist Gustave Le Bon put the point simply and vividly in *La Psychologie des Foules*, published in 1895: “The masses have never thirsted after truth. They turn aside from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error, if error seduce them. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim”. Le Bon is cited with

approval in Bryan Caplan's *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, a compilation of evidence that ordinary citizens are systematically mistaken about the economic issues that underlie political debates.⁸ This ignorance, Caplan argues, is all but incurable, because people tend to believe what makes them feel best, and the cost to them of re-examining their ideological biases is higher than the cost of remaining ignorant.

Even if we reject the thesis that ordinary voters are inevitably ignorant and swayed by those who play on their illusions, a problem for democratic theory is created by the simple and obvious facts that the decision making process of voters is an activity that can be performed well or badly, and that many voters as a matter of fact are unwise voters. To be a good voter one must be adequately informed about the issues. Arguably, there is also a moral requirement that voters should meet as well: just as good judges should be guided by a sense of justice, and national leaders should not be mere partisans of one faction or another, so voters should cast their ballots with a view to the common good, not merely to promote their own personal interests or those of their church, business, or clan.⁹ If we also believe that as a matter of fact a large number of voters are not good voters, as measured by these standards, then it seems plausible to infer that they ought to have refrained from voting, and unless they become better voters, ought to abstain from voting in the future. In many spheres of life, after all, here is no sin in deferring to others when one recognizes that one cannot do an important job well. Generally speaking, it is irresponsible to perform socially important roles badly. That applies to voting no less than to other activities.

But if we accept this conclusion, the value of democracy seems to have diminished or disappeared. Can we say in one breath *both* that the people should rule *and* that most people should refrain from voting and let others make political decisions on their behalf? In effect, our view would be that an elite should rule: a self-selecting elite that (unlike the masses) is justifiably confident that it is voting well. That is certainly not the full-throated affirmation of democracy that many of its advocates have voiced.

Another reason for a lack enthusiasm for democracy among some intellectuals lies in their conviction that in an important sense it is not even a possible form of political organization. The idea was expressed by Ronald Syme, the Roman historian, when he said: "In all ages, whatever the form and name of government, be it monarchy, or republic, or democracy, an oligarchy lurks behind the façade."¹⁰ According to this line of thinking, only small social groups – clubs, friends, and the like, but not governments – can be organized in a democratic fashion, each member having an equal say. That, it might be said, is a law of social interaction that flows from the nature of power, governance, and human motivation. Large societies will always be divided between the masses and the elites, each elite vying for control over the apparatus of the state. In this battle, elites or single individuals will, over the long run, always have the upper hand over the masses because of their greater education, wealth, ambition, charisma, or influence. This is the "iron law of oligarchy" formulated in the early twentieth century by the German sociologist,

Robert Michels, a student of Max Weber and later an adherent of Mussolini's Fascist Party. Similar ideas appear in the works of Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto, Joseph Schumpeter, and C. Wright Mills.¹¹

The idea that democracy is not even a possible form of government, or that it is inevitably a façade behind which oligarchy "lurks," is alien to the Greeks. For ancient authors who used the term, *dēmokratia* was a valid classificatory device: they had no doubt that some cities were democratic and others were not. For many of them, it made an enormous difference to which category a polis belonged. The question that divided these authors concerned not the reality of democratic constitutions, but their merits and deficiencies.

Many contemporary political thinkers who are deeply committed to the value and moral credentials of democracy acknowledge that nonetheless legitimate questions can be raised about its justification. They do not deny that hard questions can be raised about why democracy is a good idea.¹² Is it to be valued because it promotes happiness? Does its value consist *solely* in its being a means to further ends? What if other forms of government can also provide those goods – would that show that democracy is not superior to them? Or should we say instead that democracy is *intrinsically* valuable, and that it would therefore remain the best form of government even if some other system were a better means to other ends? That thought might be expressed by saying that people ought to be treated as free and equal, not because doing so will lead to good results (in fact, it may not), but because this is right way to respect their dignity. But freedom, equality, respect, and dignity are concepts that can be interpreted in many different ways, and it is not obvious that they can give us practical guidance in the design of institutions. Taking that route to the defense of democracy requires careful reflection.

Yet another way to appreciate the challenge that democratic thought faces is to ask whether *all* groups – not just political communities – ought to be organized democratically. Religious organizations? Families? Businesses and corporations? Universities? Hospitals? Orchestras and other arts organizations? Some advocates of democracy might respond positively to these questions, but many others will say that in some of these social institutions democracy is unworkable, ill advised, or both. It seems that there is something about the nation-state and the city-state that makes it the case that *these* organizations should be governed democratically, even if many other communities should not. But some explanation must be given about why there is this difference. One possibility is that we have no choice about living within the jurisdiction of the state; we are inevitably subject to the powers of some political community or other. But, against this, it can be argued that we cannot avoid being members of a family; and if we are to live decent lives it is almost inevitable that we will have to become members of some other hierarchically organized institution for long portions of our lives. Most people see the value and legitimacy of hierarchical and therefore non-democratic power structures in many non-political contexts. The best way for decisions to be made, in many contexts, is for governing powers and responsibilities to be confined to a small number of people. Why, then,

should such structures not be legitimate and desirable in the political realm as well? If the general public should not be empowered to choose university professors or doctors or the heads of corporations, why should ultimate political authority rest solely in its hands?

These doubts about democracy can be reinforced by the reflection that human beings normally grow in experience, maturity, and judgment as they age, and that in the early stages of adulthood – the time when democracies often give people the vote – that process of growth is still far from its peak. Why then, would it be illegitimate for a state to extend the franchise only to the age group that has reached that peak? Perhaps we should be ruled not by all the people but by a narrow band of citizens who are in their fifties. To call such a regime a democracy would be stretching the word beyond its normal limits. Even though everyone would eventually become a member of this elite, such a society would nonetheless be governed by a small segment of the whole. It would be more apt to call it an oligarchy or better yet an aristocracy, if we are to use some conventional label. A variation on this theme would be to establish a system of weighted voting: those in their twenties would cast votes of less weight, those in their thirties of greater weight, and so on. That would contradict ideas that many democratic theorists hold dear: that all citizens are political equals, that each citizen should have one vote, that all votes should have equal weight, that there should be a single category of citizenship, that all adult citizens should have the same rights and powers. (Alternatives to these democratic ideas have not been lacking. Sparta gave a council of elders an important role in its governance. Plato's design of a well-governed city in the *Laws* follows its example. John Stuart Mill proposed, in *Representative Government*, that the votes of better educated citizens be given added weight.)

Since there is still room for debate about democracy, and it has always been an evolving and multi-faceted political system, a systematic and thorough study of it must be attentive both to its history and to past and present debates about its merits and deficiencies. Democratic theory or anti-democratic theory would be impoverished if it were constructed in the absence of any sense of what democracy was like when it was practiced by the Greeks, and what its critics and defenders said about it. Many scholars are fully aware of the need to engage with the past in this way. One recent author argues that there are “dangers faced by a society or system that encourages thinking of the popular will as a moral good” and supports his argument by examining the failures of Athenian democracy.¹³ At the other end of the spectrum, another author argues that the highly participatory form of democracy that flourished in Athens was responsible for its success, power, wealth, and for the well-being of its citizens.¹⁴ What these scholars have in common is the assumption, shared by many other students of Greek antiquity, that our understanding and evaluation of ancient and modern democracies can only increase if we look at them together and appreciate their differences and similarities.

3. Ancient and modern democracies: differences and similarities

Although Greek democracies and contemporary democracies are so-called in a single sense of the term – they are political systems in which the authority to rule derives ultimately from the people – we must acknowledge important differences between those older forms and the ones that are prevalent in modern nation states. The most important of these differences is a matter of size. A Greek polis (city-state: *poleis* is the plural form) typically was comprised of several thousand citizens living either in an urban center or its surrounding countryside. Athens was exceptionally large: it probably had 30,000 to 40,000 male citizens in the late fifth century, and its territory (Attika) extended less than 1,000 square miles. Modern nation-states, of course, are typically many times larger, both in population and spatial extent.

Corresponding to this difference in scale is a difference in the kinds of institutions through which ancient and modern democratic ideas are expressed: the smaller scale of ancient democracies allowed the people to rule directly and to take an active part in the machinery of government, whereas modern democracies assign major responsibilities and powers to a small number of individuals who represent or carry out the wishes of the people, most of whom play no or at most a small role in day-to-day governance. The citizens of Italy or Britain or the United States cannot meet on a regular basis in a single physical space to vote on legislation. Most of them do not, at any point in their lives, occupy positions of administrative authority over public matters. But in Greek democracies, the assembly that had ultimate authority over legislative matters was gathered together in a single physical space that was open to large numbers. (The Pnyx, where the Athenian assembly met at least four times a month, could accommodate at least 6,000; certain measures required that number as a quorum.) A large portion of the population was assigned at some point in their lives to an administrative post, local council, jury, or other political office. To be a citizen in the classical Greek world was not merely to be ruled but to share actively in the ruling of the polis. It would not be mistaken, then, to say that in one important respect ancient democracies were more democratic than modern democracies can be. The people played a more important role in ruling.

But there is also an important respect in which democracies of the twentieth century and of our own time are more democratic than were their analogues in antiquity. Democracy is rule by the people, and so if certain groups among those who are governed by a political system, live within its jurisdiction, and share in its economy are legally prohibited from exercising the normal rights of citizens, then it can be reasonably claimed that to some extent such a system is not democratic, or at any rate that its claim to be called a democracy is compromised. Of course, all modern democracies restrict political rights (for example the right to vote, the right to a fair trial, the right to assemble) to adults; no one could reasonably object to these limitations or plausibly impugn the democratic credentials of these systems of government. But in Greek democracies, women and slaves constituted a group that far outnumbered the free-born male population, and yet they were barred from attending meetings of the assembly, holding public office, serving as jurors, or possessing property. Women did acquire some political significance in Athens in ca. 451, when a law was adopted restricting citizenship to the children of *both* free

Athenian parents. Athenian women were also assigned public religious duties and in this respect played an important role in civic life. Even so, in view of the restrictions placed on women and slaves, it could be said that ancient Greek democracies were not democracies in the fullest sense of the word. They might be called democracies in some respects and oligarchies in others.

When we look back to Greek democracy to see how it arose and functioned, and to assess its merits and demerits, we rightly take Athens to be the most important of the democratic forms of government that existed in antiquity. It developed into a democracy (limited, as noted, to free-born adult males) through a series of radical changes over the course of the sixth and fifth centuries; as a result of the alliances it formed with other Greek *poleis* (in the Delian League) after the Persian Wars of 490-479, it was one of the two most powerful city-states of the fifth century, rivaled only by Sparta and its allies, which it fought in the Peloponnesian War (429-416 in its first phase, 415-404 in its second phase). The central role played by Athens in any study of Greek democracy is based not only on the size and power it achieved in the Hellenic world, but on the familiar fact that its poets, dramatists, historians, philosophers, orators, and scientists produced a body of writings that exercised a profound influence on Roman, medieval, and later European thought.

Furthermore, Athens is the Greek democracy whose institutions and history are most fully documented. That is because, of the one hundred fifty-eight constitutional studies that were composed under the supervision of Aristotle in the late fourth century, the *Constitution of Athens* (thought by some scholars to have been composed by Aristotle himself), is the only one that survives, except for a few brief fragments of some of the others.

There are many good reasons, then, why a comparative study of ancient and modern democracies and their critics should give pride of place, when it turns to antiquity, to the political institutions that prevailed in Athens for two hundred years. At the same time, we should not lose sight of an obvious fact: when Greek authors used the word *dēmokratia*, they were referring to a *general type* of political system. We also know that it was not a type that had only one instance. Aristotle tells us as much: in his *Politics* he says that democracy (along with oligarchy) had become a very common form of government (1301b39-40; cf. 1296a13-16; 1303a11-13). When he discusses democracy and contrasts it with oligarchy in Books IV and VI of the *Politics*, he has in mind not only the democracy of Athens but an array of other democratic constitutions that are to be found in other *poleis* as well. He thinks of democracy as a genus that has four species, ranging from the best kind to the worst (the worst one he describes is probably modeled on Athens in some respects). No doubt he is assuming that his fourfold taxonomy is useful because democratic cities belonging or close to all these types can actually be found.

To understand Aristotle's study of democracies – in fact, to understand *any* Greek author on this subject – it is crucial to be aware of a fundamental point made

at the beginning of section 1: the word *dêmos* was used in two different ways, one broad and the other narrow. In the broad sense, it designates the whole body of citizens construed as a collective entity. So understood, it includes elite and non-elite individuals – both rich and poor, that is, those whose resources were large enough to allow them to avoid the necessity of economic labor, and those whose resources were insufficient for this purpose. (It is estimated that 4,800 to 8,000 Athenian heads of households were members of this elite during most of the second half of the fifth century.¹⁵) As a result, *dêmokratia* could express two different concepts: rule by the entire body of citizens (one that includes elite and non-elite individuals), or rule by only a portion of that body, namely the *dêmos* in the narrower sense. In either case, *dêmokratia* is rule by many: in such a regime the whole body of citizens (rich and poor) is the ruling power and is made of many: and that part of the whole that consists in the poor is also a large ruling multitude. Those without sufficient resources, it is assumed, will always be a large group, when compared with those who have abundant resources. So, when the poor rule, that is rule of the many (the *dêmos* in the narrow sense). *A fortiori*, when such a city adopts a measure at a meeting of the assembly, the collective body that has adopted it (the *dêmos* in the broad sense) is composed of many.

The least defective kind of democracy, Aristotle says, is one that gives equal weight to rich and poor citizens (IV.4 1291b30-35). We can take him to mean that in these communities, a poor person has no greater financial incentive than a rich person to participate in the legislatures and the courts, and so equal proportions of elite and the non-elite citizens participate in politics. The result, he notes, is that this kind of regime is a *dêmokratia*. That is because the *dêmos* is in the majority, and “majority opinion has authority” (1291b37-8). Here the word *dêmos* designates those with fewer resources; they rule because proposals that receive the most votes win, and there are more poor voters than rich. So, despite there being a kind of equality in these democracies between rich and poor – the incentives for political participation are the same for both – the governance of the community reflects the point of view of the poor, because the principle of majority rule works in their favor. Proposals that reflect their partisan bias can easily become law.

Since *dêmos* is ambiguous and that creates an ambiguity in *dêmokratia*, it might be asked: which sense of the term is in play in the debate between Greek critics and defenders of democracy? Are the opposing sides talking past each other, one of them defending *dêmokratia* in one sense of the term, the other opposing it in the other sense? The answer, as we can see from the passage just examined, is no. Suppose a law is passed by a majority vote in an assembly of citizens in the kind of democracy just described, and suppose it was opposed by all the rich in attendance but supported by all of the poor. We can say that the law was favored by the *dêmos*, meaning that this was what the assembly acting as a collective decision-maker chose; or we can say that the law was favored by the *dêmos*, meaning that this measure was adopted because it was favored by the non-elite citizens, who had more power than elite citizens. Critics of democracy like Aristotle hold that when collective decisions (those of the *dêmos* in the broad sense) are determined by the

opinions of the poor (those of the *dêmos* in the narrow sense), there will inevitably be defective rule. Proponents of democracy deny this. This is not a verbal or artificial debate.¹⁶

Another fundamental aspect of Aristotle's understanding of democracy must now be acknowledged – one that casts him and other Greek critics of democracy in an unfavorable light, and distinguishes them from many or all of its contemporary critics. His discussion, like that of many elite authors of antiquity, suffers from a bias against certain forms of economic activity, a bias that we can be glad is absent from discussions of democracy in our own times. Those who engage in certain forms of labor, he believes, will develop ethical defects, or will fail to acquire valuable habits of character and reflection, and these failings will make them deficient as citizens.¹⁷ Unskilled workers who earn their labor through sheer physical exertion fall into this category. So too do skilled craftsmen whose work consists in the routinized and repetitive production of physical objects – shoes, clothing, houses, and so. (Those who filled these occupations he calls *banausoi*.) The least debilitating form of work for citizens, Aristotle believes, is the labor of those who own and farm modest plots of land with the assistance of a few slaves, or those who earn their living by shepherding flocks. It is these people (IV.6 1292b25-28, VI.41318b11-12), he believes, who are the principal constituents of the *dêmos* of the least bad democracy. As he notes, they have little time to devote to politics because they need to work. But he is also assuming that when they do share in governance, the fact that their occupations do not involve degrading subservience to others prevents their political decisions from going very badly astray. By contrast, he assumes that skilled and unskilled urban dwellers who must earn their living by selling their labor are far more distant than are farmers of small plots or shepherds from acquiring the habits of self-governance, skills of deliberation, and devotion to the common interest that are needed for good citizenship.

Occupational bias of this sort is of course found throughout the modern period, as any reader of nineteenth century novels can easily see. But contemporary critiques of democracy are largely or entirely free of this prejudice against certain forms of economic activity. The school of anti-democratic thought that takes Arrow's impossibility theorem to be its starting point need not disparage those who work with their hands. Those who propose that democratic rule be replaced by the rule of markets can make their case without being biased against manual labor or commercial activity. That is one important respect in which today's critics of democracy and those of antiquity differ. But it should not be concluded that Plato's or Aristotle's negative opinion of democracy can be dismissed without a hearing, simply because of their assumption that certain forms of economic activity degrade a person's capacity for civic excellence. Admittedly, some opponents of Greek democracy had little more to say against it than that the poor were bad people. That is the extent of the case against democracy made by the author who came to be called "The Old Oligarch" (see section 5). But the critique of democracy found in Plato and Aristotle is not so easily dismissed; it resonates with the anxieties about democracy found in contemporary authors who are free of class bias.

Let us return now to the point made earlier in this section that because Greek city-states were far smaller in population and land mass than typical nation-states of our time, their democracies had a more participatory character than do ours. It is important not to be misled by this difference: it does not mean that in all Greek democracies decisions about all civic matters were constantly being made by the whole body of citizens assembled together as a group. Once again, it is important to keep in mind Aristotle's observation that there are important differences among the various kinds of democracy, even though they all suffer from a common defect. Their common failing is that they are not guided by the common good. In all of them, there is a bias in favor of the good of those who must work for a living. But one of the most important differences among them has to do with the assembly of all citizens. All have such an assembly, which always plays *some* role in civic life. But the responsibilities assigned to it differ enormously from one polis to another, and for other reasons as well its political potency varies. Economic forces may make a city's assembly a less significant factor in civic life than similar bodies elsewhere. In some democracies the assembly is intentionally designed to be a rather weak institution. In all cases, Aristotle believes that the attitude that citizens have towards the rule of law will make a significant difference in the degree to which the *dêmos* (in both senses) exercises its power. We can observe him making these points in the passages to which we now turn.

Aristotle begins one of his discussions of the varieties of democracy with the statement: "For all to deliberate about all things is democratic, for this is the equality the *dêmos* seeks" (IV.14 1298a10). But the rest of the passage is devoted to noting differences among democracies in this regard. The first possibility he mentions was adopted by the city of Telecles (otherwise unknown) and several others: there, the city is divided into several tribes (as Athens was) and each tribe takes its turn governing the city. Although there is an assembly of all citizens, which meets occasionally, it meets only for the purpose of listening to the announcements of the board of magistrates (whose membership varies, as each tribe takes its turn), and to consider certain matters (left unspecified) pertaining to legislation and the constitution. A second system is one in which the assembly of all citizens has greater but still delimited powers: it meets for the purpose of choosing magistrates (either by election or by lot), adopting laws of general scope, making decisions about war and peace, and hearing charges of bribery or official misconduct (*euthuna*). All other decisions fall within the jurisdiction of a smaller body of officials (whose membership rotates in accord with elections or a lot). A third system is similar to the second, except that a lot is the method used for selecting nearly all magistrates, the exception being those offices that require expertise in some area. In the fourth arrangement, the assembly of all citizens has complete decision-making power over the city; the board of magistrates has only the subordinate role of making preliminary presentations to the assembly. It is this unmitigated democracy that Aristotle has in mind when he says that "for all to deliberate about all things is democratic."

One of the important points we can infer from this passage is this: Aristotle expects his contemporary readers to recognize that a polis counts as a *dēmokratia* – a city ruled by *the whole body* of citizens considered collectively – even when most major civic issues are decided by *a small group* that is selected (by election or lot) for this purpose. He expects them to agree without hesitation that the first three regimes count as democracies, even though many important matters are, as a matter of constitutional design, decided not by the deliberations of the citizens as a collectivity but by a much smaller body. This comes very close to the concept of political *representation* that came to the fore in the modern period and is now taken for granted in every modern democracy. For when the small body of magistrates makes decisions that fall within its jurisdiction to resolve, those resolutions count as the decisions of the polis itself. The polis decides in virtue of the stance taken by one small group within it – and in doing so it is nonetheless a democracy, because the members of that group serve for a limited term and rotate in ways that reflect the equality of all citizens.

That brings us to a second noteworthy feature of this passage: it takes a certain conception of equality to be a defining feature of all democracies, namely that there must be something pertaining to rule that all citizens have the same amount of. (Aristotle also speaks of freedom as a second defining feature of democracy – a point we will return to later.) Equality is a vague and abstract idea that needs to be interpreted, and as Aristotle indicates here, different democracies understand it in different ways. One way for rule to be equal is for citizens to rotate onto the principal decision-making body of the city, the assembly. Here there is no room for elevating some citizens above others on the grounds of greater insight or political skill. Another way for rule to be equal is for magistracies to be filled by lot, for this gives everyone an equal chance to hold office. A third way for rule to be equal is for citizens to choose their leaders through an election, for everyone’s vote is given equal weight. A fourth is for all citizens to participate in the assembly, because here every one may speak, and all votes have equal weight.

A third point to note about this passage is something Aristotle says at the end of it: the worst of the four forms of democratic deliberation is the last. It is, in his words, “like a dynastic oligarchy or a tyrannical monarchy” (1298a32). It is reasonable, then, to attribute to him the idea that a decision making body composed primarily of a thousand or more non-elite citizens is bound to deliberate badly, some or much of the time. Democracies do better when they assign major decision-making roles to a smaller portion of the *dēmos*. This is true, Aristotle believes, even when that smaller group is randomly selected (by a process of rotation or lot).

He does not elaborate on this point, but it is plausible to assume that in his mind it has to do with the very nature of deliberation. Individual deliberation, as Aristotle describes it in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (III.3), is the search for an answer to a question that has not yet been solved. It confronts a problem of some difficulty that requires reflection and the examination of alternative possibilities. When the problem is too great for one person to resolve on his own, he seeks the advice of

others (1112b12). We can reasonably conjecture that in Aristotle's opinion there is a limit to the usefulness of bringing more and more people into the deliberative process. The value of adding someone to a deliberative body must reside in the contribution made by that individual to the solution of the problem under discussion. But once a certain number of deliberators is reached, it is unlikely that adding others (merely on the grounds that they are citizens) will add to the quality of the thinking of the group. In fact, their having a vote but no responsibility for contributing to the solution of the problem might well make them less qualified as voters than those who have been actively engaged with each other in discussion.

These are conjectures about what Aristotle might be assuming. But he is surely right that it is poor constitutional design to have all political issues decided by an assembly of all citizens. One reason why this is so is that when people see that they will not be active contributors to a deliberative process, they are less likely to be well informed about the problem at hand. They know that they will not be called upon to defend their views in the give-and-take of discussion, so they will not need to think about the issues in advance of the meeting. It is not far-fetched to suppose that these or similar points lie behind Aristotle's preference for smaller deliberative bodies.

We can round out this discussion of how varied Greek democracies were by turning to the taxonomy Aristotle uses in several other passages (Pol. IV.4-5, VI.4). As already noted, he depicts the least defective democratic regime as one in which most of the citizens earn their living as farmers or shepherds. (His contemporaries would easily accept this classification of such regimes as democracies, since Greek *poleis* were predominantly agricultural societies) Because so many citizens must work for a living, they have little time to devote to politics, and the assembly therefore meets infrequently. Property qualifications are required of magistrates and of those who attend the assembly, but they are small enough to exclude only a small portion of the population. The people of such a democracy are governed by law, because the assembly meets so infrequently. The life of the city flows according to widely accepted social norms and long-standing written statutes, there being few occasions to alter its course.

A second kind of democracy is one that lacks a property qualification for citizenship. Those who share in the government need only demonstrate that they are qualified by birth to be citizens. Yet, although all those who pass this test are free to attend the assembly, many in fact refrain from participation because of economic necessity. Here too, a popular will is formed infrequently, and so the citizens are governed by the laws. Third in order is a kind of democracy that further relaxes the qualifications for citizenship: all free males (regardless of their parentage) are eligible to share in political decision-making. But here too, the resources of most citizens are too small to allow them to devote much time to politics, and so it is the law rather than the popular will that holds sway. Fourth, in the worst kind of democracy, the one that developed last, the expansion of the city has provided it with abundant economic resources, and so all citizens, however poor,

are paid from the public purse to attend the assembly and to sit on juries. By contrast, there is no economic incentive for the wealthy to devote themselves to politics; their economic interest leads them rather to the cultivation of their property. As a result, the multitude uses its political power to advance its own interests at the expense of the wealthy. It rules by decree (*psêphisma*) rather than by law – decrees being short term, *ad hoc* legislative measures that apply to the situation at hand, as contrasted with the long-term, general commitments that are the defining characteristic of laws.

Several of the institutions of this last democracy – pay for civic participation and a large public treasury – were found in Athens in the second half of the fifth century, and it may be that one of Aristotle’s goals in proposing this four-fold taxonomy is to provide a framework for criticizing that city’s constitution. It is so lacking in order, he says, that it does not really qualify as a genuine constitution (*politeia*) at all (IV.4 1292a30). He goes to some length to compare this worst form of democracy to a tyranny, and to compare the popular leaders (*dêmagôgoi*) who arise in it and use persuasive speech to win the support of assemblies to those who use flattery to gain the favor of tyrant. The implicit assumption of this critique is that the *dêmos* will pay attention only to those who tell it what it wants to hear. This theme, as we have seen, emerges again in the modern era (recall Le Bon’s remark that “the masses have never thirsted after truth. ... Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master”). It is more fully articulated by Socrates in Plato’s *Gorgias*, and is still heard today in complaints about the ease with which elites, the wealthy, and the media can manipulate public opinion in our own democracies.

We can more fully exploit Aristotle as a resource for studying Greek democracies by taking note of several other institutions that he thinks are characteristic of them: (1) Offices have short terms and are not filled twice by the same person (1308a13-15, 1317b23-6). (2) Magistrates are held accountable for their actions, and accusations against them could be made in a court or assembly by any citizen (1274a15-18, 1281b32-4, 1318b21-31). (The Greek term for this institution is *euthuna* – a word that suggests the idea of “straightening”.) (3) Anyone can be ostracized (that is, exiled) for a limited period of time by a popular vote, not because he had committed a crime, but because his influence endangered the current balance of political forces (1284a17-22, b20-5, 1288a19-26, 1302b15-19). (4) Just as the *dêmos* (in the narrow sense) is the ultimate authority when the city deliberates, so too it dominates the courts (1273b36-1274a3, 1317b25-8). To these four we can add features of democracies that we have already noted: (5) Officials are chosen either through election or lot (1291b38-1294b7-13, 1300a31, 1305a30-34, 1317b18-21); (6) property qualifications for holding office and for participation in the assembly are low or non-existent (1291b38-41, 1305a30-32, 1306b6-16, 1317b22-3).¹⁸

Remarkably, many of these features have more or less close analogues in democracies today. Of course, in some ways we are different: we do not select officials by lot, and we do not send them into exile by popular vote. Nor are we

governed by deliberative assemblies that all citizens may attend. But nonetheless there is a significant resemblance between ancient and modern democracies, and it is no accident that this should be so. As Aristotle notes, one of the basic ideas underlying *dēmokratia* is equality: in such a political system, there must be some important respect in which citizens are equals – something they have the same amount of (IV.4 1291b30-37, V.1 1301a26-b4, b29-1302a1, V.8 1308a11-13, VI.2 1317a40-b17, VI.2 1318a3-9). That is the idea that underlies the six features listed above. And equality of this sort plays no less an important role in the modern conception of democracy.

Aristotle has no quarrel with the idea that equality is an important political value. He defines justice (when construed narrowly) as equality (*Nicomachean Ethics* V.2). But he holds that in many political matters the kind of equality that matters is proportionate rather than arithmetic: rather than each having the same amount, each should have the amount that is proportionate to his merit or desert (V.1 1301a26-b4). Those who occupy a position of political authority should be worthy of it, because they are well qualified to do the job. That is a standard that he applies to all citizens; we, by contrast, apply it to elected and appointed officials, but not to citizens.

Aristotle thinks of democracy as a system that aims at freedom, and not just at equality (IV.4 1291b34-5). One aspect of freedom that democrats value consists in the equal sharing of power – ruling and being ruled in turn; but another aspect, which he suggest is more fundamental, is the freedom to live one’s life as one chooses (V.9 1310a28-32, VI.2 1317b15-16).¹⁹ Democrats, he implies, accept a certain amount of being ruled as the closest they can come to being completely free to live as they please. Several other Greek authors similarly associate democracy with this principle.²⁰ Here too we should recognize an affinity between what Greek democrats valued and what people in modern democracies also cherish. What many democrats affirm today is sometimes called “liberal democracy” – the word “liberal” is here used to refer to the liberty of citizens to retain a sphere of privacy and have lives of their own choosing, while the word “democracy” refers to their equal status in the public sphere.

This distinction between the private sphere, where we are entitled to be free, and the public sphere, where we are equals, was familiar to Athenians of the fifth century as well, and forms the basis for the praise of Athens that Thucydides attributes to Pericles in his Funeral Speech. “The freedom we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. There far from exercising a jealous surveillance over each other, we do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes, or even to indulge in those injurious looks which cannot fail to be offensive, although they inflict no real harm. But all this ease in our private relations does not make us lawless as citizens. Against this fear is our chief safeguard, teaching us to obey the magistrates and the laws...” (2.37.2-3, Crawley tr.). Here Thucydides is implicitly drawing a contrast between the openness of

Athenian society and the invasive norms of behavior that regulated every sphere of a Spartan's life.

The permissiveness of Athenian social norms that Pericles praises was seen by Plato and Aristotle as an inherent feature of democracy rather than a characteristic unique to Athens. Pericles allows as much, for he depicts Athens as a city that serves as a model to others (2.37.1). Plato and Aristotle believe that this too (along with a misconception of equality) is one of the defects of democratic regimes. Aristotle says: "To be under constraint, and not to be able to do whatever seems good, is beneficial, since freedom to do whatever one likes leaves one defenseless against the bad things that exist in every human being." (VI.4 1318b38-1319a1, Reeve, tr.). Plato, as we will see in section 5d, makes the point more emphatically and vividly in his portrait of democracy in the *Republic*.

4. The rise of Athenian democracy

We have been looking at Greek democracy with the help of Aristotle's *Politics* because of his wide perspective, which ranged over democracies of several sorts, and because he participated fully in the debate about its merits and deficiencies. We will turn, in the next section, to consider several other participants in the ancient debate about democracy, and particularly to Plato's critique of it. But before doing so, it is worth taking a more historical approach to our subject, by asking how democratic institutions and ideals arose in antiquity. When did the Greeks begin to describe themselves or others as people who ruled themselves democratically? How, why, and when did democratic institutions arise? It would be too large a task for us to trace the growth of democracy in every Greek city that, at some time or other, experienced such a regime. It will be sufficient for our purposes to consider the case of Athens. When and how did it become a democracy?

One part of the answer has to do with particular events – a series of radical political changes that took place in Athens beginning in the early sixth century. But another part of the answer has to do with an egalitarian social ethos that prevailed in many parts of Greece as far back as the archaic age when Homer's poetry was sung. Let us consider that ethos first. It provided the combustible material from which a new kind of politics could arise, given the right sparks.

It might be thought that the social world depicted by Homer in his epic poems contains no seeds from which democratic ideas might emerge. Admittedly, it is ruled by a small elite, and the inferiority of the commoner is taken for granted. When a man of the people, Thersites, complains about the decisions of Agamemnon, he is rebuked and struck by Odysseus, and is laughed at by the rest of the assembly (*Iliad* 2.211-70). Homer's verses encourage his audience to look down on Thersites, but it is also significant that he depicts the exposure of the elite to harsh criticism from a commoner. Thersites speaks his mind, and we are told that he has done so many times in the past; he is described as a skilled speaker. This is not an isolated instance. Homer's leaders often make decisions by consulting an assembly of the

elite and of commoners. Their rule depends in part on their persuasive power; commoners can make themselves heard, and often do. This is a world in which there is freedom of speech. Authority rests on voluntary compliance, which is secured through persuasion.

The military importance of the commoner is also apparent. The *Iliad* contains many battle scenes in which the contributions of the rank and file are essential to victory. Fighters sometimes align themselves in a phalanx which is only as strong as its weakest link. When battles are won and the spoils are distributed, leaders receive honorary gifts but the rest of the soldiers share equally in the booty. This is a hierarchical society, but one in which all members are consulted and receive their due rewards. In battle and in the assembly, the people are a force to be reckoned with.²¹

Hesiod's *Works and Days*, roughly contemporaneous with Homer's poems, goes much farther in a proto-democratic direction. It is an expression of the voice of hardworking, independent farmers, and heaps scorn on the predations and injustices of greedy nobles. The little man knows what is right, and justice is on his side. In Hesiod's world, agricultural work is not mediated by the kind of patron-client relationship that in some parts of the world makes servility an economic necessity. Written one century later, Solon's poems often take the part of ordinary people and express outrage at the injustice of their social superiors.

The military tactic of fighting with sword and shield in phalanxes eventually spread more widely in Greece, and was perfected in Sparta, giving rise to a deep-seated social egalitarianism in that city. Spartan men spoke of themselves as member of the *homoioi*²² (the similar people) to express their sense of solidarity. The rich dressed like the poor, not wishing to seem different or superior (Thucydides I.6). And although Sparta would not qualify as a democracy by Aristotle's standards (two kings and a council of the elderly were given important powers), there was an assembly of all citizens that competed with the kings and elders for power, and a small elected body (five ephors) also served as a check on the powers of the elite. Spartan egalitarianism arose from the seeds that can be observed in Homer and Hesiod: when conditions were favorable, it spread more widely throughout Greece.

Not counting Sparta, we have evidence of eighteen city-states that were governed, for some period of time, during the archaic period (700-480 B.C.), by democratic institutions in many parts of the Greek world – on the mainland, in the Aegean, on the coast of the Black Sea, on the Libyan coast, and in northwest Greece.²³ Wherever democracies arose, they were the result of violent revolutions or military catastrophes.²⁴ Democracy was not imposed on these cities from the outside by a single hegemonic state. It erupted here and there because the Greek world of small, independent *poleis* was one in which material goods and ideas circulated easily.²⁵ That allowed the egalitarian ethos that can be observed in the

works of Homer and Hesiod and was evident in Spartan mores to insert itself, when a political crisis allowed it to do so.

Other factors may have played an auxiliary role in allowing democracy to spread here and there. Increasingly, cities were governed not only by customs and social norms, but by written laws. That would make it easier for a norm of equal treatment before the law (*isonomia*) to arise: when a law is there for all to see, it is publicly proclaimed to be applicable to one and all, whatever one's social status. The increasing popularity of the worship of Dionysus, the god of wine that gives equal pleasure to the high-born and the lowly, may also have played some role in the spread of an egalitarian sentiment.²⁶

These were some of the trends and background conditions that provided a soil favorable to the growth of democracy in many parts of Greece. When and how did Athens become a democracy? Many accounts take the crucial turning point to have occurred in 507 through the agency of Cleisthenes, the leader of an aristocratic clan, who, in his rivalry with other clans, found it expedient to form an alliance with the *dêmos*. But a longer story can be told, one in which some credit is given to Solon for having established, if not a democracy, a regime that laid the groundwork for the emergence of democratic institutions.²⁷

In the seventh century, Attika was dominated by a Panhellenic elite that called itself *eupatridai*, the sons of good fathers. The poor were forced by economic necessity to work the fields of the elite, often fell into debt, and were sometimes sold into slavery when they could not pay their debts. An egalitarian ethos and sense of solidarity among the poor made them a potent obstacle to the elite, and Solon, himself a *eupatrid*, and selected by the elite in 594 to serve a one-year term as *archon*, used his power to dictate to rich and poor a series of compromises.²⁸ There would be no re-distribution of land, but the poor were allowed to hold their land without having any obligations to the rich, and sale into bondage was prohibited. He established a people's court, and gave all citizens the right to start a prosecution on behalf of an injured party or in the public interest. Only citizens with considerable property could be elected to office. Athens at this time had an assembly, and Solon is said to have created a council of four hundred, but it is difficult to know what powers either body had. A codification of the laws was not the least of his accomplishments; it stood as the foundation of the Athenian legal system until the end of the fifth century, when a re-codification was undertaken. Solon's reforms transformed Athens from an aristocracy of birth to a society in which power resided principally in the higher property classes, but one in which every member of the *dêmos* had significant judicial rights.

Rivalry between aristocratic clans did not come to an end with Solon's reforms, and the *dêmos* continued to nurture grievances. In 561 Peisistratos took power in a coup and won the support of the *dêmos* by letting the laws of Solon stand and easing the material conditions of the poor. He was succeeded by his son, Hippias, who reigned from 527 to 510. He in turn was overthrown through the intervention

of the Spartans. Several years of political instability followed, but in 507, the *dêmos* brought back to Athens the exiled leader of an aristocratic clan, Cleisthenes, who created political structures that radically transformed Athens in a way that gave far more power to the *dêmos* than it had ever had before. A new way of organizing the Athenian population was established. One hundred thirty-nine precinct governments called demes were created; it is here where local people met to discuss politics and to keep the roll of citizens. Many non-Athenians and even freed slaves were enrolled as citizens (and hence as supporters of Cleisthenes). The residents of geographically diverse demes were aggregated into one of ten tribes, and a council of five hundred, which set the agenda for the assembly, was established. Its membership was chosen by lot so that each of the tribes would be equally represented. Somewhat later, the division of the population into tribes was used as a device for electing generals; each tribe elected one general. Cleisthenes also devised a system of ostracism, thus giving the masses an opportunity every year to banish for ten years the most powerful and hence threatening member of the elite.

Athens continued to develop along democratic lines in the fifth century. After 487, the powerful magistrates known as *archontes* (plural of *archon*) were no longer elected but chosen by lot from members of the two highest property classes. In 462, Ephialtes, a democratic leader, successfully led a campaign to curtail the power of the Areopagus, an archaic court composed of ex-archons and a repository of aristocratic judicial power. Henceforth its powers were restricted to hearing certain religious and murder trials.²⁹ The power of the popular courts increased, and jurors were chosen by lot, each of the ten tribes being equally represented. The rich could not count on winning court cases, because the lot made it impossible to know in advance who would be a juror. In 461, at the suggestion of Pericles, wages were paid to men serving on the council of five hundred or as jurors. Later, citizens were also paid for attending meetings of the assembly.

Athens lost its status as an independent city after the conquests of Alexander the Great. From 317 to 307, it was governed by Demetrius of Phaleron, who had studied with Aristotle. City-states throughout the Greek world suffered a loss of autonomy; political life was dominated by kingdoms and confederacies. As the influence of Rome increased, democracies disappeared. A new democratic age would not emerge for several millennia.

5. Debating democracy in antiquity: Plato and others

Criticism of democracy and debates about its value emerge after it had become fully established in Athens in the fifth century. We will soon consider Plato's contributions to these debates, and then briefly turn to Isocrates and Aristotle. But let us first look at several non-philosophical texts in which the merits or deficiencies of democracy are aired.

a. Pseudo-Xenophon

A short, anti-democratic pamphlet called *The Constitution of the Athenians* is found in the collected writings of Xenophon. Scholars have long recognized, however, that he was not its author; we know nothing about who wrote it, although the language of the treatise suggests that he was an Athenian. It is spoken of as the composition of Pseudo-Xenophon, who is sometimes referred to as the “Old Oligarch” because of his anti-democratic stance. Its date of composition is uncertain, but 431-424 is a likely hypothesis. It is poorly organized. The author begins by declaring his disapproval of the Athenian political system, but he immediately acknowledges that the *dêmos* is good at preserving its power. Furthermore, he admits that it is just for the *dêmos* to have more than the well-born, because it mans the ships and brings power to the city. He also gives the people credit for recognizing that the offices of general and cavalry commander should be filled not by lot but by those who are most capable. But the remainder of the treatise is filled with disparagement of the character of the *dêmos*.

They are worthless men because they are not wealthy or noble. Their poverty leaves them uneducated and incapable of looking beyond their class interests. The author cannot bring himself to condemn self-interest as a motive, but his disparagement of democracy rests in part on a conception of justice: he thinks that it is unfair that the wealthy should be expected to contribute financially to public projects, whereas the poor receive benefits from the city. Pseudo-Xenophon is to be read for the light his work sheds on the unimpressive mentality of one type of opponent of democracy. His antipathy to the poor was hardly unique (we see class bias in Plato and Aristotle as well). But there is nothing in his work that could suggest to a contemporary student of democracy that perhaps there really is something to be said against this form of government.

b. Herodotus

The *Histories* of Herodotus, which appeared near the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, contains a short section (3.80-82) in which a trio of Persian aristocrats take sides on what form of government Persia should adopt: rule by one man, rule by a few, or rule by many? Otanes takes the side of democracy, although he uses *isonomia* rather than *dêmokratia* as the name of such a regime. Equality and the answerability of magistrates to public scrutiny are the features of this regime that ground his preference. Megabyxsos favors the rule of the few, because the best men are always few. Darius prefers rule by one man, in part because secrecy is most easily achieved when there is only one ruler. Each speaker also makes points against the regimes he dislikes. The many should not rule, it is said, because they are stupid and powerless to prevent wrongdoing.

c. Thucydides

A deeper meditation on Athenian democracy pervades Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War, which follows the course of the conflict between Athens and Sparta from its outbreak to the summer of 411. Thucydides is primarily interested

not in political philosophy or abstractions about democracy, but in the way concrete military and political events are shaped by human nature, powerful leaders, and the contrasting character of Athens and Sparta. Late in the work, Athenagoras, a popular leader of Syracuse, briefly defends democracy and attacks oligarchy: in democracies, he claims, the counsel of the wise, the property of the rich, and the listening and adjudicative skills of the many are allowed their proper place (6.39). A greater tribute to democracy – more precisely, Athenian democracy – is found in Pericles' funeral oration, which occupies a central role in Thucydides' narrative of the war. But even though equality and the rule of the many are mentioned by Pericles as a valuable characteristic of the Athenian political system (2.37), and its freedom is favorably compared with the "painful discipline" imposed on Spartans (2.39), the constitutional superiority of Athens is only one component of Pericles' celebration of Athenian greatness. "We provide plenty of means for the mind to refresh itself from business. We celebrate games and sacrifices all the year round, and the elegance of our private establishments forms a daily source of pleasure ... The magnitude of our city draws the produce of the world into our harbor, so that to the Athenian the fruits of other countries are as familiar a luxury as those of his own" (2.38). "I doubt if the world can produce a man, who where he has only himself to depend upon, is equal to so many emergencies, and graced by so happy a versatility as the Athenian." (2.41) "We have forced every sea and land to be the highway of our daring, and everywhere, whether for evil or for good, have left imperishable monuments behind us" (2.41, Crawley tr.).

Thucydides is here giving his readers a demonstration of how skilled Pericles was at rousing the spirit of his audience and reminding them of the larger meaning of the war. As he notes later in Book II, "Pericles indeed, by his rank, ability, and known integrity, was enabled to exercise an independent control over the multitude – in short to lead them instead of being led by them ... If they fell victims to a panic, he could at once restore them to confidence. In short, what was nominally a democracy was becoming in his hands government by the first citizen" (2.65, Crawley, tr.).

As the narrative of the war develops, it becomes increasingly apparent that in the eyes of Thucydides the defeat of Athens has much to do with an inherent weakness in its democratic form of government. It is heavily dependent on the quality of the leaders who happen to attain power. After Pericles dies at an early point in the war, he is replaced by other powerful speakers who lacked his natural political astuteness. The Athenian assembly is shown to be a defective decision-making body, susceptible as it is to the power of rhetoric and to the sway of emotion. This weakness, it is suggested, is inherent in the rule of the many. In Book I, for example, it is noted that Themistocles, one of the greater leaders of the Persian War, was ostracized, pursued by enemies, and spent his last years under the protection of the Persian king (I.135-138). That is but one small example of the way the *dēmos* can turn on its leaders. So, the tribute Pericles pays to Athenian democracy in his funeral oration provides a poignant contrast to the anti-democratic thread woven through the whole of the *History*. As it turns out, it is an Athenian weakness, not a

strength, that its citizens can be made to believe that its democratic character makes it superior to other cities. It comes as no surprise, then, that near the end of the *History* Thucydides says that Athenian democracy improved during the brief period of time when citizenship was restricted to five thousand, that is, to those who could afford hoplite equipment (8.97). (That moderate regime, which in 411 replaced a far more anti-democratic oligarchy of four hundred, lasted only a few months, and democracy was re-established in 410.) At that late point in his narrative, his stance as a critic of Athenian democracy has long been apparent.

d. Plato

Plato's writings are filled with disparagements of democracy, although we will see that he is not so unequivocal an enemy of it as he might seem.³⁰ The principal locus of his critique is Book VIII of the *Republic*, but doubts about democracy are raised almost from the start of that dialogue. Soon after Socrates initiates a search for a definition of justice in Book I, he confronts the idea, proposed by Thrasymachus, that justice has no fixed and stable nature of its own, but is a creation of the individual or group that happens to hold sway in a city. As he says, "each type of rule makes laws that are advantageous for itself: democracy makes democratic ones, tyranny tyrannical ones, and so on with the others. And by so legislating, each declares that what is just for its subjects is what is advantageous for itself – the ruler" (338e-339a, Reeve, tr.). Justice so conceived can be defined: it consists in the advantage of the stronger. But this acknowledgment of a superficial uniformity in the way the word is used should not distract us from the deeper point that Thrasymachus insists upon – that there is no standard of justice that exists independently of the relationships of power that prevail in a political community. If he is right, there is no basis for saying that one kind of political system is better than another – no way to defend the idea, then, that democracy is superior to oligarchy or tyranny. In a democracy the *dêmos* gets its way, just as in a tyranny the tyrant gets his. (This is a comparison Aristotle would endorse, but only as regards an extreme democracy.) For Thrasymachus, to ask whether the *demos* *should* rule is to ask a meaningless question. In that respect, the *Republic* contains an attack on democracy even in its first book.

Thrasymachus, it turns out, is unable to defend his definition of justice against Socrates' objections. At the end of Book I, no definition has been found, and the search for one is renewed at the beginning of Book II. Even so, much has been accomplished even at this early stage of the dialogue. The difficulty Thrasymachus has in defending his definition suggests that there really is an objective standard of justice. That has profound implications for political philosophy in general and for democratic theory in particular. If the rule of the *dêmos* is to be superior to other political arrangements, it must be shown that democracies have a better understanding of justice, and are more likely to achieve it, than other regimes. For Plato, this is a preposterous idea. Justice, as the controversies in Book I reveal, is difficult to understand; it is an elusive concept, and only by careful study will one be

able to grasp it. It is therefore absurd to suppose that the *dêmos*, by virtue of being a *dêmos*, already knows what it is.

A defender of democracy might reply to Plato by saying that justice is an inherently disputable standard, and that it is the numerical strength of the *dêmos* that justifies its claim to rule. It is larger than any elite, and so, in the absence of any universally accepted standard of justice, it should get its way. But few if any defenders of democracy will find this an attractive suggestion, for it cannot give a plausible answer to the question Thrasymachus would ask: why suppose that the strength of the many in a democratic regime is a justification of its rule any more than the strength of one man in a tyranny is a justification of his rule?

The deficiencies of democracy come into sharpest focus later in the *Republic*. When Plato portrays a series of defective character types and correspondingly defective constitutions in Books VIII and IX, the regime that appears next to the bottom in this narrative of decline is the democratic man and the democratic state. The type of individual who is declared happiest, among the five portrayed – philosopher, timocrat, oligarch, democrat, tyrant – is the one who was first presented (the philosopher); the least happy is the last presented (the tyrant); and the others are ranked in the order in which they were described (580b). That means that the timocratic person has a worse life than the philosopher; the oligarch is yet worse off; the democrat comes next; and lowest of them all is the tyrant. It is a safe inference that we are also to assign the same ranking to the happiness and governance of the regimes to which these individuals correspond. Democracy, then, coming next to last in the order of presentation, is to be regarded as next to last in merit. It is superior to tyranny, but inferior to all of the other political systems portrayed.

What accounts for its low ranking? For one thing, it is portrayed in Book VIII as a regime that places too high a value on a certain conception of freedom (557c-d). Not only do democracies prize frankness of *speech* (*parrhesia*)³¹; they also prize freedom of *action*, and as a result the state interferes as little as possible with the lives of its citizens. They are free to do as they please, even to the point of disregarding the needs and norms of the city. “There is no compulsion to rule in this city, even if you are qualified to rule, or to be ruled if you do not want to be.” (557e, Reeve, tr.).

Plato takes educational laxness to be a component of the democratic conception of freedom. What and how children are taught is something that a democracy, because of the high value it places on freedom, will leave to the discretion of the heads of households. It was Sparta rather than Athens – a mixed regime rather than a democracy – that provided a model of a city that assumed the responsibility to oversee the moral education of the next generation.³² That is because in Sparta freedom was not understood as the liberty to live as one pleases. Plato holds that one can never become a good person unless the seeds of virtue have been planted when one is a child (558b-c). Accordingly, in democracies, where the

value placed on freedom insures that education will never be uniform and will never receive the serious and widespread attention it deserves, there will always be a large number of citizens who are deficient in justice, moderation, and understanding. No such city can be well ruled. The ideal city depicted of the *Republic* is to a large extent an educational program – the very thing that democracy lacks. The dialogue shows in rough outline how a state-supervised education ought to train the minds and emotions of those who best deserve to play a major role in civic life. This is one aspect of Plato’s political philosophy that Aristotle accepts: when he discusses education in Book VIII of the *Politics*, he begins by arguing that it is the responsibility of the city to supervise the moral development of its citizens by giving them a grounding in music, literacy, and basic intellectual competence.

Plato attacks not only the democratic conception of freedom but its conception of equality as well: democracies, he says, assign a kind of equality to equals and unequals alike (558c). Everyone is given an equal share in the constitution and the ruling offices (557a), and the majority of offices are assigned by lot (557a). The absurdity (as Plato sees it) of this indiscriminating way of allocating powers and responsibilities can be seen when we consider its analogue in the life of a single individual. He asks his readers to imagine someone who lives in a random manner by following the whims that occur to him: one day he feels like indulging in food or drink, the next day he abstains; one day he follows his interest in philosophy, on other days he is involved in politics; and so on. His pleasures are in a sense treated as equals: whichever has the most force is allowed to have sway. (561b-d). It is foolish for individuals to yield to whichever of their desires happens at the moment to be strongest; and just as foolish for cities to be governed by the majority that happens to form on this day or that in the assembly, or by an individual who is chosen at random.

Plato’s approach to democracy here is distant from the one we have found in Aristotle. Unlike Aristotle, he is not interested in portraying a variety of democratic regimes and in understanding what makes some of them worse than others. Also, unlike Aristotle, his critique of democracy sometimes takes the form of an exaggerated caricature. For example, he asks us to imagine a democratic city as a place where the ideal of freedom spreads to the relations between humans and animals: in a democratic city, “horses and donkeys are in the habit of proceeding with complete freedom and dignity, bumping into anyone they meet on the road who does not get out of their way” (563c, Reeve, tr.). Similarly, he takes the democratic ideal of freedom to be inconsistent with normal relations of deference and authority between parents and children. In the democratic city he depicts, parents are afraid of their children; and children, having absorbed the lesson that one can do as one pleases, give their parents no honor and respect (562e). The relations between teachers and students are degraded in the same way (563a). The *Republic* does not say that all democracies are like this, but it implies that the only way for a democracy to avoid these extremes is to recognize either that freedom has less value than democrats realize, or that democracies misunderstand what freedom is. The dialogue constructs an imaginary democracy in order to show what it would

be like if the ideals of democracy were fully carried out. Aristotle's approach to democracy, by contrast, asks us to consider real democracies in all their variety.

We will soon see, however, that according to Plato some democratic institutions – voting procedures, the accountability of public magistrates to examination (*euthuna*), an assembly of all citizens, popular juries, low property qualifications for citizenship – can function well and can help constitute a well-governed city. These are some of the institutions he includes in the nearly ideal city that he portrays in his last and longest political work, *Laws*. We will have a distorted picture of Plato's attitude towards democracy if we ignore this late work, one in which the figure of Socrates is entirely absent, and in which the leading speaker is an unnamed Athenian who is visiting Crete, an island whose cities have institutions similar to Sparta's. That the main interlocutor is an Athenian befits the democratic nature of some of the institutions he proposes. Evidently, whereas the *Republic* contains a depiction of democracy at its worst – its ideals being pushed to their most extreme form – the *Laws* shows how freedom and equality, properly interpreted, can, when combined with other ideals, play a useful role in political life.

Before turning to the *Laws*, however, we should examine several other works of Plato that pertain to his critique of democracy. The *Apology*, which purports to be the defense speech that Socrates gave at his trial on the charge of impiety, must be read as a condemnation of the guilty verdict rendered by a democratic jury, and by implication it raises questions not only about Athenian democracy but any democratic regime. At one point (32a-b), Socrates reminds his jurors that, several years earlier, he had been the sole member of the council who spoke against a disgraceful and illegal wartime decision. A naval battle had taken place at Arginusae in 406, and although Athens was victorious, there was popular anger at the eight generals in charge, because they had decided not to rescue the wounded and retrieve the bodies of the dead. The motion Socrates opposed called for a single trial of all of the generals, in violation of a law requiring each defendant in a capital crime to receive a separate trial. The motion was, despite Socrates' opposition, put on the agenda of the assembly, where it was adopted; the generals were found guilty, and six who were in Athens were executed. The illegality of their execution, Socrates tells his jurors, was later generally acknowledged. And yet, he adds: "The orators were ready to prosecute me and take me away, and your shouts were egging them on" (37b, Grube, tr.).³³

Socrates implies here that the lawlessness of the Athenian assembly was no accident: by referring to the importance of oratory and the disruptive shouts of the crowd, he adverts to powerful forces in Athenian civic life that could easily lead the majority to violate its own laws, with the result that they killed their own military leaders, only to regret having done so. The *dêmos*, we are left to infer, tends to be driven by skilled speakers and the power of short-lived emotions to commit terrible crimes and self-destructive acts. In effect, Plato is telling his readers that the death of Socrates was yet another act of this kind; democratic majorities are prone to do this sort of thing. "Do not be angry at me for telling the truth," Socrates says just

before he reminds the jury of the execution of the Arginusae generals. “No man will be spared if he genuinely opposes you or any other great number (*plêthos*) and prevents many unjust and illegal things from happening in the city” (31e1-4, author’s tr.).

There is another anti-democratic thread running through Plato’s *Apology*: wisdom is difficult to acquire and therefore rare; it cannot be a common possession. Socrates sought it, but even he could not acquire it. When he questions Meletus, one of the three who brought an accusation against him, he leads him to say that although Socrates has corrupted young people by his impiety – worshiping not the gods of the city but other gods – those young people have been properly trained by everyone else they encountered. Socrates then asks: “Does that hold true of horses too, in your opinion? Do all men make them better, with the exception of one, who ruins them? Or is it just the reverse: only one can make them better, or very few, namely, the horse-trainer, whereas the many, if they own and use horses, ruin them? Isn’t that the way it is, Meletus, both for horses and other animals?” (25a13-b6, author’s tr.). We are left to infer that the moral flaws and errors of ordinary people are passed along from one generation to another, and that the rule of the *dêmos* will reflect these deficiencies. The *Apology* is not a systematic study of politics, and contains no suggestions about what, if anything, might lead to a better form of government. It is left to the *Republic* and *Laws* to address that issue.

One of the themes of the *Apology* is Socrates’ dedication to the well-being of his fellow citizens, as expressed in his avoidance of meetings of the assembly and other political institutions so as to use better methods – philosophical methods – to achieve the goals of politics (31c-e). His underlying idea is that political life needs a re-examination of the ultimate ends to be served by the city, something deeper and more long-lasting than the usual preoccupations of assemblies and courts with short-term or intermediate goals and ways to achieve them. That is a criticism of ordinary democratic politics that can be applied with equal force to traditional oligarchies in which power is concentrated in the hands of the wealthy or well-born. Nonetheless, it raises questions that defenders of democracy need to consider: What is the point of democratic institutions? What are the good things that they should be aiming at? Are freedom and equality, as democrats understand these ideals, genuine goods? Do we even understand what these ideals involve?

That critique is pursued more fully in the *Gorgias*, a dialogue in which the political life is embodied in the three figures whom Socrates debates *seriatim*: the famous orator who gives the dialogue its name; Polus, also an orator, and a follower of Gorgias; and Callicles, who has disdain for Socrates’ philosophical quest and champions a life devoted to power and pleasure. The superficiality of Gorgias and Polus quickly becomes evident from the ease with which they are unable to explain the value of oratorical skill; it is Callicles who is treated as a formidable adversary and critic of Socrates’ political disengagement.

There is, however, a deep flaw in Callicles' program: in a democracy, Socrates says, he can become and remain a powerful person only by conforming himself to the will of the *dêmos*. That requires him to pay full attention to its moods and whims, to conceal his disagreements with it, and to change his tune as public opinion changes. "You keep shifting back and forth. If you say anything in the assembly, and the Athenian *dêmos* denies it, you shift your ground and say what it wants to hear" (481e, Zeyl, tr.). Callicles is described as someone who has disdain for the conventional mentality of the masses, and yet his political ambitions requires him constantly to deal with them, and when necessary, to bow to them. Recall Le Bon's observation about the crowd (section 2): "Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim." Callicles, like Gorgias and Polus, is in the business of supplying the *dêmos* with illusions, but he cannot be confident that at some point he will not become its victim. The life of someone who seeks a position of leadership in a democracy is depicted in the *Gorgias* as slavish, fraught with uncertainty, and devoid of moral character. The *dêmos* is compared to a child who demands to be pleased by a pastry cook (464d): just as the difficult long-term goals of health and good nutrition will never be achieved when children are in charge of their diet, so the goals of the political community can never be achieved by a general public that always favors the quickest, easiest and most immediately appealing solutions to its problems. Similarly, the *Republic* likens the masses to a beast (493b-c).

In the *Protagoras*, the problem of justifying democracy is posed in a different way: it is tied to the question whether virtue can be taught. The famous sophist claims that this is exactly what he does teach. More fully described, what he says he imparts to the young men who study with him is *politikê technê* – the political art that makes men excellent citizens, skilled in deliberation, and capable of sharing in the government of their city (318e-319a). Just as Socrates raises the question in the *Gorgias* whether *oratory* is a genuine intellectual discipline (rather than mere attentiveness to the whims of an audience), so in the *Protagoras* he asks whether skill in political deliberation is a rational study. To express his doubts about whether there is such a thing as a *politikê technê*, he calls attention to the way in which Athenian democracy works (319a-d). When the assembly meets to consider a building project, it consults experts on building and does not allow just anyone to speak. It is similarly restrictive when new ships are needed, and in every other area that it believes can be taught and learned. These are the subjects about which genuine expertise and specialized knowledge can be acquired. They are areas that some have mastered and many others have not. If someone lacking the credentials of an expert tries to address the assembly, it jeers at him and shouts him down, making it impossible for him to speak. But its practices are different when *political* questions arises – questions about what is just and good. On those occasions, the assembly is not at all restrictive. One need not have undertaken a special study of a so-called *politikê technê* in order to exercise the rights of a democratic citizen. Why not? Socrates suggests that, as the Athenians see it, there is no such thing as expertise in this area. Anyone may speak because no one has such knowledge, and

no one has such knowledge because this is an area in which there is merely opinion, never knowledge

Protagoras replies to this challenge by asking his interlocutors to listen to a story about how the gods created human beings and the other animals, and distributed to different species their various skills and powers. At first they short-changed human beings, giving them bodies so weak and unprotected against the natural elements and savage animals that their survival would have been impossible. Correcting that imbalance, Prometheus gave human beings the ability to light fires and thus to fashion well-crafted and useful products. For some time, human beings barely survived with these minimal skills and implements, for as yet they lived in small, scattered groups, and did not combine their forces into as large a unit as a city. Zeus saw that this was an unsustainable situation, and using Hermes as an intermediary, gave them the skills and feelings that would make them skilled at social cooperation. They acquired a concept of justice, a sense of shame, and feelings of friendship – all of these being aspects of the art of politics. Hermes asked Zeus: should these social skills be distributed to a few, just as the productive crafts that use fire need only be acquired a small number? Zeus replies that justice and a sense of shame must be distributed to all human beings, for cities cannot arise if only a few people know what is just and what is shameful (320d-322d).

That is the story Protagoras tells. His next step is to transform it into a non-mythical way of interpreting human relationships. It is part of normal human intercourse, he says, to represent oneself to others as a just person. We think that no one is totally devoid of a sense of justice. If we believe that someone has acted unjustly, we become angry and censure or punish him. That is because we think that it is in his power to change his behavior; he can see that what they did was wrong, and he can keep himself from wrongdoing in the future (323d-324d). The process of learning virtue begins as soon as children can use language. They are constantly being taught how to apply such concepts as goodness, justice, piety, beauty, and their opposites. When they are old enough, they are exposed to stories that give them models of how to behave, and their training in music gives them a sense of harmony and order. Admittedly, some children are superior to others, when we measure them by their adherence to social norms. In the same way, some skilled musicians are more skilled than others; that does not show that there is no expertise in music. Everyone has basic competence in the political craft, just as everyone can learn a language and then teach it to others. We are all capable of at least a minimal level of cooperation and a minimal sense of justice. That is all that is needed to be allowed to participate usefully in civic affairs (324d-328d).

Protagoras' myth and his gloss on it constitute as full a defense of democracy as we have in Greek literature. (It shares this honor with Pericles' funeral oration and Aristotle's argument that a large collectivity can be superior in judgment to a smaller group.) We have no evidence that it was the creation of Protagoras himself. A more likely interpretation is that in this dialogue Plato has created the best defense of democracy that he can imagine (weak as it is), just as in Book II of the

Republic he presents an argument (one whose inferiority will become evident) to show that in itself justice is a bad quality for someone to have.

But in the *Protagoras* he is content to leave matters unresolved: what follows the sophist's lengthy speech is a series of skirmishes between Protagoras and Socrates about whether the virtues are a unity or a motley. The dialogue ends with a paradox: Socrates has argued that the virtues are unified, all of them being a certain kind of knowledge; but this is in tension with the thesis, which he has also defended, that virtue is not teachable. Protagoras too has been at cross purposes: having claimed that the virtues are teachable, he then denied that they are all forms of knowledge. Despite the fact that the dialogue ends in apparent failure, it contains a deep insight about the justification of democracy. What is at issue, when the merits of democracy are debated, is the competence of ordinary citizens – people who do not seek (and may not be able to acquire) the deeper understanding of moral concepts that philosophy tries to achieve. The argument Protagoras gives for spreading political power widely over the populace rests on a conception of moral competence that sets a very low bar: if someone merely acts in accord with the norms of the community, he is admissible as a cooperating member. Plato is not opposed to using a standard of competence that many people can meet, as we will see when we consider the *Laws*. But in the *Republic* the best sort of political community will have higher standards of virtue than that.

We can already detect some relaxation of those standards in Plato's *Statesman*, a dialogue in which an unnamed philosopher, a visitor to Athens from Elea, replaces Socrates as the principal speaker. It is widely thought to have been composed after the *Republic*, and prior to the *Laws*. Its title derives from its principal subject: it is an attempt to define by taxonomic methods the *politikos*, the expert political leader. There is no departure from the thesis of the *Republic* and other dialogues that a philosophical understanding of human well-being is possible and that the only true form of rule is one that is based on such expertise (293d-e). But in the *Statesman* Plato begins to look for a second-best way of governance, one not based on the political expertise that only a few people can acquire, but on an approximation to that ideal.

A second-best city, according to the visitor from Elea, would be one ruled by strictly observed written laws based on long experience and traditional unwritten norms – even though such strictness is inherently inferior to the intelligence of a wise human being who recognizes that social rules ought to admit of exceptions (297d-e). It would not be a democracy, the visitor says, for that kind of constitution is weak and ineffective, as can be seen from its creation of many small offices and their allotment to many people (303a-b). The visitor is assuming here that the assembly of all citizens in a law-abiding democracy will accomplish little, for good or ill. Power is at its most effective when it is unified in a single person – a point that Hobbes also makes, as we have seen. So, the best imitation of philosophical rule would be governance by one person who is bound never to violate well-made laws.

Even if (contrary to fact) a genuine expert in the art of ruling were now available to us, he, like the law-abiding monarch who imitates him, would need many subordinates to assist him, and ordinary citizens would also play a significant role in the governance of the city. The philosophical ruler and his law-abiding counterpart are portrayed as weavers who know when and how to harmonize the conflicting temperaments of the citizens. Weaving, in fact, is the principal model for political expertise. Some of the smaller offices should be assigned to citizens who have a cautious, passive disposition; others should be allotted to those who are more prone to take risks; and when boards of officers are needed, both character types should be present, because decisions that avoid the excesses of both temperaments can then be expected (310e-311a). Here is a way in which a group can do better than any of the individuals who comprise it. Aristotle will develop that idea more fully.

The *Statesman* also assigns an important role to the skills of the orator, who is distinguished from the ruling monarch (304c-e). Here the Visitor from Elea is assuming that decisions made by the philosophical expert or the law-governed monarch who imitates him ought to be conveyed to the citizens with persuasive appeals to reason, and ought not merely be dictated to them without explanation. Oratory is not the same thing as political wisdom, as Gorgias and his followers had assumed; but in a well-governed city it is a skill that some must master. The Visitor emphasizes that it is not a condition of proper authority that it actually succeed in persuading those over whom it is exercised (296b-e). The consent of the governed is not necessary for political legitimacy; the idea, rather, is that it is better for citizens to obey voluntarily than for them to live under a coercive regime (just as it is better for a patient not only to be healed but to understand the reasons for the doctor's prescriptions). The need for persuasion, mentioned only in passing in the *Statesman*, then becomes a major theme in Plato's *Laws*. In the second-best regime depicted in that dialogue, every important law and the very constitution of a city must have a preamble that explains the purposes of what follows it. The *Laws* itself is prescribed reading for the citizens who live under the regime it depicts (811c). If the *Laws* can be considered a philosophical text, then, in a certain sense its citizens receive a philosophical education. The ideal of the *Republic* has been heavily diluted but not entirely abandoned.

The *Laws* contains Plato's most sustained and detailed examination of political matters. It resembles the *Republic* in its utopianism: it depicts an imaginary society that is far better than any that presently exists. But it is a more realistic utopia, in that the circumstances of its existence are ones that many existing cities can to some degree replicate. Magnesia is the name given to the imaginary colony that is to be established on the island of Crete. (Its imperfection is said to result from the fact that its citizens own property, are expected to marry, and live in separate households – in contravention of the partial communism that reigns in the ideal city of the *Republic*). It is not a city that any of Plato's contemporaries would unhesitatingly classify as a democracy, but the unnamed Athenian who leads the conversation says (693d- 694b) that in his construction of the city he is blending the

principles of democracy (which, he says, takes an extreme form in Athens) and of monarchy (exemplified most fully, he says, in Persia). The Persian regime in effect enslaves its population: it is unfree, since it has no share in power. At the other extreme, Athenian democracy gives its citizens far too much freedom to live their lives as they choose. In such a democracy, the very fact of being ruled by others is regarded as an infringement of freedom (698b); when seen as something that ought to be maximized, the ideal of freedom is in effect an ideal of lawlessness. Plato here deploys the concept of freedom in two ways: it requires political participation, but it also requires that the individual have some control over his private life. The citizens of Magnesia are allowed a due measure of each component of freedom: they share in political power, and although their lives are heavily regulated, there is a private sphere, and important aspects of their lives (whom they marry, for example) are determined by their own choices.

At one point, the Athenian makes a survey of the grounds on which individuals claim to have authority over others: parents think they are entitled to rule over their children, the well born over the base, the elderly over the young, masters over slaves, the stronger over the weaker, the wise over the ignorant, the person chosen by lot over those not chosen (690a-c). Of these seven, the claim of the stronger to rule the weaker is decisively rejected (714b), and Magnesia makes no room for distinctions of birth and lineage. But the remaining five are left standing as legitimate claims to authority. In the private sphere, parents have authority over their children. Some public institutions will give greater powers to those who are advanced in years. The institution of slavery is taken for granted. The lot (combined with elections) is a device by which positions of power are filled. Remarkably, when the Athenian mentions the authority of the wise, he links it to the authority that the law has when it is obeyed by willing subjects. The kind of wisdom that is most important in Magnesia is the wisdom embodied in its laws.

Magnesia will be ruled by an assembly open to all citizens who bear or have born arms (753b) – nearly the entire male population; a council that prepares the business of the assembly; a group known as *nomophulakes* (guardians of laws), all of whom are at least fifty years old; popular courts; and a wide assortment of offices, including those who audit the accounts of magistrates. (These are the *euthunai* that played an important role in Athenian democracy.) The population is divided into four property classes, and the economy is carefully regulated so that differences in wealth can never become excessive. Members of wealthier property classes are given more onerous public responsibilities (they must, for example, attend all meetings of the assembly), but for the most part citizens have equal political power. The body that has the task of revising and supplementing the laws is not the assembly but the *nomophulakes*. The power of the assembly in Magnesia is therefore more restricted than was that of the Athenian assembly. One of its principal roles is to be the venue for the election of officials. Another is to decide the guilt or innocence of those accused of crimes against the city (767e-768a). A third is to approve any changes to the laws (772c).

Is Magnesia a city that would be classified as a democracy, were it to exist today? It would certainly not qualify as a *liberal* democracy, because private life and the economy are heavily regulated. (Men, for example, are required to be married by a certain age.) But its democratic elements are apparent: frequent elections (in which the lot also plays a role), and the accountability of all public offices to public scrutiny. Its small size (5,040 households) allows a high degree of participation in public affairs. There is no official in Magnesia who has the power of a king, or (in modern states) a president, premier, or prime minister; power is far more widely dispersed than that. There is far more economic and political equality in Magnesia than there is in modern democracies. Of course, in one important respect, it fails to qualify as a democracy by modern standards: slavery is taken for granted.

But what about women: are they denied political power in Magnesia, as they were in every Greek polis? The answer is that Plato clearly favors a far greater degree of gender equality for Magnesia than was common among his contemporaries. Girls are to be given the same education as boys – regardless of whether their fathers approve (804d). Women are to play a military role and are eligible for certain political offices, but Plato is not as clear as we would like about how extensive their opportunities will be. He is evidently proposing a measure of gender equality that approximates the equality he prescribes in the *Republic* for members of the ruling class. In that respect, Magnesia comes closer to qualifying as a democracy than any real *dēmokratia* in the Greek world. It would be a crude simplification, then, to say that Plato is an enemy of democracy. Magnesia has too many democratic elements or tendencies to make that an apt way of labeling him. That of course does not mean that he is democratic thinker. In the *Laws*, he never renounces the critiques of democracy that are abundant in his earlier works.³⁴

In the twelfth book of the *Laws*, the Athenian constructs one more institution that will play an important role in Magnesia (it had also been briefly mentioned in Book X at 909a). It is an elite body called the “Nocturnal Council” (*nukterinos sullogos*) because it meets every day from dawn until sunrise (961b). Among its members are the ten oldest *nomophulakoi*, the supervisor of education and his predecessors, and the examiners of magistrates. Each of these senior members nominates a younger person, between the ages of thirty and forty, who will join the group, subject to its approval. (These younger members retire from the Council when they are forty, and are replaced by new members of their age group.) What are the responsibilities of this body? In Book X, it meets with those who have been convicted of atheism, and tries to show them that they are in error (909a). In Book XII, it is also given the task of meeting with those Magnesians who have been allowed to travel abroad; it thus keeps the city open to knowledge from other parts of the world. Its charge also includes the examination of such philosophical questions as the unity of the virtues.

Will it have any political power? The Athenian describes it as the intelligence of Magnesia (969b7), and in the final lines of the dialogue he entrusts the city to it (962b). That has led some scholars to the conclusion that its powers will be as great

as those of the philosophical elite of the *Republic*. But in a crucial passage, the Athenian prescribes to it the task of determining which *laws* and which men will best instill virtue in the citizens (962b-963a). The Nocturnal Council is best seen, then, as an advisory body that will recommend to the *nomophulakoi* and the assembly candidates for office and new legislation. It is also a mechanism for giving some citizens a philosophical education – these are the younger members who retire from it at the age of forty. Philosophical knowledge is thus propagated among a small portion of the population. But unlike the philosophers who rule in the *Republic*, the members of the Nocturnal Council are meant to operate strictly within the framework of the law.

e. Isocrates' *Areopagiticus*

Isocrates deserves a place in the history of Greek political philosophy largely because of his advocacy, in the *Areopagiticus* (written ca. 355), of what might be called a aristocratic version of democracy. He began his career as a composer of speeches (he had once been a student of Gorgias), but soon established his own school– one in which oratory and philosophy are not (as Plato claimed) separate and possibly rival disciplines, but are complementary. Genuine philosophy, as he conceives it in the *Antidosis* (his defense of his way of life, and in some ways akin to Plato's *Apology* of Socrates), must be conducive to the improvement of civic life. It can be of value only if it is a practical skill that seeks political results, and so the study of argumentation through persuasive speech lies at its core. It is not a body of speculative doctrine, but an understanding of how to think, speak, and argue in ways that are likely to get results. Given the opposition of Isocrates to Plato's conception of philosophy, it is noteworthy that in the *Phaedrus* Socrates describes him in glowing terms, not only as an accomplished composer of speeches, but also as someone with great philosophical potential (279a). Is Socrates being ironic in these remarks? It is difficult to say.

The *Areopagiticus* is a political pamphlet cast in the form of a speech addressed to Isocrates' fellow Athenian citizens. He assumes that his audience is dissatisfied with the way their current democracy is governed (15), but not with the very idea of democracy. The proper remedy for its ills is to alter its structure, bringing it closer to the system created by Solon and Cleisthenes. Democracy became and remains too radical, and the ideals of freedom, equality, and happiness have been misunderstood (20). The right kind of equality is one that makes distinctions between the qualified and the unqualified: this means that offices should not be filled by lot but by election (22). Pay for attending the assembly and for being a juror are new practices that have corrupted democracy; in earlier times, devotion to the common good was regarded as the proper motive for public service (24-25). What makes a city a democracy is not pay for office-holders but the control that the *dêmos* exercises over its rulers by having the power to punish them for ruling badly (26-27).

The social norms that prevail in private life make an enormous difference to the way a city is governed (28). In earlier times, the poor took the prosperity of the rich to be a resource for themselves, while the rich took the needs of the poor to be their responsibility (32). The constitutional arrangement that underwrote these social norms lay in the great prestige of the Areopagus Council. Its morally exemplary members had a powerful effect on all social behavior, private no less than public – not so much through formal legislation as through esteem and disesteem (37-42). Isocrates proposes something like the division of labor Plato depicts in the *Republic*: some citizens should be trained as farmers or for commercial jobs; others for horsemanship, athletics, hunting, and philosophy (44-45). Young people should not be allowed to waste their time gambling, pursuing sexual thrills, or drinking and eating to excess (48-49). Extravagant and ostentatious public festivals are a waste of public resources, which should be devoted instead to the alleviation of genuine needs (53). Whether a citizen has access to the necessities of life should not depend on whether he is selected by the lot to serve as a juror (54).

At this point, Isocrates turns to the question whether he is proposing a revolutionary change – the overthrow of democracy and the institution of an oligarchy (57). He insists, against this, that democracy is superior to oligarchy, and he supports this by pointing to the horrors of the oligarchical regime that briefly replaced the democracy in 404, at the end of the Peloponnesian War. When the *dêmos* took control again, it proved itself to be a more moderate and just body than the oligarchs had been (66-67). So, even a bad democracy is better than an oligarchy – that is, a regime in which the few who rule are not legally accountable to the *dêmos* (70).

Isocrates brings his oration to a close with two observations about poverty. Athens, he says, currently has a large population of citizens who must beg for provisions from passers-by, and that puts the city to shame. Furthermore, people who live day-to-day seeking bare necessities must not be blamed for not giving thought to the public good (83). It is possible to read these remarks and much else that Isocrates says in this speech as rhetorically effective stratagems for doing exactly what he denies he is doing: putting an end to democracy. But it can also be argued that he has a sincere interest in the well-being of the *dêmos*, and that he is right about at least this much: the kind of democracy in which voters are driven primarily by economic self-interest is deeply flawed.

f. Aristotle' *Politics*

Although Aristotle holds that democracy is by its nature a defective political system, he is not opposed to rule by the many. He uses the name *politeia* (which might be translated “republic”) to designate a good political system in which power is equally shared among a large group. The argument he uses to bring out the merits of such an arrangement is one of the most intriguing defenses of democracy that can be found in antiquity. It rests on the idea that it is sometimes better to bring a large group together to make a collective judgment than to rely on just a few individuals,

just as a feast to which many cooks contribute can outmatch one made by just one person (*Pol.* III.11). Is this thought, which Aristotle seems to endorse, compatible with his low opinion of an omni-deliberative democratic assembly (discussed above in section 3)? That question is taken up later in this volume, in the introductory essay on Aristotle's *Politics*.

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Endnotes

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- ¹ Ober 1998
 - ² Robinson 1997
 - ³ Kraut 1980, Chapter VII; Waterfield 2009; Vlastos 1994
 - ⁴ Roberts 1994
 - ⁵ Rawls 1971
 - ⁶ Hobbes *Leviathan* I.19
 - ⁷ Mackie 2003, p. 15, citing Cain 2001, pp. 111-112. Poundstone 2008 is an accessible introduction.
 - ⁸ Caplan 2007
 - ⁹ Brennan 2011
 - ¹⁰ Syme 1939, p. 7.
 - ¹¹ See Bachrach 1967 for a critique.
 - ¹² Christiano 2008, Estlund 2004
 - ¹³ Samons 2004, p. xv
 - ¹⁴ Ober 2008
 - ¹⁵ Davies J. K. 1981, pp. 6-14, 28-35
 - ¹⁶ Some support for Aristotle's view can be found in the study of fifty-four Greek democracies outside Athens undertaken in Robinson 2011: With respect to "the accusation that democracy amounted to the rule of the poor over the rich," he remarks: "there's no doubt that wealth disparity often arose as an issue and the *demos* and its leaders acted with it in mind" (p. 225).
 - ¹⁷ See *Pol.* III.5 1277b33-7, VII.9 1328b33-1329a2, VIII.2 1337b8-15; Kraut 2002, pp. 215-217, 234, 464-5, 475
 - ¹⁸ Robinson 1997, p. 36; Robinson 2011, pp. 222-230
 - ¹⁹ Raaflaub 2004 contains a full study of the Greek conception of freedom.
 - ²⁰ Lysias 26.5; Thucydides 7.69.2; Plato, *Republic* 557b. See Hansen 1996, Wallace 1996
 - ²¹ Raaflaub and Wallace 2007
 - ²² Cartledge 2002 emphasizes the differences between Athenian and Spartan egalitarianism.
 - ²³ Robinson 1997, p. 126
 - ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129
 - ²⁵ Robinson 2011, p. 207
 - ²⁶ K. A. Raaflaub & R. J. Wallace 2007, pp. 44-45
 - ²⁷ R. W. Wallace 2007
 - ²⁸ *Archon* means "ruler," and was used by the Greeks to designate a small number of especially high offices. These numbered nine in Athens in the sixth century. An *archon* would, after serving a one-year term, become a member of the Areopagus Council for the remainder of his life.
 - ²⁹ Wallace 1985
 - ³⁰ Monoson 2000 argues for a nuanced interpretation.
 - ³¹ See Saxonhouse 2006 for a study of this concept.

³² See Aristotle *NE* I.13 1102a10-11, X.9 1180a24-26; *Politics* VIII.1 1337a29-32; Plato, *Hippias Major* 283e9-284a2.

³³ See too *Republic* 492b on the assembly as a venue for shouting matches.

³⁴ See Bobonich 2002 and Samaris 2002 for the view that the *Laws* is to some extent Plato's retraction of the anti-democratic political philosophy of the *Republic*.