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ECONOMIC EQUALITY AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY IN ANCIENT ATHENS

Larry Patriquin

Economic Equality and Direct Democracy in Ancient Athens

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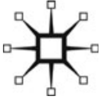

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1
Introduction: The Importance of Athens

Abstract: *The Introduction notes that Athens' evident flaws are deemed fatally problematic by numerous observers, hence for them, Athens hardly qualifies as a "democracy." Perhaps the major factor that leads numerous modern analysts to condemn the Greeks is the presence of slavery in their societies. Key to the argument of this book is opposition to the idea that slaves freed most citizens from the need to labor. It also argues against the notion that the democracy rested on a paradox, rooted in political equality and economic inequality, maintaining instead that Athenian democracy was the product of a historically unique combination of both political and economic equality.*

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The Greek word *demokratia*, first coined by the 460s–450s B.C. and in common usage by the 440s B.C., combined the terms *demos*, understood by most Athenians to mean "the common people" or "the masses," and *kratos*, a reference to sovereign power, the ability to make decisions for oneself. *Kratos* relates etymologically to words like "grasp" and "grip"; the image it portrays is one of individuals getting their hands on power (Cartledge 2007, 156–7). In its various uses, the word *kratos* placed a spotlight on specific people. For instance, *aristokratia* referred not only to members of an identifiable social group, the few wealthy aristocrats, but also to the power they held. *Demokratia*, in turn, underlined the power possessed by another faction of the population, the lower classes (Eder 1998, 113).

While *demokratia* implied "the common people," Greeks disagreed on who precisely among "the people" constituted the demos. Pro-democrats believed that the demos included all citizens, and not just the poor.[1] In contrast, anti-democrats employed "demos" in a derogatory manner to refer to one segment of the citizenry—the "crowd" or the non-aristocrats. The rich disparagingly dubbed these poorer men with terms such as "the rabble," "the mob," and the *hoi polloi* (the "many").

Despite these differences of perspective, however, almost everyone in ancient Greek society understood democracy as more than just "rule by a majority"; the term was synonymous with rule by the poor (a class that just happened to constitute most of the population). It was not sheer numbers that defined democracy. Rather, it was the *class position* of the large proportion of men permitted to participate directly in political life that made a democracy.[2] This is what led Aristotle to argue—though he noted the absurdity of huge numbers of wealthy people in any society—that a city-state would remain an oligarchy if it were ruled by the rich, *even if* they made up a majority of the citizenry. Oligarchy, then, did not mean "rule by the few."

To begin, I should point out that not all scholars see ancient Athens' mode of governance as relevant for modern nation-states. Well-known democratic theorist Giovanni Sartori, for one, is adamant that "ancient democracies cannot teach us anything about building a democratic state and about conducting a democratic system that covers not merely a small city but a larger expanse of territory inhabited by a vast collectivity" (quoted in Saward 2003, 75). Moreover, numerous observers, from the city-state's famous philosophers to latter-day critics, have pointed to Athens' evident flaws, including its occasional military defeats, its

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imperialism and empire-building, the trial and execution of Socrates, and the subordination of women. Given such a history, it is easy to understand how someone today might look at Athens for guidance, but then turn away disappointed.

Now universally viewed as repugnant, slavery stands as perhaps the greatest factor in contemporary condemnations of ancient Greek societies. At its peak, there were tens of thousands of slaves in Athens. The presence of these slaves, needless to say, is the subject of great debate amongst scholars. Despite this, one fairly common assertion is that slaves "helped to free the slaves' masters from the onus of perpetual labour, and thus, *ironically*, created the precious leisure required for democratic political life" (Watson and Barber 2000, 25, emphasis added).[3] Charles Tilly (2007, 26), a prominent theorist of democracy, also suggests that the labor of slaves "freed slave-owning citizens to participate in public politics." Tilly goes on to claim that "between 300 BCE and the 19th century CE, a number of European regimes adopted variants on the Greek model: privileged minorities of relatively equal citizens dominated their states at the expense of excluded majorities." In these states, including Athens, elites "all lived on the labor of excluded, subordinate classes" (Tilly 2007, 27). Tilly does not distinguish between the stunningly original Athenian experiment in creating the world's first democracy, and the many other examples of governance over the next two millennia, none of which came close to copying the Greek model, a model that was never adopted by "privileged minorities," but rather, for thousands of years, was condemned by ruling classes everywhere, without exception.

This ungenerous assessment of the ancients becomes almost apoplectic at times. In a recent book in the Oxford University Press' prestigious "Very Short Introductions" series, Richard Bellamy (2008, 31) takes the "myth of the idle mob" to extremes, asserting that "to be a citizen" in Greece one had to be, among other things, "a master of the labour of others, notably slaves." He further posits that "citizenship itself, if one adds military service and participation in local affairs, was a fairly full occupation" (33). He maintains that the capacity of men "to perform their not inconsiderable citizenly duties rested on their everyday needs being looked after by the majority of the population, particularly women and slaves" (32). He concludes, most absurdly, that ancient Greece "was oppressive of citizens in demanding they sacrifice their private interests to the service of the state," something that is "the mark of totalitarian regimes" (35). Such interpretations of slavery make it difficult for us to

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understand Athenian democracy and to learn the lessons it can offer on how to democratize our own institutions of governance.[4]

It is the task of this small book to argue that Greek democracy—in particular its Athenian variant—has been the most radical form of democracy in the history of humanity, and that its radical nature was rooted in an equally radical version of economic parity. My argument stands in contrast to much of the literature on ancient democracy, wherein scholars tend to find an inexplicable "paradox" between Athens' extraordinary politics, on the one hand, and its apparently typical economic arrangements, on the other hand. For instance, Anthony Arblaster (2002, 25) speaks of "the uneasy coexistence of political equality with social and economic inequality" at Athens. Meanwhile, Maureen Cavanaugh (2003, 452) asks: "If Athenian democracy was characterized by both political equality and economic inequality, what developments led to this extraordinary commitment to political equality?" Furthermore, Peter Liddel (2009, 136) observes that Athenians "did not think that economic redistribution was a prerequisite for political equality (or, for that matter, liberty)," adding that it "is clear, therefore, that ancient democratic thought was concerned with political equality but not socioeconomic equality." Walter Eder (1998, 108), likewise, claims that: "Modern democracy began by realizing the idea of political equality, then strove for social equality, and finally, at least in theory, claimed economic equality for all citizens. In sharp contrast, the evolution of ancient democracy stopped with the concept of political equality." Finally, even G.E.M. de Ste. Croix (1981, 285), perhaps the twentieth century's most important commentator on the ancient Greek world, could posit, after noting the legal equality and free speech characteristic of Athenian democracy: "There was no pretence, however, of economic equality."

While it is true that Athenians in their everyday political discourse never hotly debated the question of redistributing wealth, perhaps this silence is telling. I argue that there were no rallying cries for redistribution because Athenians began their democracy from a position of relative economic parity. The *starting point* of the ancient world's most celebrated political experiment was a rough similarity in the ownership of material resources. In sum, Athens has much to tell us about the relationship between political equality and economic *equality* (not *in*equality).

This study begins with an examination of how Greek city-states, in particular Athens, came into existence. It then surveys the "nuts and

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bolts" of Athenian democracy, accounting for how this novel form of governance worked in practice, with particular emphasis on the Council, the Assembly, and the courts. Next, I highlight the economic egalitarianism that underpinned the democracy and consider two groups of people—slaves and women—who were never granted any form of equality.[5] I then show how Athens' major philosophers deployed elitist, anti-democratic perspectives, before moving on to the story of democracy's decline and disappearance. The conclusion underscores the necessity to have economic equality as the essential foundation for political democracy. My findings have ramifications for how we might approach alterations to contemporary democracy, alterations which many analysts maintain are necessary to resuscitate confidence in the efficacy of our governing institutions.

Notes

1 However, as we will see, even pro-democrats placed severe limitations on who could be citizens, excluding a majority of adults within the city-state, in particular all women, slaves, and foreign residents (metics).

2 For a discussion of "class" and a defence of its use in the context of ancient Athens, see Wood and Wood (1978, 41–64).

3 When analyzing ancient democracy, or any other historical phenomenon, it is best to proceed on the assumption that there are no "ironies," just events and practices that require explanation.

4 See Swift (2010) for an informative account of why such democratization is necessary.

5 For the various meanings of "equality" in ancient Greek, see Cartledge (1996), who also notes that for the Greeks, "in hard political praxis the operative criterion governing equality's implementation is not sameness or identity but rather similitude or likeness" (178).

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2
Origins of the Polis

Abstract: *This chapter begins with a brief history of the period prior to c.750 B.C., after which the* polis *began to appear as the typical form of governance throughout much of Greece. It then documents the various power struggles that occurred down to c.594 B.C., when Solon was appointed as mediator to resolve a major conflict, one that had developed within the aristocracy but also concerned relations between the rich and poor. The remainder of the chapter highlights Solon's economic reforms, including the cancellation of debts and debt-bondage, which were critical to maintaining the independence of small farmers; and his political reforms, which established most of the major institutions of Athenian democracy.*

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The first permanent settlements in Greece began around 7000 B.C. The earliest civilization in the area was based around the palace at Knossos, on the island of Crete in the Aegean Sea, south of the Greek mainland. These people, the Minoans,[1] whose civilization prospered between 2200 and 2000 B.C., engaged in little independent economic activity. The palace was in charge of all wealth. Authorities collected goods from producers, returning a portion to each household for subsistence (Martin 2000, 25). The Minoans, via trade, had much contact with and influence on the mainland, including the Kingdom of Mycenae, located in the Peloponnese in southern Greece. Mycenaeans were among the first people to speak Greek. Their palaces date from c.1400 B.C., with the culture peaking over the next 200 years. Internal conflicts, especially power struggles among "princes," as well as out-migration and external invasions by raiders and bands of mercenaries, gradually destroyed the kingdoms between 1200 and 1000 B.C. The palaces turned to ruins in the face of economic and political retrogression.

Amidst much violence and poverty, cities throughout Greece went into decline, some leaving behind little more than a few physical fragments as testimony to their existence. By perhaps 1200 and certainly no later than 1000 B.C., Greece entered a so-called Dark Age. States collapsed, population fell by somewhere between 75 and 90 percent (Rose 2012, 59n6), and the elaborate architecture that had characterized Knossos and Mycenae disappeared. The economy languished for more than a century before reviving slowly after c.900 B.C. In the Archaic Age (c.750–500 B.C.), more advanced civilizations emerged and, with rare exceptions, the Greek language dominated in settlements surrounding the Aegean Sea. While they certainly included elites of both wealth and birth, these new societies exhibited much less hierarchy in comparison with their palace-based predecessors. Around 700 B.C., scribes finally wrote down the two most famous poems of the era, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which storytellers for hundreds of years had recited from memory. Given that we lack historical sources, these poems, conventionally attributed to Homer, offer our best indicator of the social structure of Dark Age Greece. They depict an aristocratic society in which an elite controlled significant amounts of private property. They also, however, show some forms of egalitarianism taking root, including a general recognition of "the value and humanity of each individual, even those of low social status" (Raaflaub and Wallace 2007, 32).

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We learn even more about ancient Greece from the writings of the eighth-century poet Hesiod, especially his *Works and Days*. He describes a patriarchal world where men controlled their wives, children, servants, and other followers from outside the *oikos* (household). Some of these men became chiefs (*basileis*) of their tribes. Economically and socially, *basileis* differed little from other members of the upper class. What distinguished them, however, was the influence they wielded over the law. They had the power to settle conflicts, typically rooted in questions of justice, and inflict punishments. This power, though, rested on their abilities to convince others of what was right; they had little control over rebellious individuals and groups. Hesiod says of chiefs: "When wise leaders see their people in the assembly get on the wrong track, they gently set matters right, persuading them with soft words" (quoted in Martin 2000, 48–9). In places like Athens and Sparta, assemblies of the more substantial men gradually appeared; they were convened on an ad hoc basis to deal with important matters. Over time, councils also developed, consisting mostly of members of the wealthier classes. Assemblies and councils, however, were not standing, legislative bodies. They did not meet regularly and they lacked set procedures. By the seventh century, the role of the *basileus* "quietly disappeared" (Starr 1986, 64), replaced by various magistrates, the archons ("rulers"), who were likely chosen by the assembly.

Around 750 B.C., a new form of political structure was emerging—the *polis* (pl. *poleis*) or "city-state." The English translation of polis is somewhat misleading, because some city-states did not have cities, while in many poleis, the cities were relatively small. Poleis were independent entities that, while politically separate, often had no obvious physical barriers separating them. What made cities distinct, for poleis that had them, was their greater economic diversity, with burgeoning commerce and industry, and their roles as political, religious, and cultural centers, typically containing an agora (a "square" where people could meet), theatres, gymnasia, temples, and so forth. Small cities were never far from a farming district, and even in the few instances where cities were relatively large they were always attached in important ways to rural areas. In the case of the city-state of Athens, the countryside (Attica) was much more extensive than the city, in terms of both geographic size and population.

Over the centuries, the meaning of "polis" changed, from describing a group of people who lived in a specific area to delineating a political

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unity of citizens, men with rights and obligations. By 350 B.C., "polis" was "used almost exclusively in two senses: geographically to mean a 'city' and politically to mean a 'state'" (Hansen 1999, 56). Estimates vary, but at the peak of its civilization, ancient Greece included about 750 poleis and another 300 or so outside Greece proper, founded by men who set up foreign settlements. The average size of a polis was 100 km.^{2} Behind only Lakedaimon, Attica was the second largest polis at 2,500 km^2 (Hansen 1999, 55), about half the size of Prince Edward Island and one-quarter that of Puerto Rico. Though relatively large, Attica's outlying areas lay no more than 70 kilometers from Athens at any of its furthest points. In terms of population, the average Greek polis numbered about 1,000 male citizens, whereas Athens at its peak—and these are very rough estimates—included somewhere between 40,000[2] and 60,000[3] citizens, declining to about 30,000 by the late 320s B.C. (Hansen 1999, 55).

We do not know why at the end of the Dark Age the polis spread so quickly as a form of political organization. We do not know as well how the Greeks created a form of politics based not on "personal loyalty to a leader but as a firm communal entity" (Starr 1977, 31), one whose raison d'être stood in fundamental opposition to the basic worldview of aristocrats, scaling back their powers to an unprecedented extent. At this time, for whatever reasons, "ordinary Athenians became conscious of their own political potential" (Sinclair 1988, 4). A group of (mostly) farmers concluded that political life need not be the exclusive purview of the wealthy, that the tillers of the land could be citizens, not mere subjects who were unequal to their masters. An "*enormous* social transformation" occurred, entailing "nothing less than the creation of an entire class" who "overwhelmed the aristocratic culture of Dark-Age Greece" (Hanson 1995, 114), where previously a culture had prevailed within which the presence of both rulers and ruled, as distinct categories of men, constituted the apparently natural order of things. In archaic Athens (and to a lesser extent in Rome a few centuries later), dependent classes "succeeded in freeing themselves *en bloc* and thereby automatically reestablishing themselves as full members of their respective communities" (Finley 1980, 72).[4] "Poorer" men somehow managed to kick open the door of politics.

Attica emerged from the Dark Age as a unified polity, and one of unusual size in Greece, but it is unclear how this region was governed before the early sixth century. There appear to have been kings, but unfortunately we "cannot describe or date the stages of the process by

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which the monarchy was dismantled" (Andrewes 1982a, 364). Somewhere along the way, members of noble families (the self-styled Eupatridai, the "well-born"), who were significant landowners, gained power. By the late eighth century, these nobles had developed a self-conscious aristocratic ethos which equated those of "good birth"—the few rich people—with the "best" and the "superior." These families delegated government to nine archons, who probably held office until they died, a term subsequently reduced to ten years. After 682–1 B.C., the archonships were filled on an annual basis. Former archons became members of the Council of Areopagos, serving for life. We can only guess at the precise responsibilities of this Council and the archons, though we know that some archons held specialized functions; for instance, the "polemarch" was in charge of war. A more formal assembly may have emerged as early as the seventh century, though it likely withheld membership from some citizens, in particular the poor. At this time, the majority of men, those who lived off the land, played no part in government.

In the latter part of the seventh century, struggles between ruling families intensified throughout Greece and tyrants appeared, sometimes on the heels of violent upheaval. In Athens in 632 B.C., an attempted coup led by a noble, Cylon, was put down by farmers who, according to the historian Thucydides, rallied "from the fields in a body" (quoted in Martin 2000, 83). Their actions demonstrated, among other things, that average Athenians "were developing from passive members of a social hierarchy into active shareholders in a political community" (Manville 1990, 78). Nevertheless, within ten years or so, the harsh law of Drako (from whom we get the word "draconian") was implemented. We know almost nothing about Drako or why he was chosen as a law-giver. Most of the content of his law has been lost, but what remains is "a clear expression of the power of the aristocracy over everybody else" (Thorley 2004, 10). Despite this, the fact that the law was written down suggests that "lower" men had challenged aristocratic control of the law (Manville 1990, 79). It was, after all, typically the non-elite, those excluded from power, who called for laws to be put in writing.

After Drako, an economic crisis, exacerbated by an intense conflict between the wealthy and indebted peasants, threatened Attic society. Furthermore, a "middle class" of peasant-farmers was emerging, one that "had the means and the incentive to demand recognition of its position within the community" (Stanley 1999, 103). If the city-state was going to defend itself militarily, the social classes had to find a way

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to attenuate the frictions between them and overcome strong regional loyalties within the polis. Athens needed to be socially as well as politically unified. Out of more than a century of political evolution came the idea that justice required the recognition of moral equality amongst men, which meant some level of equality in the political realm. The result of all these conflicts and ideological changes saw Athenians address the difficult question "of how, if at all, to differentiate between leaders and followers within the community" (Balot 2006, 26–7).

In 594 B.C., Solon, an aristocrat, trader, and poet, was appointed as the archon eponymous, the highest state official. The rich as well as the poor gave him the task of solving the conflicts that had emerged, both within the ruling class and, in particular, between the rulers and the people. Everyone involved agreed to accept his proposals for political as well as economic reform for at least ten years.[5] We are not sure why both sides were amenable to having Solon mediate on their behalf (Andrewes 1982a, 377), yet most people seemed to have deferred to his recommendations, which "laid a foundation for the political influence that the laborer class would gradually acquire over the next century and a half" (Martin 2000, 85).

Solon's economic reforms

Solon's economic reforms are difficult to assess because we have few sources on land rights and ownership at the beginning of the sixth century.[6] One possibility suggests that poorer people, the *hektemoroi* (the small farmers),[7] had fallen deeply into debt, paying annually one-sixth of their produce to creditors from whom they had borrowed money. Those who defaulted were sold as slaves. Solon cancelled these debts, an act known as the *seisakhtheia* (the "shaking off of burdens"), and made illegal the enslavement of citizens who might be unable to repay loans at some future point. Farmers now controlled their land again, debt-free. Another possibility is that from the time of original settlement, over perhaps hundreds of years, farmers had paid noble landholders the equivalent of one-sixth of their crop, and Solon cancelled this payment, effectively abolishing a form of land rent. Either way, however, Solon's solution to the agrarian crisis meant a *hektemoros* could stay "on the land he cultivated, with no remaining limitation on his rights over it, rights that would easily develop into ownership in the Classical sense"

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(Andrewes 1982a, 382). It is possible that "the liberation by Solon of the hectemors and the debt-bondsmen automatically brought about their transformation into small free landowners" (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 1977, 71). The *seisakhtheia*, then, marked a change from the mere "use" or "possession" of land to a more clearly defined form of "ownership" of properties that the *hektemoroi* may have lived on and worked on for generations (Manville 1990, 127).[8] After Solon's reforms, the sources never again refer to *hektemoroi*, further suggesting that they effectively transferred from one status to another, and that they did not, en masse, fall back into their previous predicament.

Even so, Solon's reforms still leave a number of unanswered questions. It is especially difficult to explain *how* Solon, despite the authority vested in his role, was able to convince debt holders to accept his solution. How do we account for "the readiness of the ruling class to accept the apparently revolutionary measure of debt cancellations" (French 1956, 11)? And how can debt cancellation possibly have constituted a "compromise" from the perspective of the landowners, something Solon claims to have delivered to the contesting parties? Why did the holders of private property not pose a serious challenge to this so-called compromise? Why did they not go back on their promise to accept the recommendations of their chosen mediator when this man had delivered such an apparently one-sided verdict? Alfred French suggests some possible answers. First, landlords were unlikely ever to collect from their debtors, so the loss of this revenue would not affect their financial health to any significant extent. Second, the compromise may have allowed the wealthy to retain the land itself. Having been released from their debts, the *hektemoroi* were generally amenable to the deal. In the process, though, they became free wage laborers. They did not become landowners. After all, Solon had insisted that no substantial redistribution of land would follow from his decisions. For the man forced to leave farming behind, "his only possible status on the land in future would be that of the hired labourer, to be dismissed when not wanted." The outcome of Solon's judgment, then, "was to clear unwanted labour off the land, and to keep it off" (French 1956, 22).

While French's theory offers one answer as to how Solon's economic reforms might have succeeded in winning over landholders, his observations seem to entail a "reading back into history," of something akin to the transition from feudalism to capitalism, especially in his assumption that if the *hektemoroi* lost their means of production, they had to become wage laborers. And yet, if this occurred, if so many households suffered

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"enclosure" in Solon's day, how was it the case, almost 200 years later (in the late 400s B.C.), that roughly 80 percent of Athenian citizens were still landowners? Where did *their* access to land originate? Furthermore, the "compromise" that French describes hardly would have settled the *hektemoroi's* grievances, which were rooted in their inability to make a living. How could these men and their families have survived without access to land, in a society where wage labor was surely a marginal economic activity?

Despite these shortcomings, French's (1956, 24) argument appears to have some merit. The suggestion that "by a bare fiat, Solon caused the lands to be handed back at once [to the *hektemoroi*], without argument, and without compensation, ... is naïve in the extreme." He adds that it would be "odd" if "the masses seriously expected Solon to be approved as an arbitrator by the landowners with the intention of disintegrating their own wealth" (23). French's analysis makes sense, but only if we assume that the lands upon which the *hektemoroi* had been piling up debts of some kind were *privately* owned by a few men. There is another possibility, however, and that is that the land was held *publicly*. This alternative possibility was alluded to by Aristotle, when he stated that Solon had cancelled "both private and public debts." Yet French quickly eliminates this option by simply assuming that Aristotle was wrong:

> "Public" debts cannot, of course, mean debts owed to or by the state, since not only would this have nothing to do with the problem at issue, but such debts could hardly have existed at this time. If the word "public" is taken in its ordinary sense, one can only assume that, in this instance, Aristotle was mistaken. (French 1956, 21)

So what happened? In offering an alternative explanation, T.E. Rihll (1991, 103) provides a more coherent answer. She maintains that the state, in fact, owned the land in question,[9] a starting point that better accounts for the unusual series of events that unfolded at Athens in the 590s. It is reasonably certain that Solon's reforms did *not* involve a redistribution of land, and yet the *hektemoroi*, as many scholars argue, emerged from the *seisakhtheia* as virtual landowners. If the wealthy never "owned" the land in the first place, it must have been "owned" by the state, and so was part of the political/constitutional crisis Solon was asked to resolve. These men enjoyed only *political* control of public land, in addition to other, private sources of wealth, including land (ownership of these other resources is, after all, how they became politically powerful).[10] As

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a result, Solon's abolition of debts, and the consequent loss of potential future income from debtors, would have represented a small economic loss to the rich, which they surely would have grumbled about in private, yet it was not one so stinging that it initiated a violent backlash from them. Rather, they seem to have accepted these reforms with quiet resignation. In short, Solon did not provoke a bloody revolution because the *seisakhtheia* was not revolutionary.

In future decades (indeed future centuries), the rich brought forth an endless series of grievances against the *political* powers held by the demos, but they rarely claimed that Solon's *economic* reforms were unfair. The poor, for their part, never again called for a redistribution of land during the Classical era. Just as important however—and too often overlooked—the rich did not make a concerted attempt to overthrow the property relations that, over time, undergirded the democracy. What the rich lost in the *seisakhtheia* did not represent a critically important aspect of their wealth. It was a bit of extra cream that Solon skimmed off and handed back to the *hektemoroi*, giving them land they already considered rightfully theirs. With Solon's reforms, "no one had lost his [private] land and no one had gained what he had not been using already" (Rihll 1991, 124). The outcome of Solon's abolition of hektemorage, as well as his refusal to redistribute land owned privately by the rich, is that "no land is given to anyone who does not have at least some claim to it" (Schils 1991, 87).

In Athens in the 590s, it may have been the case that the *hektemoroi's* claim to the land in question was strong while the aristocrats' claim was fairly weak. The two parties were not as far apart, in their relative strength, as terms such as "rich" and "poor," or "powerful" and "oppressed," might suggest. It would be very unusual historically to expect extremely poor men to lead the type of rebellion that sent post–Drakonian Attica into turmoil. The *hektemoroi*, then, despite the fact that they might be enslaved for debt, were likely more of a "middling" social group. Drako's laws may have tried to codify in writing the politically dependent status of the *hektemoroi* (as well as making legal their enslavement), hence their reaction against this code, hence their uprising. Faced with a "now or never" moment—freedom or slavery—the *hektemoroi* fought back against a vicious law, precipitating the crisis that Solon was called upon to resolve, one in which he, as a second law-giver, had to be appointed barely a generation after Drako, the first law-giver, whose legal code was so oppressive to so many, it began crumbling just decades after it was implemented.

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Solon's political reforms

The political consequences of Solon's economic reforms appeared immediately, in that he also agreed (or he was forced by the demos?) to open up new spaces for average men to participate in government.[11] The key objective of these reforms was to ensure that aristocrats would not monopolize politics. First, Solon divided the citizenry into four economic classes based on the annual value of *medimnoi* (bushels) of grain and/or their liquid equivalents (of wine and/or olive oil), forms of "income" easily measured in this thoroughly agrarian society. The four classes were: (1) *pentakosiomedimnoi*, worth more than 500 medimnoi, enough grain to feed about 15 families a year; (2) *hippeis*, or "horsemen," those rich enough to own a horse and perhaps outfit themselves for the cavalry, worth 300 to 500 medimnoi; (3) *zeugitai*, or "yoke-men," who likely had enough money to afford a pair of oxen and would usually be called upon to serve as hoplites (foot soldiers) in the military, worth 200 to 300 medimnoi; and (4) *thetes*, or "menials," a group who worked as day-laborers, though they were not necessarily landless, worth less than 200 medimnoi. This four-fold division of the citizenry did not "set up a system of graduated entitlements"; rather, Solon's purpose "was to determine the degree of service the state could expect of each group of citizens, since there was no public pay for public service." The establishment of the property classes did not define the privileges and prerogatives of the rich, but rather "the expectation the community had of a member" (Ostwald 1996, 56–7).

In the aftermath of these reforms, any member of the top class, the *pentakosiomedimnoi*, could be elected as an archon. As a result, the wealthier members of society still occupied the archon positions, but many men in this class, while well-off, were not aristocrats, and they had no direct ties to the noble families. This was characteristic of Solon's reforms, which made access to the various organs of government predicated not on birth, but on a hierarchy rooted in income and wealth, typically without excluding the poorest men completely. Solon also likely created a Council of 400, with 100 men drawn from each of the four ancient, kin-based Ionian tribes (groups of people who saw themselves as related, if only distantly so). These men were members of the top three economic classes (since no *thetes* sat on the Council, it was composed, in terms of wealth, of the upper half of the citizenry). It is not known what precise role the new Council played in governance, though it appears to

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have taken over some of the functions held previously by the Council of Areopagos.

In addition, Solon created an Assembly, open to all four classes. The precise powers of the Assembly remain unclear, but it seems that the Council set its agenda. It is likely that this Assembly "no longer remained just a body through which the political elite won support for policies already decided, but became in its own right the organ of State that made the final decision" (Owens 2010, 117).

Solon's most radical reform was to establish courts (*heliaia*) which, like the Assembly, accepted all citizens as participants. Given the resistance to Drako's code, and in order to give people confidence in the law, Solon "put the final power in the administration of justice into the hands of a cross-section of the whole citizen population" (Thorley 2004, 15–16). Before Solon, the nine archons who served as magistrates in personal disputes had administered private justice. The Council of Areopagus had dealt with matters regarded as more clearly public, for example homicide and crimes against the state, as well as the *dokimasia* and *euthyna*, procedures used to determine the suitability of magistrates and, once their terms were completed, hold them accountable for their actions.[12] With the introduction of the *heliaia*, any citizen could sit in judgment of any other citizen. In addition, he could bring a case into court, including "cases in which the state as a whole was the injured party" (Ostwald 1986, 15). Moreover, citizens could now appeal decisions of archons and the Areopagus to the *heliaia*. The law—including public law—ceased to be the prerogative of the wealthy. Solon's reforms "made the people the court of last resort" (Ostwald 1986, 15). In sum, "impersonal principles of law and citizenship were taking precedence over the personal rule of kings or lords" (Wood 2008, 33). Moreover, Solon was the first political leader "to make the free man one who has been, and now is, emancipated from economic bondage to an upper class," hence providing an opportunity for these men "to play a full part in the life of society as a whole" (Ostwald 1995, 61).

From Solon to Cleisthenes

Solon's alterations to the Athenian "constitution" were implemented apparently with the support of a significant majority of those involved in the conflict. Still, there must have been some who were unsatisfied, as Solon felt the need to defend his compromise. He did so in his poetry,

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a few fragments of which have survived. The gods, he wrote, had not caused the troubles he was called upon to address. Rather, the "citizens themselves (*autoi*) wish to destroy the great city through their mindless acts" (quoted in Rose 2012, 222). The greed of the rich inflicted enormous suffering on the mass of the people. He scolded them, saying: "you have taken too much of the good things of life" (quoted in Patterson 2005, 271). He said this as a man of means, adding: "Though wealth I desire to have, to acquire it unjustly I do not wish" (quoted in Owens 2010, 110). Solon seems to be implying that certain forms of exploitation (that is, procuring surpluses generated by others) are acceptable. But in pushing the *hektemoroi* into a life of bondage and unfreedom, the wealthy at Athens had gone too far. Such an obscene form of exploitation, cruel in the extreme, violated his sense of justice and fairness. The questionable actions of the rich, which had dehumanized some of their neighbors, affected the whole community. These actions served as a catalyst for revenge, with no one immune to the resultant "civil strife and slumbering war" (quoted in Manville 1990, 153). When this "relentless wound" opens, there is no place for anyone to hide:

> Thus public ruin [*dēmosion kakon*] invades each man's own house [*oikad' hekastōi*]
> Nor can the outer doors keep it out
> But it vaults over the high wall and finds him everywhere
> Even if he should flee into the innermost corner of his chamber.
> (quoted in Manville 1990, 153)

Solon's poetry also stressed the importance of *eunomiē* (lawfulness), which "puts all things into good order and makes them sound, and often places shackles about those who are unjust" (quoted in Wallace 2007, 58). Justice remedies strife and ruin because it "straightens out crooked judgments" (quoted in Manville 1990, 154), typically those made by self-interested aristocrats who control the law. In his role as mediator, Solon believed he struck a middle ground between "the people" and "the powerful." "I took my stand offering a strong shield for both sides, allowing neither side to dominate unjustly" (quoted in Thorley 2004, 16).

Despite his claim of impartiality, Solon no doubt horrified some with his new "constitution." In what is surely one of the first recorded anti-democratic comments, a visiting dignitary at the time of Solon's reforms expressed shock at how Athens' leading politicians could make only a recommendation to the Assembly, while all male citizens made the *decision* to accept or reject it. "I find it astonishing," he said, "that

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here wise men speak on public affairs, while fools decide them" (quoted in Martin 2000, 86). These "fools" were men who, thanks to Solon, had achieved *politeia* (citizenship), which meant sharing in the governing of the community, as a consequence of gaining access to decision-making processes (Ostwald 1996, 55–6).

Even with the significant changes Solon made to governance, however, noble rivalries continued to disturb the peace. Tyranny, rooted in conflicts within the aristocracy, soon returned to Athens. Greeks understood a tyrant as a usurper of power, but also as someone who could potentially protect the people (Walbank 1984, 62). Calling on a tyrant to rule was an act of desperation on the part of citizens who felt that without such a powerful man, the aristocracy would take over a polis and threaten established forms of governance. Similar to contemporary coup d'états, however, where leaders emerge in opposition to "oppressive" governments, then fail on their promises to soon return to "normalcy," ancient tyrants tended to establish oligarchies rooted in their own families' future inheritance of power.

We have an idea of the relative strength of Solon's reforms in that they could not prevent the rise of a lengthy tyranny; at the same time, the basic structures he set up continued to operate and survived relatively unscathed. In 561 B.C., Pisistratus gained power in Athens with the help of mercenaries, though his tyranny was not solidified until 547 B.C. While his rule was not the result of a popular rebellion, Pisistratus enjoyed the backing of the demos, the ordinary people, because he created jobs through a significant public works program and provided financial assistance to farmers. Mostly, however, the demos supported him because, like most tyrants, he stood in opposition to those who wanted to establish an oligarchy (Andrewes 1982b, 394). Pisistratus preserved the laws and ruled mainly by assisting members of his circle to get elected to important offices, in particular the archonships. Because former archons became members of the Council of Areopagos after their terms ended, his allies soon dominated this Council. His personal tyranny ended with his death in 527 B.C. After he died, though, his son took over, and the family tyranny ended only after a revolt in 511 B.C. At that point, Athenians made some immediate changes to reduce the odds of relapsing into tyranny, including the disenfranchisement of those who were deemed to have gained citizenship improperly under the deposed regime.

With the tyrants gone, noble rivalries again flared up. Cleisthenes, a member of the elite, called upon the demos to rise up and support

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him after he lost the election for the lead archonship to Isagoras, another member of the elite, but one who had reconciled himself to the Pisistratids. Cleisthenes promised the demos that they would gain a greater role in government. He had developed proposals for change, which he may have brought before the Assembly for approval. The main objective of his "platform" was *isonomia* (a word invented at this time, meaning "political equality"). He gave "the assurance that henceforth popular approval by the Assembly would be required to validate any major political decision" (Ostwald 1988, 306).

In mid-summer 507 B.C., as power teetered back and forth between the two competing groups, Cleisthenes and 700 families were forced out of Athens. Would-be oligarchs then tried to dissolve the Council of 400, but the Council—and the people—resisted, fearing a coup d'état.[13] When these aristocrats were defeated, Cleisthenes and the exiled families returned, though the aristocrats made one final, failed attempt to invade Attica in the spring of 506 B.C., hoping to install their leader as tyrant. Cleisthenes' reforms were soon implemented. Their importance "led later Athenians to think of him as a principal founder of the democracy of the Classical period" (Martin 2000, 87).

Notes

1 This term was first used by archeologists in the early twentieth century.
2 Sinclair (1988, 9). His estimate is for 431 B.C.
3 Hansen (1999, 55). His estimate is for 450 B.C.
4 At the same time, while many poleis were democracies, some others were not.
5 For a cogent summary of Solon's constitutional reforms, see Wallace (2007, 60–7).
6 Any assessment is complicated by the fact that there were three types of land—private, public, and sacred—which, if placed on a continuum, would have blended into each other at some points.
7 There is much debate on the meaning of "*hektemoroi*"; see Stanley (1999, 174–93).
8 Rose (2012, 361) concurs that economic concessions seem "to have entailed some sort of guarantee—'ownership'—of the allotment of subsistence-level quantities of land to individual farmers." However, he undermines this claim to a great extent when he suggests elsewhere that Solon did little to alter economic relations, while granting some political rights to the poor. In analyzing Cleisthenes' reforms, Rose says they were based on Solon's "precedent"; namely, that the demos requested land, but Solon's response was, in effect, "let them eat politics" (360).

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9 Stanley (1999, 227–8) also supports the idea that the land could have been public, and that it was used mostly by "well-off peasant farmers" (228).

10 Jonathan Hall, in a recent history of archaic Greece, proposes that: "Since Solon has already accused the leaders of the *dêmos* of seizing sacred and public property, it could be that the *horoi* [boundary stones separating properties] marked ruling class appropriation of common land, akin to the land enclosures in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, and that Solon restored such land to the community" (quoted in Rose 2012, 223–4n60).

11 The ramifications of having some semblance of economic equality would become clearer still over the next two and one-half centuries, with the enactment of further reforms which extended and deepened democratic forms of governance. At Athens, there was a clear "connection between the nature of the state and the status of labour" (Wood and Wood 1978, 39). High status in the realm of economics would eventually go hand-in-hand with high status in the realm of politics.

12 It would be a sign of the increasing democratization of Athens that crimes against the state, *euthyna*, and *dokimasia* would eventually come under the control of all citizens via the courts, these powers having been wrested from the aristocratic Areopagus.

13 See Ober (2007), who argues that the "revolutionary" events of 508–7 B.C. "constitute a genuine rupture in Athenian political history, because they mark the moment at which the demos stepped onto the historical stage as a collective agent, a historical actor in its own right and under its own name" (86).

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3

How Athenian Democracy Worked

Abstract: *This chapter begins with a survey of Cleisthenes' creation of ten new tribes in 507 B.C., highlighting the importance of this reform for the determination of who was and who was not a citizen, a determination henceforth based on decisions made not by a narrow clique of aristocrats, but by all citizens in a local area. The chapter goes on to draw out the role played by the three major institutions of Athenian democracy: the Council, the Assembly, and the law courts. It ends with a discussion of some other features of the polis, including ostracism, as well as two important reforms to democratic procedures: the* graphe paranomon *and the boards of* nomothetai *(lawmakers).*

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Cleisthenes' main objective was to avoid tyranny, and with that goal in mind he made significant alterations to the constitution that had existed since the beginning of the sixth century, rooted in Solon's reforms.

The ten tribes and citizenship

Under the Solonian system, aristocrats still wielded much power, as they were the leading members of the four ancient, kin-based tribes. Cleisthenes understood that in order to reduce aristocratic influence on government he had to render the old tribes politically irrelevant (while allowing them to continue carrying out some relatively harmless religious functions). He did so by instituting a complex system of ten new tribes, each named after an Athenian hero. He divided Attica into three sectors: the city (Athens), inland, and the coast. Each of these sectors was in turn divided into ten "trittyes" (or "thirds"), for 30 trittyes in total. In creating the ten new tribes, the ingenious aspect of Cleisthenes' system is that he did not simply amalgamate three geographically contiguous trittyes. While doing so would have been the easiest and most obvious way to proceed, it would have done little to break up the aristocratic cliques that tended to live in close quarters. Instead, a new tribe was selected, it seems, by a lottery that joined together one trittys from each of the three sectors. As a result, people who were unrelated, who may have lived up to 70 kilometers apart, and who likely did not know each other well, were assembled in the same tribe. A novel, artificial "brotherhood" was established which was simultaneously a new type of political unit.

Cleisthenes also created a unit of "local government" underneath the trittys—the *deme*.[1] Demes were existing villages in rural areas and neighborhoods (or wards) in the city. Every trittys had at least one deme. In the handful of cases where a trittys had just a single deme, the trittys and the deme were conterminous. In most instances, however, trittyes had more than one deme, with a few trittyes having up to eight or nine. There were 139 (or 140) demes throughout Attica, amalgamated in such a way as to give each trittys, and hence each tribe, roughly the same percentage of the overall population.

Under Solon's constitution, aristocrats controlled the phratries (brotherhoods)[2] that determined who qualified for citizenship (Ostwald 1988, 310). As a consequence, conflicts frequently arose because members of some aristocratic factions periodically tried to disenfranchise members

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of other, competitive factions. In the years leading up to Cleisthenes' reforms, one aristocratic group, affiliated with Isagoras, had tried to restrict the citizenship of another group. In response, Cleisthenes gave the power to determine citizenship to the people. In doing so, he created "a cleaner and standardized basis for defining Athenian membership, organized according to a new system of local demes" (Manville 1990, 187). The *demarkhos* (demarch)—a position roughly equivalent to a mayor and usually selected by lot—kept the deme register of citizens (in addition to his other roles, such as presiding over deme assembly meetings). A young male was brought forward by his father to be registered as a citizen shortly after his eighteenth birthday. Candidates for citizenship "were scrutinized by fellow demesmen to ensure they were eighteen, freeborn, and legitimate with regard to the lawful marriage of two Athenian parents" (Manville 1990, 8). From the time of Cleisthenes onward, men registered not in the deme where they were born but in the deme where their direct male ancestors had registered in 508–7 B.C. Deme (civic) registration replaced registration in a phratry.

Deme-based registration meant that an aristocrat, or a handful of them, could no longer deny a man his citizenship; the option of denial fell to *all* citizens of the deme. And this citizenship was rooted in the notion that the men who held this status would have, over the course of their lifetimes, roughly equal access to power. Such an extension of citizenship was unprecedented, a most radical innovation (Finley 1983, 15). This was just one of the ways that Cleisthenes attempted to reduce the power of the nobles.

Council, assembly, courts

Another way that Cleisthenes altered power relations was through his reforms of the three central institutions of government: the Council, the Assembly, and the courts.

1 The *Boule* (Council): Cleisthenes expanded the old Council of 400 to 500, with 50 members drawn from each of the ten tribes, roughly 16 or 17 from each of the 30 trittyes, distributed amongst the demes in proportion to population. Council members came from the top three economic classes (the *thetes* were excluded from this Council, as they had been from the old Council of 400) (Thorley 2004,

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> 29–30). By 450 B.C., the rule barring *thetes* seems to have been ignored in practice. Still, few *thetes* likely would have volunteered to serve on the Council because it involved a significant investment of time over a full year. Council members who lived more than a couple of hours' walk from Athens presumably had to live in the city, renting a place to stay during their annual term, making it difficult for the poorest men to participate. Although members received financial compensation for their political work (more on this later), which would have covered most of their expenses for rent, food, and so on, they would have been away from their farms on an almost full-time basis. This would have placed an extra burden on their wives, children, and slaves (if they owned any). Unlike the Assembly or the courts, then, the Council drew disproportionately from the more prosperous half of the population. It consisted of the most politically active men and did not constitute a genuine cross-section of the citizenry. Still, the Council was no longer composed of a small elite of aristocrats and, as a body, it held no decision-making power. Its roles were limited mainly to giving advice and implementing policy.

Council members came from all regions of the polis, which were represented in proportion to their population: 130 from the city, 174 from inland, and 196 from the coast. The *Boule* was most definitely not an urban-dominated institution. Indeed, only 28 of the 130 members from the "city" lived in demes located within the city walls. Another 29 were urban-based, but from outside the city walls. Most of the remaining 73 came from nearby rural villages, which were incorporated into the "city" region for purposes of allocating seats in a roughly equal manner between the three sectors (Thorley 2004, 29). The composition of this Council should remind us not to exaggerate the "city" in "city-state."

Each year, the ten tribes put forward the names of men aged 30 and over willing to stand for office. From this list, 50 names were drawn by lot, and the selected men served a one-year term. A member of Council was allowed to serve a maximum of two terms in his lifetime. Few men, perhaps only 3 percent, ever served a second term (Stockton 1990, 86n36). This rule on term-limits prevented groups that might vie for dominance from forming and exercising power over an extended period of time.

The Council undertook a number of functions. For one, it formulated the agenda for the Assembly, posting it in public four days in advance

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of a meeting. It also drafted proposals of decrees (*probouleumata*) to be voted on by the Assembly, which the Assembly could then accept, amend, or reject. Councilors did not expect the Assembly to simply "rubber stamp" their proposals. The Council sometimes chose not to make a specific recommendation, perhaps because it did not have time to formulate one, or because it was a contentious matter best left to the Assembly. The Council implemented the programs and policies passed by the Assembly, for instance monitoring the construction and financing of public works. A standing committee (*prytaneis*), consisting of one of the ten tribes drawn at random, presided over meetings of the *Boule* (and the Assembly) for one term (a *prytany*), one-tenth of the year or about 36 days. After its term ended, the next randomly selected tribe would sit on the committee for a *prytany*. During a typical year, the Council met for about 260 days. A chairman was drawn by lot each morning from the *prytaneis*, so that in the course of a calendar year roughly 260 of the 500 men on Council served as chairman (each councilor could hold the appointment for only one day during the year). The chairman of the Council on the day of an Assembly meeting also served as chairman of the Assembly, hence many Council members would have taken on this task annually.[3] Given this method of selection, it is unlikely, in the course of hundreds of years of democratic governance, that any man would have chaired two Assembly meetings.

2 The *Ekklesia* (Assembly): All citizens aged 20 and over could sit in the Assembly and vote on proposals ranging from expenditures and control of the food supply to the ostracism of potential troublemakers and declarations of war. By 350 B.C., the Assembly was meeting about 40 times a year, roughly once every nine days. Meetings began at sunrise and typically ended around midday. They were held on the Pnyx (p*uh*-niks), a hillside capable of seating at least 6,000 men, the number likely in attendance at each meeting and required as a quorum for certain types of business. After a proposal was introduced, the herald asked: "Who wishes to speak?" Speakers (*rhetores*, "orators") who came forward stood on a platform at the front. These men, many of whom had been trained in the art of public speaking, had to project their voices loudly and clearly in order to be understood by the massive throng in the audience. When the discussion ended there was a vote, typically by show of hands. The Assembly ran in an orderly fashion, with clear rules of procedure. "Anyone addressing the *Boule* or the Assembly

> must keep to the matter in hand, must not deal with two separate matters together, and must not speak twice on the same matter at any one meeting" (Aeschines, quoted in Thorley 2004, 34).

All citizens, unless they wanted to risk being viewed as social outcasts, would have sat in the Assembly from time to time, though few men would have had anything approaching a perfect attendance record. In the fourth century, about 20 percent of the citizenry showed up for each meeting (hence four of every five citizens were absent). Citizens from across Attica attended meetings, even though it may have taken some of them, from the coast in particular, up to two days to walk to Athens. These men typically combined their political work with other activities in the city, such as shopping in the marketplace.

Athenians cherished the idea of *isegoria* (freedom of speech or, more precisely, "equality of public address") (Ober 1989, 296). At the same time, no man was required to participate actively. Indeed, at any given meeting, there would have been no more than 20 to 30 *rhetores*, the frequent speakers, though there were likely around 300 men in attendance who had spoken during at least one Assembly at some point in their lives (Sinclair 1988, 140). All known *rhetores* paid liturgies (a type of tax). In terms of wealth, then, these men came exclusively from the top 5 percent or so of the citizenry. The poor "never produced spokesmen in the Assembly from their own ranks" (Finley 1983, 27). Nevertheless, for the demos, their "recognition of the need for leadership was not accompanied by a surrender of the power of decision" (Finley 1985b, 25). Most men did not accept leadership roles. Athenians understood that some people, the *rhetores*, had more education and knowledge, and superior public speaking abilities, and that these men, who often spoke on different sides of an issue, helped to frame debates in ways that enabled ordinary citizens to make sound decisions. As Demosthenes put it to his fellow Athenians:

> Therefore you, the mass of citizens, and especially the oldest among you, do not have to be capable of speaking as well as the most skillful speakers; for this is the work of those who are accustomed to speaking; but you must have good sense like these men, and even more so; for practical experience and having seen many things put good sense into us. (quoted in Balot 2006, 64)

Despite their dependence on *rhetores*, "the Athenians kept their well-educated advisers on a tight leash and restrained the tendency of the educated elite to evolve into a ruling oligarchy" (Ober 1989, 191). The

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heavy influence wielded by *rhetores* should disturb only those critics who set up a "straw" democracy in which everyone has equal "voice" and then count the ways Athenians failed to meet this unattainable ideal. Interestingly, it also disturbed anti-democratic critics of the time who regarded the *rhetores* as potential demagogues capable of appealing to emotions and the baser instincts of the masses, a group of wily men who could mislead the Assembly or flatter gullible listeners. It is true that the Assembly occasionally made mistakes, but in practice it tended to operate as a well-oiled, decision-making machine. While few citizens contributed vocally to the Assembly, the less talkative men on the Pnyx, the demos, still had a critically important task: they listened to the speeches and voted based on what they heard. Their role was to remain informed about public issues and use their "good sense" to cast judgments after taking in the debates.

3. The *Dikasteria* (Law Courts): The *heliaia*, created by Solon, were known as the *dikasteria* at some point after Cleisthenes' reforms (Thorley 2004, 35).[4] All citizens aged 30 and over could sit on juries. Men put their names forward annually and, from this group, the 6,000 jurors chosen to serve were sworn in *en masse* at the beginning of the year, taking the Heliastic Oath, pledging that:

> I will cast my vote in consonance with the laws and with the decrees passed by the Assembly and by the Council, but, if there is no law, in consonance with my sense of what is most just, without favor or enmity. I will vote only on the matters raised in the charge, and I will listen impartially to accusers and defenders alike. (quoted in Hansen 1999, 182)

A citizen was eligible to sit as a juror (*dikast*) year after year. Those who served were usually older, poorer, and more likely to be without work when compared to the average citizen; in short, they were men with a lot of time on their hands. *Dikastai* came from all over Attica in rough proportion to *Boule* allocations (Stockton 1990, 136). Each *dikast* received a "ticket" made of bronze, inscribed with his name to identify the important role he played in dispensing justice. Archaeologists have found the best-preserved tickets in the graves of men who died during a year when they served on the juries, an indication of how proud citizens were to participate in their democracy and a "testimony to the Athenian mentality in the classical age, for in archaic times it was his weapons that a citizen took with him to the grave" (Hansen 1999, 182). Justice was not

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in the hands of aristocrats, as was common elsewhere, but of humble people.

Courts met frequently, up to 200 days a year. Jury panels ranged in size from 201 for "small" cases to 501 or more for increasingly significant matters, up to, in at least one known case, all 6,000 jurors. They dealt, to a great extent, with "political" offences as well as typical criminal matters, but less so with conflicts between private individuals (Hansen 1999, 179). "Political crimes" generally involved a citizen charging a *rhetor* with having proposed an "unlawful" decree in the Assembly (even though the Assembly may have approved it) or of not following procedures accurately in the course of bringing forth a proposal for consideration.

With these reforms, cases now began in the courts instead of arriving only on appeal from some magistrate or the Council of Areopagus. The legal process in each case was straightforward and efficient. There were no professional lawyers. Men involved in a case represented themselves while perhaps reciting memorized arguments written for them by paid speechwriters. After listening to the case made by the prosecution and the defense, both timed by a water clock, *dikastai* voted by secret ballot to convict or acquit. In some cases, they also determined the penalties of those convicted between options presented by each side. *Dikastai* could choose one option or the other; there was no room for negotiation between the two. Therefore, the conflicting parties had an incentive to present reasonable proposals for punishment that would be acceptable to a majority of voters, whether that was a small fine, an onerous fine, exile, or death. There were no appeals permitted of any court decision (though a convicted defendant could charge a prosecution witness with false testimony).

One difference between the *dikasteria* and the *heliaia* is that the 6,000 jurors were now divided into ten panels of 600, containing 60 from each tribe. The way juries were established also changed over time. At the beginning of the fifth century, each panel of 600 jurors was allocated to one of the ten courts for the entire year (each court was assigned particular offences, for example family disputes). Unfortunately, this system left jurors open to bribes, because bribers could readily discover which jurors served in which courts. After 403 B.C., however, the ten panels were randomly assigned each *day* to one of the ten courts. A further and much more sophisticated reform, implemented in 370 B.C., saw a random selection machine, a *kleroterion*, employed to allocate jurors. Now, each juror (up to 6,000 in total!), rather than each panel

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of 600, was assigned to a jury on the morning the courts met (in effect, the panels of 600 were dismantled). These changes show how Athenians responded to shortcomings in their institutions, making improvements in order to ensure the viability and the legitimacy of their democracy.

With the revamped Council, Assembly, and courts in operation, older institutions and offices also had to be modified. Most notably, archonships were appointed by lot after 487–6 B.C., from those who put their names forward, whereas previously they had been elected. With this reform, the status associated with archonships fell into decline. The office of *strategos* (military general), elected with the possibility of re-election, became the bigger prize. Appointing archons removed from these positions the aura once attached to them, given that "men of ability and ambition [and wealth] would no longer have any interest in holding an office that depended largely on chance." This change "made it possible for the generals eventually to replace the archons as the leading executive officials in the state" (Seager 1973, 10). The Council of the Areopagos, made up of all former archons, was also tamed in 462–1 B.C., losing most of its remaining functions, including the ability to overturn decisions of the Assembly by declaring them "unconstitutional." Henceforth, it served primarily as a court for those accused of murder. As a result, "the elite no longer had an institutional means to veto the decisions of the masses" (Ober 1989, 78). By the early 450s, the archonships opened to the second and third Solonian classes, a further indication that this once powerful aristocratic body had been essentially "declawed."

Magistrates

The Athenian polis, unlike modern "democratic" states, had no permanent civil service. Day-to-day administration fell to magistrates (officials) who implemented decisions and enforced rules approved by large collective bodies such as the Assembly. A few hundred men chosen annually by lot, from those who put their names forward, served as magistrates. They ran the city, typically in groups of ten that included one citizen from each tribe. Magistrates worked in the areas of finance and administration (as auditors, superintendents of the mint, market wardens), religion (overseers of the Dionysia festival, repairers of shrines), and the military (cavalry commanders, officers of the cadet force, and the *strategoi*, the ten generals).[5] In most cases, a man could serve in a

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particular office only once in his lifetime. However, he could be selected, over time, to any number of different offices, though he could not hold those offices in successive years. Most positions involved fairly mundane and easily learned tasks. People "knew by custom and practice what the jobs involved before they took them on" (Davies 1993, 232). In the few instances that required "experts," such as some financial and religious offices or the military generals, a ballot was held. Any citizen could put his name forward annually; for instance, the great *rhetor* Pericles was elected as a *strategos* every year from 443 to 429 B.C.[6]

Elections in Athens, however, were limited to these exceptions. From the perspective of the demos, elections were to be avoided whenever possible, because, while their proponents argued that voting allowed the most meritorious men to rule, it also enabled the wealthier classes to monopolize public offices. Of the 631 known elections in Athens, 61 percent involved the election of men who contributed to the liturgies, a tax paid mostly by the richest 5 percent of citizens. If we do not double-count men voted into more than one office, we known of 305 individuals elected to public offices, 42 percent of whom paid liturgies (Taylor 2007, 330n42). In addition to this wealth bias, elections also carried an urban bias. Officials such as the *strategoi* were more likely to come from demes located in or close to the city. In contrast, officials chosen by lot, such as the *tamiai* (treasurers) of Athena and the *tamiai* of other gods, were selected in rough proportion to deme populations throughout Attica (Taylor 2007, 335, 340). It is no wonder, then, that elections were tainted by their association with aristocracy and oligarchy. The lot, where officials served by "luck of the draw," was democratic.[7] It prevented a handful of urban, wealthy men from holding power on a continual basis, a form of monopoly regarded as unhealthy for a democracy, where offices rotated frequently. The lot also eliminated factional disputes, rooted in class and status, over access to offices.

Typical of the near-obsession Athenians expressed for good governance, the men selected for offices did not simply walk into work on the first day of their terms and walk out when the year ended. They had to pass a test (*dokimasiai*) before their appointment. This was normally a routine matter—it was an assessment of character, not of competence. For any office, "it was taken for granted that any citizen who had the proper legal credentials to be eligible could serve in the post" (Ostwald 1986, 79–80). Still, the *dokimasiai* involved a formal hearing conducted in public by a board tasked with examining candidates who had to answer

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a series of questions (on, for instance, their military service records). At these hearings, any citizen could object to a candidate; the board made the final decision. Once selected, magistrates had to be fair and even-handed or else any citizen could charge them with misconduct while carrying out their duties. Furthermore, the Assembly could impeach a magistrate through a "non-confidence" motion. In effect, citizens had an institutional mechanism for voicing grievances against their society's decision-makers (McAuley 2013, 187). A more stringent hearing—a *euthynai* (accounting)—was held about two months after the term of office ended. At one time, the Areopagus could choose whether or not to examine the conduct of a magistrate, but after Ephialtes' reforms of 462–1 B.C., however, a *euthynai* became compulsory for every magistrate. Now, *all* male citizens (at some point in their lives) sat in judgment of *all* magistrates, whereas previously a *few* wealthy men had sat in judgment of a *few* magistrates (Ostwald 1986, 78). Most importantly, the board of ten *logistai* undertaking the inspection, who reported to a special court, ensured that any financial records passed muster; in particular, the board needed to be convinced that no incidents of fraud or embezzlement had occurred. All in all, Athenians made it clear that accountability was a serious matter.

Ostracism and *graphe paranomon*

In sum, up to the time of Cleisthenes, the history of Athens "is a story of the consecutive expulsion of groups of aristocrats by rival groups of aristocrats and a continual oscillation between tyranny and rule by an uneasy coalition of aristocratic groups" (Forsdyke 2000, 239). With the substantial reforms he initiated to the basic structures of governance, Cleisthenes changed these patterns. Athenians did not stop there, however. They helped to preserve their burgeoning democracy through ostracism, a device first introduced in 487 B.C. and last used in 417 B.C. (with no record of any use between 443 and 417) (Finley 1983, 55). There are 15 known cases of ostracism (Hansen 1999, 35). During this period, down to 322 B.C., the Assembly voted each year on whether to ostracize someone. If the answer was "yes," then a second vote was held two months later. Citizens scratched or painted the name of the individual they wished to ostracize on *ostraka*, pieces of broken pottery. A valid outcome required that at least 6,000 "ballots" be cast. If achieved,

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then the man whose name appeared on the largest number of *ostraka* had ten days to leave Attica. In the ancient version of being voted "off the island," he would be exiled for a decade, after which he was free to return. Importantly, his property was not confiscated, and he was free to contact family and friends, but he had to remain, for the entire ten years, outside the boundaries of the city-state.

The Assembly did not apply ostracism to people who had committed treason or other significant criminal acts; these individuals were punished in other, harsher ways. Rather, ostracism was a preemptive strike. It involved the removal of a political leader who many critics viewed as a troublemaker and a potential tyrant, a subversive who threatened democracy, someone likely to provoke intense political conflict. Ostracism was supposed to maintain social stability while avoiding *stasis*—strife, violence, or, in the worse-case scenario, civil war. One side in a battle between competing groups could make use of the potsherds to rid themselves of a ringleader on the other side, without opening deep wounds. Though used infrequently, ostracism was an annual reminder to aristocrats of the ultimate power of the people. The mere threat of ostracism would have made many an aristocrat think through the possible outcomes of his actions.

After Cleisthenes, the demos imposed itself on politics and took on, among other things, the power to exile. Their "usurpation of this power was central to their assertion of political authority in the community" (Forsdyke 2000, 252). This seemingly strange practice was grounded in the threats that persistent conflict posed to citizens. Martin Ostwald (1988, 344–5) summarizes ostracism's importance for democracy as follows:

> It is one of the earliest signs of the democracy that was to come that the Athenians solved the problem of a possible policy-deadlock in the state not by killing or permanently exiling the proponents of an unpopular policy, as the tyrants had done, but by establishing a due process through which the people as a whole would decide which of two or more opposing policies should be given the chance to develop fully into *the* policy of the state. Thus ostracism is another example of *isonomia* [political equality] in the sense that the choice between different courses of political action, espoused by prominent and influential citizens of the upper classes, was made to rest in the hands of none but the people as a whole, rich and poor alike.[8]

Ostracism was last used in 417 B.C., replaced, for the most part, by the *graphe paranomon*. This new procedure enabled any citizen to charge

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an orator with proposing in the Assembly an unconstitutional decree (that is, one contrary to existing law), even if the Assembly had passed the decree in question. As a result, any proposal might be considered twice: first in the Assembly and a second time in the courts. It involved a "procedure by which the People's Court could overthrow decisions of the People's Assembly; but the procedure was directed not against the people but against the orators who had misled them" (Hansen 1999, 207). From 415 to 322 B.C., citizens resorted to this device in 39 known instances, with the accused acquitted in roughly half the cases (Finley 1983, 55n9). Those convicted faced heavy fines, and if unable to pay, lost their civic rights. In turn, if those who brought charges failed to obtain at least 20 percent of a jury's votes, they were fined for wasting the court's time and forbidden from ever again making similar charges.[9]

Oligarchy and *nomothetai*

The political system Cleisthenes built continued to operate, with a few changes here and there, down to the end of the fifth century, when oligarchic Sparta, Athens' arch-rival and greatest threat, reared its head. The two city-states engaged in almost continual conflict from 431 to 404 B.C., during the Peloponnesian War. In 411 B.C., with the war lingering on, and with many of the poorest citizens serving in the navy, the Assembly voted to abolish democracy at an unusual meeting held not at its regular place on the Pnyx, but rather outside the city walls. There, a group of conspirators informed the Assembly that Persia would not provide financial support to Athens in its war against Sparta unless Athens adopted an oligarchic form of government. With survival at stake, the demos ceded full legislative power to a new Council of 400. Under this system, 5,000 men were supposed to retain their political rights, but in practice the new Council held all power. Pay for most public services was suspended. Police and armed guards patrolled the streets in an overt threat to the demos, a warning to stay quiet. However, the coup lasted a mere four months. Moderate oligarchs relented to pressure and reinstated citizenship to those in the hoplite class and above (the Constitution of the Five Thousand) (Ostwald 1986, 397). Nevertheless, many former citizens remained disenfranchised. This second oligarchy survived only a few months as well; the democracy was restored in 410–09 B.C.

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Soon after, Athens embarked on a major codification of its laws, which took almost a decade to complete. In 404 B.C., another coup, carried out with Spartan assistance, disrupted this work. After a major military defeat, a Commission of Thirty took on the government and the task of formulating a new constitution, but it soon descended into an oligarchy that had much in common with anti-democratic Sparta (Ostwald 1986, 485). In one of its first acts, the Commission limited citizenship. And, in a major violation of egalitarian principles, its new constitution "ordained that only the 3,000 full citizens were entitled to a legal trial and that all others might be summarily executed by order of the government" (Jones 1957, 45). The Commission murdered as many as 1,500 Athenians; its members were forever known as the "Thirty Tyrants." In 403 B.C., just eight months after the coup, democrats engaged the tyrants in a significant military battle, overthrew them, and once again restored democracy. At this time, the Assembly rejected a recommendation to restrict citizenship to those who owned land, a proposal that would have removed the democratic rights of 5,000 men (out of 25,000) (Sinclair 1988, 43). This proposal was "the final attempt made to salvage something from the 'oligarchic' programme" (Mossé 1973, 23). Meanwhile, some of the coup's leaders were executed for the role they had played in the tyranny, and then, for the first time in recorded history, a general amnesty was declared as part of the resolution of a political conflict. No reprisals, no trials, no attempts at payback.[10] The aim was to heal a divided society, to help it move forward. In sum, the oligarchic coups of 411 and 404 B.C. were the short-lived products of the violence and intimidation of a minority and/or of Spartan interference. From Cleisthenes to the Lamian War (in the late 320s), a period of roughly 185 years, these were also the only concerted attempts to overthrow democratic government.

Following the restoration of democracy at the end of the fifth century, Athenians instituted one further important change in their laws (*nomoi*). From this point on, law creation was carried out by boards of *nomothetai* (lawmakers or "law-setters"), chosen at random from the year's 6,000 *dikastai*. Laws—higher order matters—were distinguished from decrees (*psephismata*)—more mundane business, such as granting citizenship to a foreigner. In the records, decrees now began with: "It was decided by the people" (or "by the Council and the people"), whereas laws began with: "It was decided by the *nomothetai*" (Hansen 1999, 167). *Nomothetai* sat in panels of between 501 and 1,501

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members. Every year the Assembly could vote to modify one or more laws. If a law was chosen for modification, it went before a board of *nomothetai* where a court-like procedure unfolded. Citizens proposing new legislation essentially launched a prosecution against the current law, which was defended by five men chosen by the Assembly. This procedure lasted for most of a day. Each side had about three hours to make its case, after which board members voted by show of hands. The *nomothetai* were "entrusted with a task which was far too detailed, complex, and lengthy to be conveniently or efficiently performed by the *ecclêsia* itself" (Stockton 1990, 53). This procedure "removed a lot of tedious and often technical business from the Assembly, whose agendas were crowded enough" (Thorley 2004, 60). Furthermore, any citizen had the right to challenge a new law in court. In such instances, the *dikastai*, including perhaps many who had participated in passing the law in the first place, again sat in judgment, this time wearing their "*dikastai* hat" as opposed to their "*nomothetai* hat"—that is, as jurors rather than lawmakers.

Athenians treasured their method of establishing the rules under which they lived. Beginning in the late fifth and early fourth centuries, they published their laws, engraving them in stone and displaying them in prominent public places where citizens could see, read, understand, and debate them. Unwritten law, which could be altered at the discretion of those in power, characterized aristocracies. Athenian law, in contrast, served the needs of all citizens; the law, after all, could be passed only with their direct approval. Nothing like Athenian law existed in any contemporaneous society outside Greece or in most societies down to the twentieth century. It was enacted not by self-interested members of the wealthiest class, but by common, average men, most of whom were farmers and most of whom, as far as we can tell, cherished their political system.

Modern critics typically regard Athenian democracy, and the work involved in framing and implementing its laws and policies, as inefficient, time-consuming, and/or costly.[11] But those critics do not understand—or more likely, do not see as pertinent—the central point of Athenian democracy: to make "the government of the *polis* and the citizenry of the *polis* virtually indistinguishable" (McAuley 2013, 177). Citizens of the Athenian state, unlike citizens today, could not easily "draw the sharp line between 'we,' the ordinary people, and 'they,' the governmental elite" (Finley 1985b, 102).

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Notes

1 For the role of demes as political units, see Osborne (1985, 72–83).
2 Phratries, which were divisions within a tribe, were associations of households "that shared common cults, performed sacrifices, and publicly recognized the births, marriages, and adoptions of their members" (Manville 1990, 60).
3 This method of selection remained in effect until 399 B.C. when a separate group of nine members of the *Boule*, one from each non-*prytaneis* tribe, began to run the Assembly, with one of these men chosen by lot to act as chairman (Sinclair 1988, 229).
4 Ostwald (1986, 48) maintains that the law courts were modified almost half a century after Cleisthenes, under the reforms of Ephialtes in 462–1 B.C.
5 See Davies (1993, 230–1) for a complete list.
6 In addition, a few slaves worked as "public servants," as clerks for example.
7 In Athens, "even the magistrates who oversaw the selection of officials by lot were themselves officials who had been selected by lot, the *thesmothetai*" (McAuley 2013, 181).
8 Eder (1998, 118–21) argues that ostracism may have been harmful to democracy, because it limited the freedom of speech politicians on different sides of a debate required in order to speak without fear of reprisals. Moreover, it was also a device aristocrats used to settle their own battles, some of which may have had little to do with democracy.
9 Manville and Ober (2003, 28), in summing up the rough-and-tumble style of Attica's politics, note that "there were no golden parachutes for failed leaders in ancient Athens."
10 Exceptions were made for the Thirty themselves and a few dozen of the leading figures of the tyranny, "but even these [men] were to be included in the amnesty if they would submit to and successfully pass *euthynai* for acts committed under the oligarchy" (Ostwald 1986, 499).
11 For instance, Ian Budge (1996, 26): "Clearly the Greek model is unworkable today and functioned badly in Athens too, much of the time."

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4
Equality and Inequality

Abstract: *This chapter examines land ownership and average farm sizes in Athens, noting the low levels of inequality in resource ownership, while highlighting the small differentials between "rich" and "poor," which are contrasted with the vast disparities in wealth typical of contemporary capitalist societies. It then surveys the three major taxes—the* eisphora, *the* trierarchia, *and the funding of religious and cultural festivals—which were paid for almost exclusively by the richest men. The chapter ends by noting that women and slaves were both excluded from citizenship, but concludes that, despite its failure to achieve "the true realization of the democratic ideal" (Marilyn Arthur), Athens still has much to tell us about how to create and extend democracy.*

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One important yet rarely acknowledged aspect of Athenian democracy—what I argue was a critical ingredient in its formation and its success—was that it rested on a foundation of general economic equality between households. Indeed, how could it have been otherwise? The political powers held by Athenians could only have been disseminated so broadly if those powers were grafted on to a social structure that had a relatively small gap between the rich and poor, where it would be an exaggeration to use the term "wealthy" to describe almost all those near the peak of the structure. The independent economic resources controlled by males in Athens enabled them to challenge their exclusion from politics and, once included, to the horror of philosophers like Plato, to expand their control over political institutions, sharing this control not only with aristocrats but also with the minority segment of "lower," landless men.

Data from the end of the classical period suggest Athens was not an egalitarian society, that its social divisions were, in fact, comparable to contemporary capitalist countries. Based on a census undertaken in 317 B.C., Hans van Wees (2011, 112) calculates that the top 30 percent of citizens owned 74 percent of all wealth; the middle 45 percent owned 20 percent; while the bottom 25 percent owned just 2 percent.[1] Kron's (2011, 135) analysis of data from c.321 B.C. found that the richest 10 percent of households owned about 60 percent of all wealth. The corresponding figures from the late 1990s were 53 percent of all wealth for Canada and 68 percent for the United States. Kron (2011, 134) concludes that "the Athenian wealth distribution is not dissimilar to that of a modern representative democracy and welfare state." These data reveal Canada to be even more egalitarian than Athens.

We need to keep in mind that the first solid statistics we have, from the 320s–310s B.C., were collected almost three centuries after Solon's reforms. Evidence of the relative economic equality of Athenian citizens for the majority of the democratic era must therefore come from other sources, for example Attica's similar house sizes and its relatively generous wages, its steeply progressive taxes, and its "poverty-stricken" aristocrats. Give these conditions, I argue that Athenians, at least in the early Classical period, were much more equal than the citizens of a modern nation like Canada, where in 2005 the bottom 40 percent of the population had practically no wealth (that is, their assets and debts canceled each other out),[2] yet in 2012 the richest man, David Thomson, was worth $20 billion.

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Land and wealth

Throughout Attica after the Dark Age depopulation, good land was available and was eventually occupied. An aristocracy of significant landowners appeared alongside a number of small, privately held farms (Cooper 1977–78, 166). By 403 B.C., about 20,000 of the city-state's 25,000 citizens (80 percent) owned land, the most basic "means of production." Greek poleis tried culturally, if not always legally, to maintain a relative equality of ownership. For example, when Greeks settled new areas, they often divided the territory into plots of roughly equal size in order to give every household an adequate farm to work (Burford 1993, 27–8). And, of course, in Athens Solon's reforms did much to promote general economic parity.

The size of a typical farm at Attica in the Classical era ranged from 40 to 60 plethra (10 to 15 acres or 3.6 to 5.3 hectares). We know of at least two properties of 300 plethra, so the largest recorded estates were about five times the average size. The farms of poorer men, the *thetes*, were about 20 plethra, though some *thetes* owned even less land. If a man had access to a plot smaller than 20 plethra, he might supplement his "income" with other activities. The less land he held the more he had to rely on earning wages. Citizens who held no land typically resided in the city and earned their livelihood through non-agricultural pursuits.

Literary sources for the fourth century make no mention of great landowners who exploited an impoverished class of serf-like agrarian laborers. In addition, the sources "have *nothing* to say about the sale of land by pauperized peasants," and complaints concerning dispossession "are entirely lacking" (Andreyev 1974, 20). Huge farming estates, therefore, "seem not to have existed in Attica" and no "large fortunes were made from the land" (Burford 1993, 70). It is possible, then, that most Athenians entered the era of the democratic polis with adequate material resources. As we saw above, the Assembly witnessed no calls for the redistribution of property, likely because a mass population of impoverished and indebted people did not exist. Athens had no equivalent of the urban mobs of ancient Rome, a group of dreadfully poor men who lacked political power on a scale anywhere remotely approaching that of the Athenian demos.

In Attica in the late fourth century, the top 10 percent or so of citizens owned 30 to 35 percent of all land. Remarkably, the next 70 percent owned 65 to 70 percent of the land (Ober 2010, 259). Lin Foxhall (1992, 158)

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suggests similar proportions for private land ownership for the same time period: the wealthiest 9 percent of men owned 39 percent of the land; the middle 68 percent owned 61 percent; while the bottom 23 percent were landless.[3] It should be noted that the roughly one-fifth of citizens who held no land were not necessarily destitute. Though some were no doubt poor, many others would have been adequately provisioned or even well-off as a result of non-agrarian types of economic activity. With these data in mind, though, Foxhall still concludes: "Although peasant smallholders were most likely the overwhelming majority of the citizen body, they did not, as a group, control a *similarly overwhelming proportion* of the primary means of production, that is, land" (Foxhall 1992, 156, my emphasis). She further posits that an "elite," especially given other sources of wealth such as mining, maintained "overall economic control," hence "the model of the 'peasant-democracy,'" espoused by writers like Ellen Meiksins Wood (1988), cannot "seriously be maintained" (Foxhall 1992, 156).[4]

A successful "peasant-democracy," however, does not require that citizens hold land in proportion to their numbers, or even an "overwhelming proportion" of the land, greater than their numbers (especially given that either of these circumstances would be impossible in a class-divided society, by definition). Rather, the critical point here is that a huge percentage of male citizens—perhaps seven out of ten—held enough land to remain relatively free from the clutches of a class of potentially predatory aristocrats, the most well-off members of the community. In contrast to Foxhall, then, I argue that after Solon's reforms Athenian peasants found themselves closer to the independent end of the social spectrum and further away from the dependent side than perhaps any non-elite class in history. Ian Morris challenges Foxhall's analysis, concluding that landholding patterns in Attica were "*extremely* egalitarian" (quoted in Rose 2012, 74, Morris' emphasis). Ober (2010, 259), too, finds that inequality here was "strikingly low in comparison to estimated distributions of land-holding for other ancient and medieval societies." The vast majority of citizens, close to three-quarters of the total, had some access to land—their own means of production—which enabled them to avoid exploitation (that is, they were not required, as part of coercive social relations, to produce and hand over a surplus to members of another social class).

Even for those who held little or no wealth, the socio-economic system was fairly generous. For instance, wage rates for landless workers at Athens were sufficient to ensure that these men did not hover "at a

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subsistence level perilously close to bare survival." This "was very rare anywhere in the world, before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Ober 2010, 263). The emerging picture of relative economic parity may help to explain why, over the half millennium from 800 to 300 B.C., "large" and "small" houses in Attica did not differ much in size. Ancient Greeks' residences do not display the extremes typical of almost every other class-divided polity. By 300 B.C., "houses in the 75th percentile of the distribution were only about one-fifth again (roughly 50m^2) as large as those at the 25th percentile" (Ober 2010, 258). Mansions and hovels, perhaps the most visible evidence of inequality in any given society, were almost nowhere to be seen.

The tendency toward equality is noticeable at the wealthier end of the spectrum as well. Starr (1977, 123) suggests that "Greek aristocrats were poverty-stricken by the standards of the great dukes of eighteenth-century England"; they were certainly "poor" in comparison to contemporary billionaires like Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. An Attic estate of two to five talents in value would have included a farm, perhaps with livestock and slaves, a property in the city, and possibly some cash. The 1,200 men who made up the most well-off segment of the population (about 5 percent of all citizens) possessed an average wealth of three to four talents. In the late fourth century, three talents in *wealth* equaled roughly 30 years' *income* for "an ordinary Athenian" (Hansen 1999, 115).[5] The richest within this group (the 300 or so wealthiest men) were worth about 15 talents, a fortune few men possessed. One of the rare exceptions was the banker Pasion; he left the largest recorded estate, worth somewhere around 80 talents (Jones 1957, 87).[6]

Athens was by no means a perfectly egalitarian community. In addition to a handful of truly wealthy men, it also had a number of indigent residents, such as the disabled and the elderly without families. Nevertheless, in the Solonian era, it must have been more equal than any modern society. For instance, if in a present-day capitalist nation, the average annual *income* is, let us say, \$50,000,[7] holding 30 times that amount in accumulated assets would leave one with \$1.5 million in total *wealth*. The rarest of Athenians, Pasion, was worth 80 talents, which would represent about \$40 million for a similarly rich man in our "modern society" example.[8] The "very rich," the top 300 or so men aside from Pasion, worth \$7.5 million each based on our twenty-first century standard, were evidently more prosperous than their peers, but they were not individuals whose wealth was so enormous it bordered on the

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stratospheric. The "next richest" in Attica, the 900 men who followed the top 300, would have been better off than most of their fellow citizens, yet although they lived in relative comfort, they would not have had a social standing radically out of step with that of their immediate neighbors. They might have had marginally larger properties; they may have owned a horse or two and some fancy pieces of jewelry. In terms of the distance between "rich" and "poor," then, many a "wealthy" horse-owner in Athens "may still have eaten exactly the same things for dinner as his poorer neighbor" (Burford 1993, 81).

The potential income yielded by assets dramatically highlights the "poverty of the rich" at Attica. If an elite man—that is, someone with a "fortune" of three to four talents—tried to live solely off his wealth, his investments, at the conventional rate of 12 percent, would have provided an annual "wage" of only about ten times "bare survival" (Ober 2010, 264). In contemporary society, such a wage would amount to perhaps $100,000, given a biological minimum of $10,000. Compare this 10 to 1 ratio to the aforementioned David Thomson who, if he invested his $20 billion at a modest 5 percent per annum, would realize annual earnings of $1 billion, an amount 10,000 times that of our ancient, "rich" Athenian and 100,000 times that of a contemporary pauper living on a subsistence income.[9]

Taxation

Taxes further limited the ability of the wealthy to amass great fortunes in ancient Athens. In archaic Greece, taxes constituted, for the most part, sources of revenue for the wealthy and fell mainly on the poor. If "anyone was taxed heavily before about 500 BCE, it was the serf populations of the Greek world, the *klarotai* [Crete], *hektemoroi*, helots [Sparta], *woikiatai* [Locris], *penestai* [Thessaly], and the like" (Gabrielsen 2013, 333). In contrast, taxes and other obligatory charges in democratic Athens fell almost entirely on the rich. That things were different in Athens should come as no surprise given the general economic equality throughout the city-state after Solon, and the powers that ordinary people had in the Council, Assembly, and courts.[10] The uniqueness of the Athenian "tax code" speaks to the fact that many men had access both to substantial economic power, especially their ownership of land, *and* to substantial political power.

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The young Athenian democracy taxed all forms of commerce, activities the wealthy typically engaged in, including trade (for example, harbor fees). The state levied a small tax of 1 or 2 percent on imports and exports as well as sales taxes, generally on goods sold in Athens' agora, typically at the rate of 1 percent, though higher for some luxury commodities. Even brothel owners paid a tax, the *pornikos telos* (Littman 1988, 800). The revenues collected were sufficient for a relatively small state, in particular for one where democratic practices were not yet strongly entrenched.

As democracy took hold and the state began to grow, Athenians came to rely heavily on three major taxes paid for the most part by the wealthy.[11] These taxes were so high in relation to available assets that, unlike today, the richest men of Athens did not necessarily exaggerate when they sometimes complained about the large financial burdens the state imposed on them.[12] Athenians designed their tax policy to collect (one might even say "maximize") significant revenues from those who had "any perceptible surplus available which could be tapped for the purposes of direct taxation" (Davies 1984, 35).

The first tax, the *eisphora* ("contribution"), began as an occasional levy on property, with monies used to finance the Peloponnesian War.[13] With Athens almost constantly involved in hostilities from 431 to 338 B.C., however, the *eisphora* was "occasional" in theory only. In the first half of the fourth century, the 2,000 or so richest men (roughly the top 5 percent) paid it at an average rate of 8 percent of annual income (Sinclair 1988, 63). Before 378–7 B.C., those who paid the tax did so at an equal rate; after this date, taxpayers paid in proportion to their wealth. Around the same time, Athenians established *symmoriai* (companies), 100 groups of about 15 members, each responsible for paying 1 percent of the total tax bill. The 300 wealthiest men paid the total tax and then collected the proportion owed by other citizens, in effect reducing the burden on the state for raising the revenue and putting the onus on the richest to collect from the "next richest." By 347–6 B.C., the *eisphora* had become an annual levy (Hansen 1999, 112; Christ 2007, 63–4).

The second tax, the *trierarchia*, paid for triremes (warships) and dates from 483 B.C. (van Wees 2013, 99). Ships were built by the state with the funds for construction coming out of general revenues. Trierarchies paid for the upkeep of these ships and the wages and rations of the crew. Every year of the Peloponnesian War saw at least 250 triremes in active service, and the tax burden for their provision fell on the shoulders of

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the wealthiest members of society. Supporting a trierarchy could cost up to one talent a year, yet the tax was paid by men with as little as five talents in wealth, thus it consumed 20 percent of their total *assets* (Jones 1957, 56). By any standards, this was considered a major levy, even if it were paid only once, yet some of the wealthiest men funded up to seven trierarchies in their lifetimes (Jones 1957, 57). By the first half of the fourth century, the expense had grown so prohibitive that trierarchies were replaced by syntrierarchies, where two wealthy men shared the cost of outfitting a ship. In 357 B.C., the burden spread even further with the creation of 20 *symmoriai* of 60 men each (1,200 in total), who were responsible as a group for any payments due. Each man contributed a similar amount. Finally, in 340–39 B.C., a more progressive policy was implemented that required only the 300 wealthiest citizens to contribute funds (Christ 2007, 68; Sinclair 1988, 62). Davies (1984, 22) argues that Athenians calculated the uppermost strength of their navy in relation to the number of "rich" in their society: "the 'normal' size of the [trierarchical] class was deliberately set thus so as to correspond with the maximum number of men in Athens who could afford the drain on their personal incomes involved in being a trierarch." It is yet another unique aspect of Athens that when it came to war preparations, the wealthy covered much of the expense.

The third tax paid for the numerous religious ceremonies and drama festivals (*choregia*) held each year.[14] A man obligated to pay this "liturgy" was "not taxed a specific sum but assigned a specific task, which he could perform more or less effectively, at greater or smaller personal expense" (Finley 1985a, 151). Those who paid for the *choregia* "were compelled to meet the expense of costumes and masks, to pay members of the chorus and its leader, and to provide food and shelter for the chorus during the training period" (Littman 1988, 801). By 360 B.C., the richest 1,000 to 1,200 citizens, typically the same men who had served as trierarchs, financed these liturgies (Sinclair 1988, 122). "From the perspective of the demos, or state, [this] extravagance drained individual wealth, easing the disparity between rich and poor, and benefitting the city" (Kallet 1998, 55). The most well-off men staged impressive public showcases that everyone enjoyed.

To ensure that only the wealthiest paid liturgies, and to protect "economically less able individuals against wrongful inclusion into the liturgical class" (Gabrielsen 1987, 9), a complex process (*antidosis*) was implemented. A "poorer" man could use this process to find a richer man to serve as his replacement in making the payment. If a man was

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assigned a liturgy, and he felt that another, richer man was not paying his fair share, the "poorer" man could challenge the supposedly richer man. The "richer" man could then agree to pay for the liturgy and thereby end the matter. However, if he felt he in fact had less wealth than the "poorer" man, he could take the case to court and, if he won, he could force an exchange of property. In effect, before issuing a challenge, the "poorer" man had to be sure that the "richer" man was indeed richer, or else he could face the loss of assets in the ensuing property swap. This procedure was not used often. Just a few cases appear in the records, and none shows any property exchange (Hansen 1999, 112).

The *eisphora*, trierarchies, and other liturgies allowed the state to make substantial expenditures, so much so that by the end of the Classical period payments for public services (including military services) represented "a considerable transfer of funds" to the poor (Rhodes 2013, 229) and "a remarkably generous redistribution of wealth" (van Wees 2013, 1).[15] Moreover, some of the most prominent members of the community saw Athens' tax policy as a central component of a just society. For example, the great orator Demosthenes, commenting on the law of 340–39 B.C. that placed the financing of trierarchies in the hands of the 300 wealthiest men (down from the wealthiest 1,200), said:

> I could see, men of Athens, that your navy was going to rack and ruin and that the rich were getting tax exemptions in return for small outlays, while citizens who had small or moderate properties were losing their substance [possessions] and the city was missing her opportunities in consequence. I passed [that is, proposed] a law by which I compelled the rich to do what was equitable, and stopped injustice being done to the poor. (quoted in Davies 1993, 23)

Despite the fact that payments were obligatory, those who paid taxes took pride in providing for the defense of the city and the financing of public spectacles. The men who funded cultural and religious events especially sometimes spent far in excess of what was legally required in order to demonstrate their magnanimity, and no doubt bask in the esteem of their fellow citizens. Furthermore, the payment of liturgies could serve as an aid to the defense, if a citizen were ever to face legal charges. Court records indicate that many men on trial established their characters and provided evidence of their community spirit by pointing out how many good works they had financed and the enormous expense those works had entailed. Two commentators have concluded that "it was an accepted principle in Greek cities that the wealthier citizens had a

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moral obligation to spend their wealth for the public good" (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 1977, 121). More than merely a moral obligation, however, public contributions were also a *political* obligation, enforced by the state-citizenry. Wealthy men had no choice but to spend money, with the goal of meeting community needs. Respect was granted to the rich not because they were philanthropists but because they were taxpayers.[16] As for the praise heaped on these men, allowing them to have their moment in the sun, the poor no doubt were gracious with their applause, while smiling at each other knowingly.

Athenian democracy taxed a significant share of the assets of the wealthy and the demos controlled how these revenues were spent. For example, the demos directed a massive building program initiated under Pericles' leadership, from the proposal stage to final construction. Unlike tyrannies, where aristocrats spent some of their largesse on "public" buildings that were often little more than vanity projects for the vainglorious, in Athens things were different. "By exercising economic power on an unprecedented scale, the demos strengthened its political position and advertised itself as sole ruler" (Kallet 2003, 130).

In sum, "the scale and range of burdens imposed on the rich and of redistribution to other citizens is undoubtedly a reflection of Athens' democracy" (Rhodes 2013, 229). The city-state's "fiscal policy" stands in stark contrast to, for instance, the Roman republic and empire, where most taxes fell on land, paid for substantially by peasants and tenant-farmers, with the funds employed in general to support the vast military apparatus required to defend the sprawling possessions of imperialism. The wealthy contributed little to public finances, a burden placed on the backs of subjected peoples. For Finley (1985a, 96), the policy of virtual tax exemption for the *non*-wealthy in Athens was a consequence of "that novel and rarely repeated phenomenon of classical antiquity, the incorporation of the peasant as a full member of the political community."[17] Indeed, in contrast to the vast majority of "moderns," Athenians were sufficiently wily to realize that placing a heavy tax burden on the wealthy was essential to the success of democracy.

Public service payments

A fair tax system also generated revenues that could serve as a form of basic remuneration for citizens (Finley 1983, 34). Perhaps the most

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well-known of these income transfers are the payments made for public service, introduced c.450 B.C. for magistrates, Council members, and *dikastai*.[18] The creation of these payments was championed by Pericles, who advocated for innovations that pushed democracy even further in an egalitarian direction (Martin 2000, 113). In total, about 350 magistrates stood to receive about one drachma (six obols) per day by the late fourth century. Council members received four obols per day in the early fourth century and five obols per day in the late fourth century. Jurors earned two obols for each day served, which rose to three obols in 425, where it remained until the 320s (Jones 1957, 5). Assembly pay, given to the first 6,000 citizens to arrive on meeting day, was introduced sometime after 403 B.C., following the overthrow of the Thirty Tyrants. Attendees received one obol per meeting initially; in the 390s the amount was raised to three obols (Sinclair 1988, 117). By the 320s, the rate of pay had increased again to one drachma for each of the 30 ordinary meetings and 1½ drachmas (nine obols) for each of the ten main meetings (which were longer in duration). The Assembly typically met for about half a day; so based on average laborers' incomes, these amounts compensated men fully for their time (and may have constituted a small bonus for the poorest workers) (Hansen 1999, 150).

As a comparator, in the fourth century, a family of four required about 3½ obols per day to meet its basic needs (Sinclair 1988, 129). At these rates, a man on state pay for political service alone could have supported himself, but only at the most minimal level. For instance, a *dikast* could not count on being chosen for jury duty on every one of the (up to) 200 days that the courts conducted business, so jury pay of three obols, especially for men with relatively large families, was "a useful source of support but not a sufficient means of livelihood in itself" (Sinclair 1988, 129). Most jurymen, however, were older and probably no longer capable of sustained physical labor. These men likely lived with a son or daughter and jury pay composed their contribution to the family's total resources. A man able to maximize jury and Assembly pay and occasionally serve as a magistrate could perhaps keep his family afloat on a public service income, but it would have been a rare individual who could have undertaken all these tasks. For one, there were few magistrate positions, and, for another, he would have had to be chosen one of the 6,000 jurors to serve and then be chosen again on each day juries sat. A citizen might make good money if he sat on the Council, but he could do that only after age 30 and for only two years in his lifetime.

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Given these limited financial obligations, the costs of Athens' democracy were not exorbitant, especially when placed in the context of other items in the budget. For instance, during the Arkhidamian War (or Ten Years' War) (433/2–423/2), Athens spent an annual average of almost 1,500 talents on military activities, a sum substantially higher than expenditures on religious festivals and democratic processes, each of which cost about 100 talents per year (Pritchard 2012, 38–9, 44).[19] Almost a century later, in 338 B.C., expenses for the Council, Assembly, and courts still totaled 100 talents, about 8 percent of the state's revenue of 1,200 talents (Hansen 1999, 316). The cost of democracy always constituted a small proportion of total monies spent by the state (Hansen 1999, 189).[20]

Pay for public service carries a bad reputation largely because it came under constant attack by a particular segment of the elite, the political philosophers. Plato, for one, believed these payments made men "lazy, cowardly, gabby, and greedy" (quoted in Martin 2000, 178). According to Jones (1957, 49), Aristotle criticized payment for service "precisely because it fulfilled its purpose of enabling the poor to exercise their political rights." In opposition to these views, Pericles argued that one of the unique features of a democracy is that "no one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty" (quoted in Manville and Ober 2003, 41). Because the abolition of pay for public service undermined democracy by pushing the poor out of politics, it was always at the top of any oligarch's agenda (Markle 1985, 271). Ever since, anti-democrats, primarily conservatives, have attempted to reduce public sector remuneration to a minimum and in some cases—such as boards and commissions—have eliminated compensation entirely. Doing so is a great idea, Athenians would have maintained, only if you want to be ruled by your society's elite.

Regular payments to ordinary men also prevented "patronage relationships reasserting themselves," which would have forced "the poor to become the clients or even the debtbondsmen of the rich" (Davies 1993, 233). Spreading political power widely meant that aristocrats could no longer claim to be the "protectors" of society and hence demand free labor services and engage in other forms of extortion in return for this "protection." It is another unique feature of Athens that it had almost no patronage, a system that usually grows out of unequal personal relations between two men for the purpose of facilitating an exchange of goods or services, such as the issuing of credit (and the obligation to pay a debt). Clientage is a form of exploitation, of dependence, just "one of

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the methods by which the rich seek to control the poor, and the poor try to protect themselves in a potentially hostile environment" (Millett 1989, 16). Patron/client relations form in unequal societies; that is, almost all known class-divided societies, where "charitable" aristocrats "help" the needy. Once more, Athens appears exceptional. Political philosophers accused the demos of many things, but clientage—and the "deference" of the poor that goes with it—was never one of them.

Athenians understood that their democracy cost money, but most men saw these financial outlays as significantly "overbalanced by the knowledge gains" that they "reaped from participatory practices" (Ober 2008, 25). Democracy enabled Athenians to be reasonably successful in defending themselves militarily; to construct impressive public buildings and monuments; to create a vibrant, in many ways timeless, culture; and to recover relatively quickly from disasters like plagues and oligarchic coups. Democracy made it possible for the citizenry to capture *social* knowledge (which is distinct from technical or expert knowledge) and deploy the collective wisdom and experiences of tens of thousands of individuals to solve the problems of the whole (see Ober 2008). Shared knowledge developed within the tribes set up by Cleisthenes and within heterogeneous groups of decision-makers organized as work teams (each usually containing ten members). Learning increased exponentially amongst the men who sat on the Council as they attended a veritable school of government for an entire year. These citizens would have known their fellow demesmen quite well and would also have come to know rather quickly the other tribesmen in their contingent of 50 councilors, if these men were not already familiar faces. This group in turn would have had to work closely with the other 450 members of the *Boule*. Given that only a few men would ever serve on the Council twice, after 10 years there would have been close to 5,000 citizens with significant experience in the art of governance and valuable knowledge about the pressing concerns of the day. Over 20 years, the *Boule* produced upwards of 10,000 "graduates." Men in their early thirties, just eligible to sit on the Council, had an almost endless supply of elders who could serve as their advisors and confidantes. Furthermore, all citizens would have sat from time to time in the Assembly; many others, including perhaps nearly all "senior citizens," would have been members of juries; and thousands could say they held one or more of the various magistracies.

In sum, selecting men by lot encouraged political learning, and at the same time contributed to "the production of fairer outcomes for

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the entire citizen body" (Kosmetatou 2013, 236). In dramatic contrast, contemporary democracies demand a type of citizen participation, typically via the polling booth every four or five years, that contributes little to knowledge-building and rarely allows for decision-*making*. Voting is a ritual through which we choose our decision-*makers*, men and women who supposedly have the requisite expert knowledge to make choices on our behalf.

Slaves and women

Although Athenian democracy included men from across the social spectrum, it also excluded two significant sections of the population, women and slaves (both male and female). In 431 B.C., in addition to about 40,000 citizens, there were 170,000 wives and children of citizens, and perhaps as many as 100,000 slaves.[21] Slave numbers are especially difficult to estimate. Fisher (2001, 35) suggests they represented somewhere between 15 and 35 percent of the overall population. Most slaves were non-Greeks, either captured in war or brought to the city by merchants and sold in the marketplace. Over time, natural population growth also accounted for a small increase in their numbers (Garlan 1988, 52–3).

Most female slaves worked in households, undertaking tasks such as cleaning and preparing food, while most male slaves seem to have labored in agriculture. Slaves were also artisans, toiling in small workshops, while others had building jobs or worked in mills and foundries. Slaves tended to look like, dress similar to, undertake the same types of labor as, and make the same wages as, poorer citizens (that is, those who lacked land or sufficient property in the city). There were no specifically servile occupations in ancient Athens, with one major exception—the silver mines. These mines, with their horrendous working conditions, employed only slaves, using at least 10,000 and perhaps as many as 30,000 in the fourth century (Osborne 1995, 31). Aside from the mines, however, slaves generally did not work together in significant numbers. The largest known workshop was a shield factory employing 120 men. There were a handful of other workshops that made use of two to three dozen slaves. Otherwise, slaves manned selected, unpleasant tasks, such as guarding prisons and executing criminals. It is notable that the Attic economy never produced the kinds of colossal estates or plantations

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that have characterized slave societies elsewhere; "slavery was never accompanied by the massive growth of concentration in landholding that occurred [later] in Italy through the dispossession of peasant smallholders" (Finley 1980, 89).

Which households employed slaves? An eminent ancient historian has suggested that slaves "were owned in the main by the 1,200 richest families and in decreasing numbers by the next 3,000 or so. It is unlikely that any slaves were owned by two-thirds to three-quarters of the citizen population." Slaves, therefore, "merely added to the wealth of a relatively small rentier class" (Jones 1957, 17, 18). Individual rich men may have owned up to 30 slaves; there is one recorded case of a man who owned perhaps 1,000 (Jones 1957, 14). A slave cost the equivalent of seven months' wages for a skilled laborer (Davies 1993, 90) or 19 months wheat for a typical household (Gallant 1991, 33). This expense would have ruled out ownership of slaves for many Athenians. Gallant (1991, 127) concludes that "on the whole most peasants did not own slaves." Other scholars have suggested much broader use of slaves with perhaps majority ownership, arguing that the "initial expense, especially for a young or untrained slave, could be borne by all but the poorest or most parsimonious of landowners" (Burford 1993, 210).

Whatever the rate of ownership, Athenians who could afford slaves regarded them not as a luxury but rather as a basic necessity, without which a household with five or six hectares of land would have had great difficulty functioning. Slaves may have enabled the political elite—those who spent much of their time in public service—to participate in the democracy. For most citizens, however, slaves simply added to a family's labor inside and outside the home. Agricultural slaves, for instance, did not free up male citizens for a life of leisure. Rather, the extra farm hands enabled a citizen to spend 40 mornings a year at the Assembly. That would be the case for someone who had perfect attendance, but given that every meeting was skipped by three of every four eligible citizens, the average man attended just 10 times per year. A man would have been busy with politics if he sat on the Council, but that was for typically only one year in his lifetime. And it was mostly older men with few other responsibilities who sat on the juries. In sum, the effort required for a man to participate in politics was not onerous. Democracy "was predicated upon the principle that political activity should be compatible with the ordinary citizen's ordinary job" (Hansen 1999, 309). As a general rule, "the agricultural basis of the citizen

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economy was itself enough to ensure that for much of the year time was not at a premium for the Athenian citizen, and slaves were not required to free the citizen to engage in political activity" (Osborne 1995, 38). Self-governance in Athens did not demand that men purchase slaves so they could absent themselves from labor. Only the very wealthy could afford to keep their hands clean. Even the critics of democracy never assumed that the mass of citizens led lives of leisure. Moreover, they saw the fact that most citizens had to labor as a fatal flaw of democracy, because the time spent working, in their view, prevented "poorer" men from sharing fully in political life.

Like slaves, women also lived on the political sidelines. The public world, with few exceptions, was a world they could not enter. In ancient Greece, the prominence of a number of goddesses who held important powers, described in various myths, seems to have done little to alter the status of the vast majority of women who lived in a patriarchal society where their roles were limited to domestic matters: bearing and raising children, food preparation, transporting water, spinning and weaving, making and washing clothing, and supervising slaves (if the household had any). Women always had a male guardian—be he father, brother, husband, or son. These men looked after any necessary legal matters or contractual arrangements on her behalf. In law, women were "treated as perpetual minors" (Pritchard 2004, 173), "incapable of a self-determined act" (Gould 1980, 44). By age 14, a typical young woman had been given a dowry and married off to a man perhaps twice her age.[22]

Although women did not participate in political life, neither were they secluded in their homes. They went out for funerals and festivals, a number of which were organized by and for women exclusively (Cohen 1989). Still, husbands (especially those who were rich) strove to keep their wives at home as much as possible in order to control their sexuality and ensure they produced legitimate children to inherit the estate. Only rarely did females venture into areas such as the marketplace. An exception was poorer women, who sometimes worked outside the home cleaning clothes, selling food, or serving as midwives or wet nurses. A handful of women worked in crafts, for instance as cobblers (Brock 1994, 342). There were, as well, a few very independent women, for example high-end prostitutes (see Pomeroy, 1995).

Women enjoyed some social prerogatives equivalent to those held by men. For one, they could initiate divorce proceedings almost as easily as a man could, and neither males nor females suffered any loss of social

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honor as the result of divorce. Both parties typically remarried at some point (Foxhall 1989, 38). A woman also had a few "rights" attached to her status. For instance, a divorced woman could take with her the dowry she brought into a marriage (this property would then be returned to her father or guardian). On the whole, however, women in Athens were subordinate to men in almost every way. Arthur (1973, 51) summarizes well the consequences of this subordination:

> The very heights of the aspirations toward human freedom and dignity which were first given expression in the middle-class democracy of the city-state there collided most violently with the reality of the partial and incomplete emancipation of the majority of the population. And to the extent that, in any given society, the nature of the relation of man to woman especially reveals the most basic truths about the level of human and social development, then the inferior position of woman in the Greek city-state, for all that it was a vast improvement over what had been, must be understood as the great stumbling-block to the true realization of the democratic ideal.

In the case of females, then, Athens was like most societies of its time. Moreover, it was like most societies down to the twentieth century, where half the population had no political voice. Even though many Athenian men had access to citizenship rights unparalleled in the ancient (or modern) world, they most likely never considered extending those rights to their wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters.[23] It says a lot about the struggle of women for basic recognition that another two millennia would pass before gender equality in politics would become a publicly expressed idea. It says even more about this struggle that, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, gender parity at the highest levels of government is not an entrenched reality in a single nation.

At Athens, then, only a small proportion of the total population participated in politics. In comparison with slaves and women, all men who were citizens, even the poorest of the poor, were, in effect, part of an elite with civil rights and a high social status. The subordinate role of women, and perhaps even more so of slaves, has led some to conclude that Athens barely merits consideration as a democracy, and therefore it has little to offer contemporary debates on self-governance. There is, however, no need to dispense with the lessons that the history of ancient democracy provides if, at the same time, we acknowledge its evident failings. Perhaps most importantly, we need to assess the consequences for a society that develops, even in a "partial and incomplete" form, some conception of equality and some egalitarian practices.

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Resolving the "paradox"

There are scholars of ancient Greece who continue to point to a perceived "paradox" in Athenian democracy, where what they see as a significantly unequal economic system stood side by side with a largely egalitarian political system (for male citizens). For instance, Lin Foxhall (2002, 218) writes: "I have never been able to resolve in my own mind the paradox of substantial inequalities in landholding juxtaposed to the notion of political equality in poleis where landholding and citizenship were linked in several ways." She concludes that "the paradox of political egalitarianism juxtaposed with economic inequality cannot be resolved" (Foxhall 2002, 220).

Did such a paradox exist in ancient Athens, where political equality stood in such stark contrast to economic inequality?[24] All of the features of Athens noted above—relatively equitable land ownership, pay for political service, a steeply progressive tax system, and a general absence of exploitation of male citizens—suggests the answer is no. Even the richest men in society were only relatively so, and in general earned their wealth as war booty, through trade, by lending money, by monopolizing the production of household goods and luxury items, by winning the silver mining concessions, by acquiring land beyond the city-state, and the like. Men did not become wealthy, as they do in capitalist societies, by accumulating the property of their fellow citizens who are losers in a competitive race or, as in feudal societies, by living on the backs of various types of agricultural laborers. For male citizens—undoubtedly the privileged in this society—equitable land ownership enabled most of them to avoid having to produce a surplus for a rentier class. As a result, conflict between a powerful aristocracy and a dependent, exploited labor force of peasants was unheard of. Any disagreements that arose played out between people who were only somewhat unequal economically and, at the same time, equal politically. Furthermore, economic and political equality tended to feed off each other, with the consequence that

> there was no large state apparatus to sustain, no royal bureaucracy, no massive and wealthy ecclesiastical establishment, no huge disparities of wealth marked by conspicuous luxury, aristocratic magnificence, and a flourishing market for manufactured luxury goods.... In short, the social, political, and economic demands upon the tax and rent fund—in the form of rents, fees, dues, tithes, tributes, taxes, and labour services—typically produced by peasants elsewhere were relatively limited. (Wood 1988, 109)

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A type of democracy such as the one that existed in ancient Athens can "never emerge unless there is *preexisting* social and economic egalitarianism among the citizenry" (Hanson 1995, 118). Once it had obtained political power, the Athenian demos was able to defend and protect its economic status and political rights. In short, the paradox Foxhall identifies did not exist. Rather, a relatively level economic starting point allowed for an unprecedented diffusion of citizenship and political rights to male citizens. Although citizens represented only 14 to 17 percent of the total population, "what was remarkable for a society in the ancient world or, for that matter, for a society in the modern world until comparatively recent times, was the extension of political rights and the direct participation of large numbers of citizens" (Sinclair 1988, 200). Nevertheless, many members of Athens' elite saw this generalized (male) equality, which prevailed throughout much of the history of classical Athens, as an unqualified disaster. Foremost among the critics of equality were Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

Notes

1 Less egalitarian assumptions, based on a smaller number of taxpayers, produce the following data: the top 30 percent had 86 percent of wealth; the middle 45 percent had 13 percent; and the bottom 25 percent had 1 percent (van Wees 2011, 112).

2 See http://www.progressive-economics.ca/2011/10/20/wealth-and-income-in-the-top-1/.

3 I have made these calculations from Foxhall's data which includes public land, which accounted for about 10 percent of all land available. She argues that the rich controlled almost all this land. Once these properties are included in the total, the proportion of land controlled by the top 9 percent rises to 45 percent, while the proportion controlled by the middle 68 percent falls to 55 percent.

4 Rose (2012, 211) says that Foxhall's data "wipe[s] out the pleasant picture of an Athenian democracy firmly in the hands of small, fully independent farmers." Needless to say, I argue the data do no such thing.

5 In the early 320s, an unskilled laborer earned 1½ drachmas per day. The daily rates of pay were 2 drachmas for semi-skilled laborers and 2½ for skilled laborers (Markle 1985, 293). Hansen's figure of 30 years seems to be derived by using the "middling" amount of 2 drachmas per day, which is then multiplied by 300 work days per year, to produce an annual income of 600 drachmas. This would mean that, over 30 years, 18,000 drachmas, or 3 talents, would be earned (1 talent = 6,000 drachmas).

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6 In the mid to late fourth century, the average wealth of an adult male citizen was close to half a talent (Kron 2011, 132).

7 This rounded number, chosen to help clarify my point, is about $2,000 more than the average annual income for a full-time worker in Canada in 2013.

8 If the average wealth of 3 talents equals 30 years' income, then 80 talents equals 800 years' income. The figure of $40 million is obtained by multiplying 800 by $50,000.

9 At the usual Athenian rate of 12 percent, Mr. Thomson could earn $2.4 billion per annum, or 24,000 times the "rich" Athenian and 240,000 times a contemporary subsistence income.

10 One must agree with Cavanaugh (2003, 461) that in the study of ancient Athens, "insufficient attention has been paid to the significance of the shift from universally applicable taxes, in use by the tyrants before the adoption of democracy, to the wealthy bearing most of the cost under the democracy."

11 In addition to the taxes on the rich, revenues from leases on silver mines, duties from imports and exports, and tribute from Athens' empire (from 478 to 404 B.C.) provided three other important contributions to Attica's coffers.

12 Ste. Croix (1981, 290) maintains that, with the exception of an occasional *eisphora*, the rich "were not heavily taxed." I am not sure this is accurate, even in absolute terms, and it is surely not accurate in relative terms. Has there been another precapitalist society in history where the wealthy paid a substantial portion of the tax revenue? Certainly it has never been the case under capitalism. To note just one egregious contemporary example, in Great Britain in 2011–12, the bottom 10 percent of households paid 43 percent of their total income in tax; the top 10 percent paid only 35 percent in tax (Allen 2014). That the richest people in society could pay a lower tax rate than the poorest people would have made an Athenian's head spin.

13 Hans van Wees (2013, 85) contends that the *eisphora* may have been used as early as 594 B.C., paid by perhaps the wealthiest 15 percent of citizens. In its first clearly documented use in 428 B.C., the state collected 200 talents. Metics paid 33 talents; citizens paid the other 167 talents. From the citizenry, the tiny *pentakosiomedimnoi* class contributed 100 talents, half the overall total. The contributions from *hippeis* and *zeugitai* were 50 and 17 talents respectively. The *thetes*, the poorest 50 percent of the population, were exempt from the tax (Littman 1988, 800).

14 This tax, like the *trierarchia*, was one of the *leitourgia*, or "liturgies." The term is perhaps best translated as "public works" (Thorley 2004, 48) or "services for the community" (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 1977, 122). *Leitourgia* originally meant "work for the people"; that is, work for those who, in turn, provided "service to the state" (Finley 1985a, 151).

15 Hans van Wees (2013, 145) suggests that Athens "initiated the redistribution of wealth through public finance on a scale not seen again until the rise of

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the modern 'fiscal State' in Europe." Once again, I would challenge the notion that any nation has surpassed the Athenians on these matters. In short, while van Wees argues that what occurred at Athens was *unusual*, I argue it was *unique*.

16 In an attempt to gloss over the egalitarian features of Athens, Lin Foxhall (2002, 219) maintains that "the *eisphora* was not a graduated income tax, nor did a *choregia* support universal education. Liturgies and taxes *served as much to* define and highlight the special position of the very richest as to force them to contribute to the support of the state" (my emphasis). It is not clear why Foxhall contrasts the *eisphora* with an income tax, given that the Athenian charge was much more progressive than any modern income tax. In addition, it seems peculiar to "downgrade" the *choregia* simply because it was used to produce cultural and religious spectacles and not to cover the costs of, say, school fees. Finally, in terms of her assessment of forced contributions, if she is correct ("served as much to"), then the onus is on her to explain why the rich in no other class-divided society in history have ever taken it upon themselves to "define and highlight" their "special position" by taxing themselves onerously.

17 I would say "that novel and *never* repeated phenomenon."

18 The word used for these payments, *misthos*, was the same word that was used for the "wage paid to a day labourer or a soldier" (Hansen 1999, 398).

19 Even in years that did not involve intense warfare, Athens' military bill could be high, averaging just over 500 talents per annum in the nine-year period from 378–7 to 370–69 B.C. (Pritchard 2012, 56).

20 Some scholars have argued that Athens' empire provided the funding required to maintain democracy. For instance, Rose (2012, 267–8), citing the work of M.I. Finley, suggests that "it was the unique level of wealth flowing into Athens from her empire that financed a level of participation by the poor inconceivable in any other *polis*." But why should the money necessary to fund this participation have to have come from a unique source, such as the empire? Pritchard's (2012) data make clear that, while Athenians augmented their wealth in important ways via "contributions" from other states, they could easily afford to cover the costs of their democracy from domestic revenues. Indeed, pay for the first 6,000 attendees at Assembly meetings began at the beginning of the fourth century, after Athens had lost its empire. These payments, as well as those previously introduced for councilors, jurymen, and magistrates, remained in place until the late 320s, a period of roughly 80 years, when, as we will see, democracy was assaulted by outside forces (Ste. Croix 1981, 602–3).

21 There were also 40,000 metics (foreigners permitted to live and work in Attica) who were part of the total population of approximately 350,000 (Sinclair 1988, 9). Metics were also excluded from citizenship.

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22 Fathers provided dowries to their daughters. Sons received funds from the family estate, though some obtained part of their "inheritance" upon marriage (Foxhall 1989, 32–3).

23 Hence the humor of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* (Assemblywomen), produced c.392 B.C.

24 In the social sciences and the humanities, we should acknowledge that by referring to something as a "paradox," we are admitting defeat, admitting that we are unable to explain it.

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5
Elite Critics of Popular Rule

Abstract: *Political philosophers, almost without exception, opposed mass involvement in politics. Instead, they proposed that the art of ruling was a specialized, technical skill, which could be attained only by the few men who had the right combination of aristocratic lineage alongside proper education and training. In this chapter, a quick review is given of the basic ideas of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It concludes that this trio, the most important thinkers at Athens, were staunch opponents of self-governance and political equality.*

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Athenian democracy expected all citizens to participate in political life, to debate and make decisions on the key issues of the day. It was simply agreed amongst common men that, as Pericles put it, all citizens were capable of participating in governance and of being "adequately informed about public affairs" (quoted in Sinclair 1988, xi). This philosophy was put into practice with the lot, used to select the Council, the courts, and almost all magistrates. The lot assumed that large numbers of men were competent to serve, and the notion of *isegoria* (the equal right to speak in public), which justified the lot, implied that these men potentially had something useful to contribute to policy formation and implementation. The lot ensured that a given citizen was chosen not because of any special characteristics or because of any inherent superiority over his fellow man, but simply because of luck. The system itself emphasized the wisdom of the collective, as opposed to the supposed genius of the individual, and thus posed "a profound challenge to any politics informed by belief in natural hierarchies" (Balot 2006, 67). While democrats had faith in the thousands who gathered on the Pnyx every nine days or so, the most famous philosophers of ancient Greece preferred to put their trust in the hands of brilliant, high-minded individuals, men who had much in common with themselves.

Opponents of democracy, like Isocrates (436–338 B.C.), wanted political leaders to be chosen for their ability or on some conception of merit as opposed to chance. They claimed that the Athens of yesteryear had been better governed because their ancestors had selected, in Isocrates' words, "the best and the ablest for each function of the state" (quoted in Mossé 1973, 65). But democracy, as Plato cleverly put it, "distributes a kind of equality to equal and unequal alike" (quoted in Farrar 2007, 175). In other words, democracy gives citizens of unequal status the same political rights, enabling everyone to participate, for the most part, when and where they please. This approach to government offended many philosophers who felt that only a select group of men were entitled to rule. The intelligentsia believed it was unfair and unwise that everyone should share power in the public realm (reflected in the principle of "one man, one vote"), when all citizens obviously were not equal in terms of their assets, backgrounds, abilities, virtues, and speaking skills (see Harvey 1965). In brief, anti-democrats stressed "the differences among people where democratic theory emphasized what was held in common" (Roberts 1994, 75–6).

What made Athens a unique polity, and what seems to have troubled some of its leading thinkers, was that the state had removed birth and

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wealth as requirements for citizenship and its accompanying rights. This was an unprecedented idea, one that no other society would replicate for at least 2,000 years, and yet the three greatest philosophers of ancient Athens—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—were all more or less opposed to it (see Ober 1998; Wood and Wood 1978). Many analysts regard these men as "neutral" theorists whose contributions to intellectual life were not influenced much by their own social context, the polis of Athens. To this day, students often study their ideas as though they were timeless, paying little attention to how they were, in fact, rooted in the day-to-day political struggles of a particular city-state. In some ways, this is understandable. It may be a consequence of the fact that, as we will see, Plato in particular "chose to discuss democracy in the abstract while living in the most vibrant democracy in existence" (Roberts 1994, 187). What is lost in many current analyses, however, is how the historical reality of the polis influenced key debates in Greek political philosophy, and that these debates were "occasioned by the *success*, not the failure, of democracy" (Ober 1998, 29). More often than not, this trio of thinkers sided with those opposed to the democracy and all it stood for—social equality and especially rule by men whom the elite viewed as members of the rabble.

Anti-democratic thought emerged shortly after the birth of democracy. One of the earliest extended comments to have survived appeared in the second half of the fifth century. Titled *Political Regime of the Athenians*, it was composed by an unknown author, once thought to be Xenophon, but now referred to as the "Old Oligarch" (a sobriquet that nicely summarizes his perspective). He suggests that democracy has "given the advantage to the vulgar people (*poneroi*) at the expense of the good (*chrestoi*)" (quoted in Roberts 1994, 52). He goes on to provide a succinct summary of why, in his view, some men should rule and other men should obey:

> ...because among the best people there is minimum wantonness and injustice but a maximum of scrupulous care for what is good, whereas among the common people (*ho dēmos*) there is a maximum of ignorance, disorder, and wickedness; for poverty draws them rather into disgraceful actions, and because of a lack of money some men are characterized by lack of cultural education (*apaideusia*) and simple ignorance (*amathia*). (quoted in Ober 1998, 17)

The difference between anti-democratic philosophers revolves mostly around the issue of *why* some men are better than others. For instance,

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Socrates (469–399 B.C.) believed politics was a special skill and, like any skill, it was best practiced by those properly trained, especially men who already possess appropriate natural endowments. As a result, only a few are capable of ruling, those of sound mind and body, men like the educated philosophers whose souls have not been corrupted. Socrates lamented that the Assembly of his day was filled with ordinary men—"cleaners, shoemakers, carpenters, blacksmiths, farmers, merchants"—who could contribute little to politics. Besides, he suggested, there was no need for mass involvement in politics since "a good decision is based on knowledge and not on numbers" (quoted in Wood and Wood 1978, 97, 98).[1] In a famous passage that Plato recorded in *Protagoras*, Socrates summarizes what he saw as the outcome of the division of labor and why, in his view, leading politicians should be specialists in their field:

> Now when we meet in the Assembly, then if the State is faced with some building project, I observe that the architects are sent for and consulted about the proposed structure, and when it is a matter of shipbuilding, the naval designers, and so on with everything which the Assembly regards as a subject for learning and teaching. If anyone else tries to give advice, whom they do not consider an expert, however handsome or wealthy or nobly-born he may be, it makes no difference: the members reject him noisily and with contempt, until either he is shouted down and desists, or else he is dragged off or ejected by the police on the orders of the presiding magistrates. That is how they behave over subjects they consider technical. But when it is something to do with the government of the country that is to be debated, the man who gets up to advise them may be a builder or equally well a blacksmith or a shoemaker, merchant or shipowner, rich or poor, of good family or none. No one brings it up against any of these, as against those I have just mentioned, that here is a man who without any technical qualifications, unable to point to anybody as his teacher, is yet trying to give advice. The reason must be that they [the members of the Assembly] do not think this [politics] is a subject that can be taught. (quoted in Wood and Wood 1978, 129–30)

While no sustained, written argument for democracy survives from Athens, some amongst Socrates' contemporaries, for example the metic Protagoras, opposed these views, arguing that virtue, a quality necessary for sound rulership, could be attained through the process of socialization in a community where, from birth onward, all citizens learn how to act in public, just as they learn a language. Men do not require towering intellects, or have to be supremely virtuous, in order to grasp the intricacies of politics.

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Plato (427–347 B.C.), Socrates' most famous student, however, carried on the lessons of his teacher. He argued that those who rule and those who are ruled are different kinds of people, equating the virtue necessary to lead with philosophical knowledge, for which only a tiny percentage of men have any aptitude. In the *Republic*, a ruling class holding aristocratic values is in control of Plato's ideal polis. This ruling class, non-existent in the Athens of his day, is able to govern because it has access to leisure. These men are the Guardians. They do not own property and the community provides their basic needs. At first glance, this class of men might appear admirable; they are intelligent, selfless, and free from the grubby pursuit of wealth, able to employ their wisdom to direct property-owning citizens. However, they are a privileged class that undertakes no manual labor, while directing the producers who have to work for a living and feed their leaders. The Guardians must not toil, Plato maintained, because those who labor to obtain necessities are morally inferior; they are people "whose souls a life of drudgery has warped and maimed" (quoted in Wood and Wood 1978, 144). With their leisure assured, rulers learn virtues like courage and love of truth. This learning process, however, is effective only with men raised in a particular social environment—an aristocratic environment—where individuals do not have to work with their hands. For Plato, according to Wood and Wood (1978, 149), the "unbridgeable chasm between those who are fit for rule and those who are not is less a consequence of natural inequalities than of the vastly different conditions of life imposed by the social division of labour." According to Plato, those at the bottom of this division, those who practice "arts" such as making clothing, growing food, constructing buildings, and so on, "have all been severed from any share in the kingly art of ruling the state" (quoted in Wood and Wood 1978, 178). These men, who practice "contributory arts," can "merely provide the conditions for their rulers' existence, well-being, and freedom" (Wood and Wood 1978, 178). In short, anyone who works for a living is excluded from government.

As the structures of Athenian democracy described above make clear, Plato's theory—his *imaginary* polis—had little basis in historical reality. Nevertheless, "it was subsequently perceived as a firsthand eyewitness indictment of Athenian democracy on the part of one of the most brilliant minds in history" (Roberts 1994, 82). In Plato's utopian polis, a hereditary aristocracy makes laws and the duties of non-citizens are confined to laboring. The lowly and "vulgar" are expelled from the

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political community, replaced by a rigid social, political, and economic structure, which Plato apparently believed could be frozen in time. In sum, Plato tries "to reclaim the polis for the aristocracy" (Wood 2008, 67), to put hierarchy in place of equality, to remove citizenship rights from most men and substitute instead a strict division between rulers and producers.

In his last work, the *Laws*, Plato grounds his ideas in empirical reality more than he had done in the *Republic*. Yet the system he proposes seems to hark back to the aristocracy of the Homeric age, a time when a few men owned almost all land and most men owned none, and there was a clear division between citizens (owners) and non-citizens (the propertyless). This "second-best" polis (as compared to the one he outlined in the *Republic*) consisted of an aristocracy that never disposed of its property, but simply passed it on to the next generation, and that never participated in commerce or acted as merchants or retailers, never mind worked as farmers or craftsmen. This type of polis was the opposite of the democracy practiced at Athens for roughly a century and a half prior to Plato's writing, and Plato's disdain for it almost assuredly went against the grain of prevailing opinion and ideals. Furthermore, he argued that democracies more often than not end up as tyrannies, yet the form of self-government he witnessed during his long life was both effective and stable, and "bore little resemblance to his unpleasant portrait of democracy" (Ste. Croix 1981, 70–1). Despite Plato's "determination to lend an air of abstraction to his work and to cast his wisdom as universal and absolute, knowing no bounds in time or space, his writings nonetheless make plain that he was distinctively a Greek aristocrat who shared numerous traditional convictions with the bulk of his class" (Roberts 1994, 85).[2]

In turn, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), Plato's most famous student, appears somewhat more sympathetic to democracy than his predecessors, and his theories have a much stronger grounding in the social life of his day. He agrees that the knowledge of the collective could often be a good thing. At the same time, however, he claims the attributes of the demos, and by extension democracy, are "low birth, poverty, and vulgarity" (quoted in Wood and Wood 1978, 226). Democracy is something of a free-for-all, a society where "each person lives as he likes" (quoted in Jones 1957, 43–4). While Aristotle may have intended to disparage democracy with these comments, it seems Athenians regarded "living as they like" as necessary for establishing the common good, as critical to their freedom,

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and concerned not with living without license, as Aristotle implied, but within their society's norms, laws, and regulations.

Like Socrates and Plato, Aristotle in the end also believed that a few men (typically the wealthy) were different, and morally superior to others, though more because of their birth than their education or socialization. These men were fundamentally unlike those who practice "sordid crafts" and "vulgar arts," or who work in "servile occupations" where they perform menial duties as "mechanics, shop-keepers, and day laborers" (quoted in Wood and Wood 1978, 221–2). Aristotle's ideal polis would have greatly restricted access to citizenship and its benefits, eliminating the poor and most urban workers (though apparently not self-sufficient farmers), while allowing a limited number of men to govern—those who had the time to think, debate, and participate. His state would have ruled out of the realm of citizenship a solid majority of the citizens of Athens.

In what is perhaps his most generous interpretation, however, Aristotle concludes that if a polis must be democratic, it should have a "mixed" constitution, featuring democratic and oligarchic elements that give as many leading roles as possible to aristocrats, a suggestion that forms the basis of "representative democracy," which would appear almost two millennia later. A "mixed" constitution, Aristotle implies, provides a "balance" between the various interests in society, but, of course, its true purpose is always to neutralize the powers held by the people. Acknowledging that democracy at Athens "is a fact of life, Aristotle seeks to exercise damage control by defusing it as far as possible" (Roberts 1994, 87).

On the whole, it seems that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were philosophers "completely at odds with the vast majority of their fellows," and their viewpoints, as far as democracy is concerned, were "an attack upon its very principles" (Wood and Wood 1978, 258, 261). Given the significance of these three men to the history of political philosophy, it "could almost be said that political theorizing was *invented* to [try to] show that democracy, the rule of men by themselves, necessarily turns into rule by the mob" (J.S. McClelland, quoted in Roberts 1994, 3).[3] The most important thinkers of Athens, the men (rightly) viewed as producing some of Athenian democracy's greatest cultural products, would have obliterated that democracy beyond recognition if given the chance. Their deepest desires would not be realized during their lifetimes. However, a series of events that began in the early 330s, and intensified around the time of

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Aristotle's death in the late 320s, mark the point when this remarkable social, economic, and political experiment began to pass from history.

Notes

1 A similar criticism regarded the "crowd" as endlessly fickle, unsure of what it wants, with its desires susceptible to unpredictable change. Among others, this idea was put forward by Isocrates in *On the Peace*: "We [the demos] are so devoid of reason that we do not hold the same views about the same question on the same day. On the contrary, the things which we condemn before we enter the assembly are the very things which we vote for when we are in session, and again a little later when we depart to our homes we disapprove of the things which we resolved upon here" (quoted in Mossé 1973, 62).

2 Ste. Croix's (1981, 71) judgment is characteristically blunt: "The wildly exaggerated respect which has been paid down the ages to Plato's political thought is partly due to his remarkable *literary* genius and to the anti-democratic instincts of the majority of scholars."

3 We would likely have to modify this assessment if we knew more about the philosophies of thinkers such as Protagoras and Democritus.

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6

The End of Direct Democracy

Abstract: *This chapter covers the Hellenistic era, noting how democracy was severely curtailed in the decades after c.323 B.C., then went into a terminal decline, and was effectively dead by the beginning of the Roman Empire, if not long before. In Athens, the old vestiges of self-governance continued, but in more or less weakened condition, as the Council and the Assembly were gradually neutralized. Athens' constitution became increasingly oligarchic, especially in the transfer of power to elected officials and away from men chosen by lot.*

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War eventually killed Athenian democracy. From the last one-third of the fourth century onward, Athens and other Greek states had to deal with pressures placed upon them by external powers, kingdoms ruled by monarchies antithetical to self-governance. In the Hellenistic era (323–30 B.C.), a period of almost 300 years, what "had been—ideally—autonomous and free *poleis* became more or less subject communities that a king might try to bend to his will" (Shipley with Hansen 2006, 54). This subjugation, and the slow decline of democracy that accompanied it, commenced when Athens lost a key battle at Chaeronea in 338 B.C. to Philip II, King of Macedonia. The peace agreement which followed allowed Athens to establish its own domestic policies, but required that it mirror Macedonia on external matters. The importance of this defeat is that "never again would the states of Greece make foreign policy for themselves without considering, and usually following, the wishes of outside powers" (Martin 2000, 190). For example, Macedonia demanded that Athens contribute triremes to the military adventures of Philip's son and successor, Alexander the Great. Many Athenians found this arrangement objectionable, yet they had little choice but to accept it in the face of superior military power, while hoping that one day they would overthrow their oppressor.

Relations with Alexander soon soured. Athenians were making preparations for a Macedonian invasion when, in June 323 B.C., they learned of his death. Nevertheless, this did not stop the Hellenic War (or Lamian War) from beginning that autumn, as Athens and other Greek states joined in an effort to regain their freedom. Things did not go well. By 322 B.C., after many intense battles, Athens found itself on the losing side, routed by the Macedonian general, Antipater. Macedonian troops were stationed in Piraeus, Athens' famous harbor—a humiliating experience for the city-state that had been the beacon of liberty in the ancient world. With little negotiating room left, Athenians accepted peace terms that, while not fatal to democracy, severely scaled back important aspects of democratic life. For instance, a citizen now had to have a net worth of at least 2,000 drachmas to enjoy full political rights. The number of men who qualified for citizenship fell immediately from probably 21,000 to 9,000 (Habicht 1997, 40). Implementing this new constitution over the heads of the poor required "the presence of a Macedonian garrison to make them accept the loss of their citizenship and all the material advantages that went with it" (Mossé 1973, 100).

Political struggle nevertheless ensued and by the spring of 318 B.C., democrats had regained control of Athens. The new regime halved the

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wealth qualification for full political rights to 1,000 drachmas (Habicht 1997, 52), increasing the number of citizens from 9,000 to 12,000 (Wood and Wood 1978, 251). While an improvement, many men who had been disenfranchised just a few years previously failed to recoup their rights. The democrats' time in power was short-lived though; they were ousted by the summer of 317 B.C. The new leader, Demetrius of Phalerum (ruling on behalf of Macedonia), continued the assault on the old democracy, abolishing payments for attending the Assembly and sitting on juries (Habicht 1997, 59). He also ended the use of the *graphe paranomon*, which had enabled any citizen to challenge a law he viewed as unjust. With these "reforms," the constitution "was modified in the interests of the wealthier classes" (Habicht 1997, 57). Indeed, the new regime has been described as "aristocratic in name and monarchic in fact" (Mossé 1973, 105). The old vestiges of self-governance continued, but in a more or less weakened condition, as the Council and the Assembly were gradually neutralized. By the end of the fourth century, "Athenian democracy seems to have become a mere formal relic, without substance. Even if there were some stirrings among the *demos* from time to time, on the occasion of some crisis or other, all real political power lay in the hands of a wealthy minority" (Mossé 1973, 114).

Threats to democracy increased within a few decades of Alexander the Great's death, when the areas he had conquered became separate territories, led by his former generals. The monarchs in these "successor kingdoms" worked hard to establish their dynasties, persuading subordinate classes to accept kingship—or at least resign themselves to it. One way kings were able to convince others of their legitimacy was through the idea of merit. Though seemingly a quality of individuals, it "tended also to become attached to the king's family and so served as a justification for dynastic succession" (Walbank 1984, 66). Kings would attempt to stand out from their subjects, to demonstrate their superiority, for example by wearing purple clothing and ornate crowns. Some people came to see them as gods or divine-like, men chosen by the gods to dispense justice on earth. Sadly, justice was less likely to be found in decisions made by one's fellow citizens. Any monarch would have maintained that citizens are not necessary to create a just society; a king was sufficient, because he could serve as a "shepherd of his people," a savior to one and all (Walbank 1984, 82). The King of Syria (and most of the old Persian Empire), Seleucus I (c.358–281 B.C.), articulated precisely the monarchical philosophy of governance when he noted that "what is decreed by

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the king is always just" (quoted in Martin 2000, 205). Kings centralized power and tax dollars in their households, and large bureaucracies (or "courts") developed at royal palaces to offer support to these new leaders who in turn supported their men with regular incomes and/or grants of land. This, in short, is the political system that ruled Athens on and off for close to 300 years.

Even so, Athenians did not let their democracy go quietly. They overthrew Demetrius in 307 B.C. with the help of an outside military force lead by Prince Demetrius Poliorcetes of Macedonia. The new government restored the democratic constitution abolished in 317 B.C., though it turned out to be "a mere caricature of the regime which had constituted the greatness of Athens" (Mossé 1973, 108). In particular, the city-state had to answer to Prince Demetrius' demands for military assistance (and worship him as a god). Meanwhile, political control quickly moved back and forth among various contenders. The tyrant Lachares seized control in a coup around 300 B.C., but he was deposed in 295 B.C. with the return of King (formerly Prince) Demetrius. Athenians accepted Demetrius' assistance, and his resumption of power, because Lachares had cut off the city's food supply and people were starving. After 295 B.C., much of the democratic constitution seems to have been maintained at least on paper, though the Council of 600, chosen by lot, was abolished.[1] A new, *elected* Council was raised in its place (Habicht 1997, 88). In 287 B.C., a rebellion against Demetrius, who was being challenged at home in Macedonia, saw a battle between Macedonian and Athenian forces. A peace agreement, similar to those of the past, gave Athens internal "independence" but allowed the Macedonian military to remain in Piraeus.

These political battles occurred alongside social strife and dislocation. By the first half of the third century, large groups of peasants had suffered marginalization, and the polis went into decline. Forms of injustice began to seep into society. After 300 B.C., we see the rise of large estates as land fell into the hands of fewer men. At this time, at least one Greek farm (belonging to Apollonius at Memphis) consisted of 6,500 acres, more than 100 times the size of a typical Athenian holding at the height of the democratic age, and completely out of line with the now extinguished principle and practices of economic egalitarianism that had prevailed earlier throughout much of ancient Greece (Hanson 1995, 396). In addition, taxes increased to pay for the military ventures of the elites and to support their lavish lifestyles, further contributing to the

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impoverishment of the masses. It is at this point that calls to redistribute land, absent for so long during the classical period, "reappeared in Greek history with increased violence" (Austin and Vidal-Naquet 1977, 25).

These tumultuous decades provide a glimpse of the gradual erosion of self-governance, illustrated by disputes over the meaning of "democracy." Everyone who seized power in this period, even most oligarchs, claimed their actions were meant to enhance democracy, not harm it; for example, when new rules were put in place to raise the property qualifications for political rights. This forced some men to provide more precise definitions of "democracy." One example of this occurred in a 270–69 B.C. decree honoring a war hero, Callias of Sphettos, in part for the fact that his "actions never contravened the laws or the principles of a democracy that includes all citizens" (quoted in Habicht 1997, 139n64). Two-thirds of a century earlier, it would not have been necessary to explain that democracy "includes all citizens"; this would have been self-evident. As we move through the Hellenistic period, the meaning of *demokratia* continued to change, such that it "increasingly came to signify no more than an internally self-governing republic, whether democratic or oligarchic" (Ste. Croix 1981, 322).

The almost constant battle for freedom continued in the decades to come. Athens and its allies, including Sparta and Egypt, started the Chremonidean War against Macedonia in 267 B.C. with the hope of disencumbering the Greek states once and for all of foreign rule. The war was a disaster, and Athens surrendered in 263–2 B.C. More foreign troops were stationed in Athens and a regent, the son of King Demetrius Poliorcetes, was appointed to govern the city. From this point on, Athens "permanently entered the ranks of the subject city-states with paltry politics, the victim of superior external force" (Finley 1983, 117). It was now controlled by a foreign military. Soldiers were eventually moved out of the city around 255 B.C., when the royal governor was recalled, though they still occupied Piraeus and the fortress of Attica. As in the past, Athens had to fight in Macedonia's wars when beckoned to do so. After this setback, democracy was but a pale imitation of its former self. The once proudly independent city was reduced to the point where "the resolutions of the Athenian Assembly, of the Council, and of nongovernmental organs are full of assurances of loyalty to the king and the royal house of Macedonia" (Habicht 1997, 150). The Assembly did little more than approve decrees that granted honors to various individuals, tellingly for religious service and rarely for political acts. It seems as well

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that the king had veto power over decisions made by the now heavily constrained "democracy."

Athens was finally liberated from Macedonian rule in 229 B.C. shortly after the death of King Demetrius II, when conflicts arose over Demetrius' successor. Athens saw this as an opportunity to push for independence, which it believed it could accomplish peacefully. This objective was achieved; the royal governor cooperated and the Macedonian garrison was convinced to depart, which they did soon after having been paid off. Shortly thereafter, Athens adopted a policy of neutrality in conflicts involving other Greeks, including those in desperate need of assistance. Athenians felt they had no choice. The only way they could maintain their sovereignty was to focus exclusively on their own affairs. By this point, Athens had developed a close relationship with Egypt and relied on it for support should conflict break out. Athenians likely could not have adopted a neutral stance without the protection offered by Egyptian kings. This "hands off" approach enabled Athens to avoid the three major wars that broke out on Greek soil between 228 and 205 B.C. However, by the late third century, there was a new menace on the horizon. The Roman republic made its presence felt throughout the Greek world. Athenians found it increasingly difficult to maintain a policy of neutrality as hostilities flared all around. In 200 B.C., Athens finally joined other powers, including Rome, in a war against Philip V, King of Macedonia. The city-state was poorly equipped and could barely protect itself let alone offer assistance to allies. The war was won, mainly because of the strength of Rome, and a peace agreement was reached in 196 B.C.

By 168 B.C., Rome had subordinated and disassembled the Macedonian kingdom, leaving Athens no longer threatened from that quarter. However, Rome looked like it could become the new oppressor in Greece, a possibility pointed out by some city-states, who saw Athens' new alliance with and acceptance of Rome's activities as dangerous and naïve. In direct contrast to the traditional ethos of Greek poleis, the Roman republic was "an instrument of individual ambition and acquisition for a ruling class of private proprietors who competed with one another for wealth and power" (Wood 2008, 115). Rome was a society where private property provided immense wealth while land ownership was concentrated in a few hands. Unlike Athens, in Rome professional armies conquered foreign territories, both near and far, for the exclusive

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benefit of a small, staggeringly wealthy elite. The Roman state would prove to be "an exploitative instrument unique in antiquity in strength, brutality, and the scale and reach of the exploitation" (Finley 1983, 120). At various points, Rome attacked and plundered Greek city-states, but compliant Athens was always spared. From 168 B.C. on, Athens operated in Rome's shadow and would do nothing to incur the wrath of its Senate and armies.

Although Rome began intervening in Greece in 229 B.C., it typically did not occupy the territories it fought and defeated, and it did not exercise direct control over Athenian affairs. Its policy changed, however, in 148 B.C. when it took over the four republics that used to constitute Macedonia and turned them into a Roman province. In 146 B.C., Rome added a number of other Greek city-states to its growing collection of territories. It was clear even to contemporaries that these actions marked a watershed in Greek political life; the new behemoth could not be defeated. After the 150s, "Greek history was part of Roman history" (Martin 2000, 202).

Even so, there was little change in Athens' relationship with the foreign power until the first century B.C. In 89 B.C., Rome went to war against King Mithridates VI of Pontus (based in Asia Minor, in contemporary Iran), to prevent him from expanding his empire. In 88 B.C., Athens decided to support the king in opposition to Rome, breaking an alliance which had been in place for roughly a century. Mithridates moved into Greek areas controlled by Rome, and many Greeks saw this as the long-awaited opening to regain their freedom. Unfortunately, the decision to oppose Rome was catastrophic. A Roman army commanded by Cornelius Sulla arrived in Athens in 87 B.C. Sulla put the city under siege in an attempt to starve the citizens, who had always depended on imported grain, and force a surrender. On March 1, 86 B.C., the Roman army entered Athens, slaughtering men, women, and children. A Pontic army eventually turned up, but too late to save the city. The war ended in mid-85 B.C. At that point, Athens was in a sorry state, with many damaged buildings. Artistic treasures had been stolen. The beautiful groves where Plato and Aristotle once taught had been chopped down for firewood. Sulla had continued on to Asia Minor and defeated Mithridates before returning to Athens again in 84 B.C. on his way home. When he arrived, the pro-Roman faction now in charge gave him full honors, including the erection of a statute.

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Athens' constitution continued after Sulla departed. It had become increasingly oligarchic over the previous hundred years, especially in the transfer of power to elected officials and away from men chosen by lot. As democrats had always predicted, men from the wealthier segments of society came to dominate these offices. By as early as the second half of the second century, in a reversal of the process that had unfolded in the sixth and fifth centuries, the Council of Areopagus "was tending to become a Roman-style senate, and its functions developed at the expense of the people's courts and the *Boule* of the Six Hundred" (Mossé 1973, 143). Rich men now ruled almost exclusively. After 86 B.C., only a handful of decrees survive from the Council and not "one of these surviving decrees deals with political matters; the majority concern religious affairs" (Habicht 1997, 317). The civil war in Rome that began in 49 B.C. and lasted for roughly two decades sealed Athens' fate. In 31 B.C., Athens was absorbed into the Roman Empire, where it "assumed the role that would be its long-term destiny: a cultured university town within someone else's great empire" (Manville and Ober 2003, 152).

Athenian democracy declined and then disappeared over the course of the Hellenistic era, but it "did not just die out, let alone commit suicide: it was deliberately extinguished by the joint efforts of the Greek propertied classes, the Macedonians, and the Romans" (Ste. Croix 1981, 293). This process encompassed four changes to political systems: (1) assemblies continued to meet, but they typically issued only honorific decrees. In short, they dealt mostly with trivial matters, slowly decayed, and eventually died out; (2) the *dikasteria* were abolished as the main dispensers of justice and were gradually replaced by small panels of magistrates; (3) by the second century A.D., Councils, which had been chosen by lot, "had been transformed into permanent, largely hereditary, and more or less self-perpetuating bodies" (Ste. Croix 1981, 308); and (4) liturgies were added to magistracies, which meant that while men were not legally prohibited from holding offices, they now, in effect, had to purchase them, by contributing to the tax fund in order to earn the right to participate in public service. Aristotle had recommended just such an arrangement to oligarchs in the *Politics*, observing that "the common people may be willing to acquiesce in their own exclusion from office and may sympathise with those who have to pay so high a price for the privilege" (quoted in Ste. Croix 1981, 305). Ultimately, Athenian

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democracy proved “no match for the forces of an entrenched and class-conscious oligarchy” (Rose 2012, 267).

Note

1 The number of councilors had been changed from 500 to 600 shortly after 307 B.C. with the addition of two new tribes.

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7

Conclusion: The Key Lesson for Contemporary Democracy

Abstract: *The Conclusion summarizes the argument that Athenians had to engage in a successful "economic struggle" in order to establish democracy. The chapter ends by noting that a similar struggle on the "material plane" is crucial today if we are to move beyond forms of public decision-making that disproportionately benefit society's elite. The last few pages sketch out a strategy for action that draws on the Athenian experience, suggesting that any effective change must begin with fundamental alterations to the institutions of contemporary democracy.*

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By the beginning of the Roman Empire, if not long before, Athenian democracy was effectively dead. Nevertheless, it still stands out as a remarkable socio-political experiment, because the polis was "not a primary means of appropriation from direct producers but, on the contrary, a means of protecting citizen producers from appropriating classes" (Wood 2008, 33). All states before the polis had served, for the most part, as vehicles for ruling classes to pocket the proceeds of surplus production, the fruits of the labor of the most vulnerable members of their societies. The poor barely survived, while their working lives supported small elites who spent much of their time wallowing in luxury. Not so at Athens. These citizens had broken the mold of exploitation, so much so that they would have been perplexed to see the modern state used regularly as a force of oppression against the demos. In Athens, citizens *were* the state in a way without equivalent in any class-divided polity since 323 B.C. The happy marriage they achieved between "people" and "state" placed severe constraints on the actions of leading politicians and military officers, while over time solidifying political rights for a broad group of citizens.

With the decline of Athens, the practice of ordinary men governing themselves fell dormant for roughly two millennia. Moreover, when democracy reappeared in the "modern" era, particularly as a consequence of the American Revolution, it did so in a watered-down version, as *representative* democracy (Wood 1995, 204–37). This type of democracy is accepted by wealthier members of societies (as well as "pluralist" political theorists) because it greatly reduces the role of popular involvement in self-governance. And yet, for that very reason, classical Athenians would have had trouble recognizing it as democracy at all and most Greeks would have been loath to attach the word *demokratia* to it.

This mutation in the meaning of democracy is why standard, "textbook" definitions describe it as a political system that allows for government "by the people," where citizens have "the opportunity of selecting political elites in competitive, periodic elections" (Johnston 2001, 298).[1] An essential characteristic of democracy—extensive participation in government—has been excised from contemporary definitions of this once-radical concept. Athenian democracy, at its root, was a class-based project, thrust upon a no-doubt recalcitrant aristocracy by subaltern classes determined to have a share in political life. Class conflict lay at the heart of the original notion of democracy, woven into its very formation, into *the word itself*. "Demokratia," as Pericles used it for

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example, "does not define those who govern," as in majority rule, "but those to whose welfare the government of the state is geared," the demos (Ostwald 1986, 183). And the poor's access to political power—the poor's *creation* of democracy—was not a benefaction from their "superiors," but something that "lower" men forcibly extracted from the "rich."

It is difficult to imagine how this unique experiment in political democracy could have occurred without a parallel, and similarly unique, experiment in economic equality. The key ingredient in this political revolution was relative economic parity between rich, middling, and poor, built upon the broad ownership of land Solon's reforms brought to Athens. With the main battle settled—the struggle over access to society's resources—average men had to "merely" make a logical corollary: that if they were (virtually) equal economically, they should be (virtually) equal politically. From this starting point, Athenians "attained popular sovereignty with a minimum of bloodshed and internal upheaval." That they managed to do so is "one of the remarkable facts of human history" (Ostwald 1986, 175). In Athens, economic power made possible the generally peaceful acquisition of political power for ordinary males in a series of stages, from Solon in the 590s to the post-oligarchic reforms of the late 400s, a period of roughly 200 years.

In this historically unprecedented democracy, all citizens engaged in and practiced the art of ruling to one degree or another. They openly challenged the Socratic-Platonic idea that only a few had the knowledge and moral character required to govern. This fraud, perpetuated by monarchs and political philosophers alike, quickly dissolved, as everyday people soon realized that, with support from their fellows and a slight boost to their self-confidence, they too were capable of competently running most of the affairs of state. In doing so, they ensured that all could speak if they so chose, that all were required to listen, and that all had one vote and one vote only—a trio of principles that surely grated on aristocrats' nerves. On any given matter, every reasonable citizen was able to say that, whatever the outcome, the political system, its institutions and practices, was just.

It is imperative, then, that we reinstate into our modern politics democracy's original meaning as *institutionalized decision-making processes in class-divided societies that enable and encourage many of the non-wealthy members of those societies to impose themselves on the political agenda*. This definition of *demokratia* has been forgotten for far too long. Bringing it back into the light makes more understandable an

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important contrast between past and present. In Athens, all of the major political philosophers were staunchly anti-democratic. Today, though, there is a general acceptance of democracy. Referring to this contrast, Paul Cartledge (2009, 24) remarks that "nothing could illustrate better the gulf between the political culture of ancient Greece and the modern Western world." However, the fact that we are all democrats now is so not because democracy has finally won, but rather because it has lost the critical role it once had in ancient Athens as a defense mechanism for the poor, a loss that has enabled even the wealthy to place themselves on the pro-democracy side of the barricade. This contrast between ancient and modern, then, can be explained best if we rewrite Cartledge's sentence to read: "Nothing could illustrate better the gulf between the economic power of the ordinary men of ancient Greece and the lack of economic power of working classes in the modern capitalist world."

Understanding the complexities of Athenian democracy and its lessons for modern political organizations requires that we give greater attention to the economic basis upon which the demos constructed their power. This is especially so, when scholars who see only a "paradox"—a supposed conflict between political democracy and an apparent economic *in*equality—miss the critical lesson, the gift given to us, by Athens. That lesson, that economic equality is an essential condition of political equality, is obscured by arguments that see the Greeks' system as mostly similar to all others, where privileged minorities dominate exploited majorities. Even Josiah Ober (1989, 339), who is aware of the amazing level of socio-economic equality at Attica (Ober 2010), could still conclude his superb *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* by claiming that his study "inverts the traditional Marxist approach to ideology and raises the possibility that lower classes can achieve major changes in the organization of society without overt struggle on the material plane."

But Athens raises no such possibility. Indeed, struggle on the "material plane" was necessary in order to enable everyday Athenians to create something "major." Today, however, most of us believe that representative democracy is the best we can do, that creating a version of Athenian democracy is both impractical and unattainable. There are good reasons for this pessimism, though they are related not so much to the practicalities of self-governance as they are to its attainability. In any contemporary variant of Athenian democracy, government would, without any provocation from the general population, compel "the rich to do what was

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equitable," "place shackles about those who are unjust," and stop "injustice being done to the poor" (to cite Solon and Demosthenes again). In early twenty-first century, capitalist "democracies," however, the rallying cry is virtually the opposite, as the rich engage in one of the most obscene wealth-grabs in the history of humanity, while the poor—and even substantial sections of the middle class—find themselves "downwardly mobile," increasingly marginalized, and subject to frequent physical and psychological violence, often at the hands of what is supposed to be "their" state. The ability of affluent entrepreneurs to minimize their tax obligations while ensuring that governments collect revenues via regressive taxation (which harms the poorest most) illustrates perfectly the distinction between democracy then and "democracy" now.

The recent "power grab" by capitalists that has occurred alongside "globalization" has provoked much discussion on what is frequently referred to as a "democratic malaise" or a "democratic deficit." Depending on the country one inhabits, the afflictions harming democracy can include the signing of "free trade" agreements alongside membership in supranational bodies like the World Trade Organization, both of which place limitations on national sovereignty; first-past-the-post electoral systems that produce "majority" governments, sometimes with the support of less than 40 percent of the electorate; declining voter turnout, especially among youth; political parties left, right, and center that often abandon their promises once in office, usually as a result of pressure from private capital; corporate power's stranglehold over significant areas of public policy (such as trade, energy, and natural resources); political institutions, where the seats at the table are occupied by too many men and not enough women, and by lawyers and business people, rather than, for instance, cleaners, shoemakers, and carpenters; little public participation in political life beyond voting, or choosing not to vote, every four or five years; cutbacks to unemployment and social assistance, designed intentionally to rob people on "welfare" of their dignity and gnaw at their mental health; a massive increase in the use of prisons, which makes an oxymoron of "criminal justice"; a rapidly unfolding, global ecological catastrophe that capitalist states seem either unwilling or incapable of attenuating, never mind preventing; the use—and morally repugnant "defenses"—of torture in the "war on terrorism"; secretive governments that force their citizens to use time-consuming "access to information" mechanisms to get their hands on dossiers that have nothing to do with privacy or national security; state spying on the

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personal lives of citizens, which now rivals some of the worst excesses of defunct Communist regimes; and wars entered in to by "democracies" on the basis of not only fallacious "intelligence," but outright fabrications engineered by politicians most reprehensible. To paraphrase the great American philosopher Dorothy, from *The Wizard of Oz*: I've a feeling we're not in Athens anymore.

"Democracy" now contributes to disempowerment and makes clear to the demos that politics does not matter much. Occasionally, perceptions of helplessness are countered with outbreaks of protest, such as Occupy Wall Street, but the state either aggressively beats back these uprisings or waits them out, until the brief flashes of anger have dissipated. True, each adult has a vote, but that vote is enfeebled by massive economic inequality, especially in a nation like the United States where the well-off can effectively purchase elections. Such conditions make it impossible to achieve social justice, something that should be at the heart of a democratic polity, by definition. For sure, the current system in wealthier countries does not allow people to starve to death, but that must qualify as a rather nasty and brutish "bottom line." A world that allows fat billionaires to exist alongside beggars under bridges has hollowed out any semblance of "political equality." It is patently obvious that the vast majority of ordinary folk, and not just the very poor, have little effect on many of the public policies implemented in their names.

Some may point to pressure groups, rather than voting, as the true locus of power in modern democracy, but I would counter with just one example. As far as I know, there has never been a single case in any advanced capitalist country where the wealthy have had to engage in sustained, mass protests in order to obtain reductions in their taxes, protests akin to, say, the Civil Rights marches led by Martin Luther King Jr. in the United States in the 1960s or the 10- to 15-million strong worldwide demonstrations in 2003 against the imminent Iraq War. Those with more assets than they know what to do with can go about their everyday lives safe in the knowledge that their concerns remain at the heart of public life. Meanwhile, in Athens, the wealthy would have had to have been much more proactive if they wanted to pass policies that served mainly their own interests. Being fairly astute politicians, however, it seems they never dared to bring proposals before the Assembly to reduce their contributions to the treasury, ones that would end their responsibility to pay for the things that people needed, be they public works, religious festivals, or military defense.

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What can we do in our contemporary world to change democracy so that, similar to ancient Athens, the state's top priority is always the amelioration—and hopefully the elimination—of the various forms of exploitation that plague the vast majority of humanity? If Athenian democracy teaches anything it is that struggle for relative equality on the "material plane" is essential if we are to move beyond forms of public decision-making that disproportionately benefit society's elite. In short, economic democracy is a necessary prerequisite of political democracy. Without the former, the latter cannot exist. And yet, when we compare ourselves to the Athenians, it is evident that, unlike them, we are in a severe bind.

Solon helped to make democratic governance possible (and survivable) by preserving a rough economic parity from almost certain extinction. He did so in a political version of "flicking a switch," in his role as mediator, a member of the aristocratic class called upon by both rich and poor to help solve, once and for all, the conflicts that troubled Athenian society. A comparable action in contemporary capitalism would require a business titan—perhaps Warren Buffet—to order the rich to redistribute substantial wealth. Moreover, our contemporary "social referee" would have to remodel political institutions to make them blatantly "pro-poor," where the mass, from the middle class to the marginalized, could veto inhospitable legislation and replace it with laws that provide tangible, material benefits to the demos. Needless to say, this fantasy of a modern mediator is never going to happen. What, then, must be done?

In Athens, a version of economic democracy was necessary in order to construct a *demokratia*, one built self-consciously as a way of *undercutting aristokratia*. At the height of the democracy, Athenian citizens had their hands on *both* economic and political power. Today, most citizens have *neither* economic nor political power. Material resources are increasingly concentrated in a small number of households, and most governments are reluctant to challenge the market "logic" that fuels this inequality. In order to preserve even a modicum of protection from the system, citizens throughout the world must rely on what are currently the two most important defense mechanisms available—trade unions and social democratic parties. These levers of power, though, can do little to change the status quo.

To get out of our bind, we will have to initiate a process that would be, for the most part, a reversal of the one that unfolded in Athens. As a first, essential step to a better world, we must make significant alterations to

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the institutions of governance, with the objective of creating a radical form of "people power" analogous to that held by the Athenian demos.[2] Of course, new institutions could not simply replicate past examples, but the Greeks could serve as an inspiration to us. With more user-friendly institutions to work with, ones saturated in democratic values and culture, citizens in control of political power could tilt the balance of economic power back towards themselves, as they gradually claimed, then augmented, both forms of power—a task that would unfold over decades, perhaps even over centuries. This would, for sure, mark a difference with Athens, where Solon's reforms quickly solved the "economic problem" to the reasonable satisfaction of the men who eventually assembled regularly on the Pnyx. In the process of transferring wealth to itself, the modern demos would have to decide what it wants, what it needs, and what constitutes a "fair" settlement of its grievances on a myriad of matters, such as income distribution, minimum and maximum wages, taxation policy, ownership and control of corporations, and so forth. Where that settlement would take us—what it would look like—cannot be divined in advance, but whatever it might look like, it would be the result of a democratic process familiar to citizens of the ancient world but unknown to their modern counterparts.

Notes

1 Johnston (2001, 298) indicates that this is a minimalist definition, then (correctly) adds that "most of the systems we recognize as democratic do not go very far beyond the minimum of holding periodic elections."
2 For some preliminary thoughts on this matter, see Patriquin (2011, 2013).

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