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Simon Lote, "Selection by Lot and its Ancient Greek Origins" | Counter-Currents

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Although electoral representation is a discredited system, White Nationalists should not give up on the idea or virtues of democratic representation but should seek alternative ways of achieving this through sortition—the selection of representatives through a randomized process like a national lottery.

The political potential of sortition is virtually unknown in White Nationalist circles. Edgar Steele mentioned it briefly in his book *Defensive Racism* arguing that juries, which are selected by sortition, should not only decide questions of fact, i.e., whether the accused has broken the law, but also importantly that they also be allowed to rule on the legitimacy of the law in question.[1] This essay goes far beyond Steele's proposals and argues that sortition should play a decisive role in the political process itself, so much so that bad laws never see the light of day and are killed in their drafting stage.

Sortition or selection by lot is the antithesis of preference voting as it is an a-rational selection process. This "blind break" as Dowson refers to in *The Political Potential of Sortition* means that the selection of representatives cannot be manipulated by any human agency once the size and entry qualification into the lottery pool has been determined. Selection by lottery is completely impartial and will not favor one individual over another. Those represented through this process will not be aristocrats (unless the pre-lottery pool is actually weighted to favor them). However, they will also not be an oligarchy as this selection process prevents special interests from using their power to influence the outcome in their favor.[2]

Sortition is capable of delivering a legislature similar to what founding father John Adams advocated: namely that it

“should be an exact portrait, in miniature of the people at large.” This is not an alien concept, as professional pollsters and focus groups daily use the principle of random selection to gauge public opinion through polling only a tiny fraction of the total population.[3] The numbers of allotted representatives needed for accurate representation would certainly be no more than the number of representatives that are today elected to legislatures.

Would the average man selected in such a manner be competent in statecraft if by the very law of averages he could not possess expert knowledge in economics, law, foreign affairs, and public services? This is a fair challenge to make and one which is best answered by reference to a discovery made in 1906 by Sir Francis Galton, the father of Eugenics. That year Galton visited a Fat Stock and Poultry exhibition held that year as part of his research into the science of breeding. At one stall there was an open competition to bet on the weight of a slaughtered ox. The majority of the bets were cast by the general public and not by butchers or farmers who might have drawn on specialist knowledge in judging the size and weight of the ox carcass. Galton saw the judgment of the general public in the ox competition as comparable to their votes in a general election, and he predicted that they would fail to judge the correct weight of the ox, just as he believed that the general public exercises poor judgment when they cast their ballots

at general elections. A total of 787 bets in the ox competition were cast, and Galton calculated the average using statistical methods and was surprised to find that the average of the bets was 1,197 pounds—whereas the actual weight of the ox carcass was 1,198 pounds. The crowd's judgment was essentially perfect.[4]

This crowd wisdom is highly dependent on several variables, namely diversity of information sources, independence of thought, and aggregation, e.g., tabulating up votes made under a secret ballot. Unlike betting on the weight of an ox carcass, the crowd is rendered ignorant and dumb by the modern political process. Information is filtered through the lenses of the mainstream media, and here the political discourse is largely controlled by anti-whites who own the media. White Nationalist sentiment is demonized where not censored all together, and anti-white propaganda disseminated widely. Although the secret ballot allows the individual voter to cast a ballot according to his own judgment, his decision will be swayed by mass media and powerful interest groups. They give prominence to certain candidates and make other candidates recede into the background. These variables will be examined when we explore how sortition has been used throughout history.

Ancient Greek Origins

The use of sortition began with the birth of democracy in the city-states of Ancient Greece. Lotteries played an important

part of Greek culture as it was intrinsically linked with their religion. Lot was seen by the Greeks as a means by which the gods intervened in human affairs. The Delphic Oracle used lot to appoint their priests, and in Homer's *Iliad*, Agamemnon arranged a lottery among his comrades to determine who would have the honor of fighting Hector. The outcome of the lottery was accepted as the will of the gods, but it was no doubt a shrewd political move on the part of Agamemnon to eliminate the prospect of any infighting among his ambitious generals. This essay is concerned solely with the political aspects of lot in Attica and its capital city Athens, the largest city of the Hellenic world and consequently the one that historians know most about.[5]

Sortition became an ingredient in the Athenian constitution following a turbulent period of aristocratic factionalism and tyrannical rule. In approximately 560 BC, Pisistratus, the ultimate victor in a factional power struggle among the aristocracy, became the first of a succession of tyrants who would rule Athens between 561 BC and 510 BC. Prior to this, government positions were acquired through elections, which aristocrats generally dominated owing to their wealth, connections, and influence. In this era, politics was dominated by the personal interest of individual scheming aristocrats who formed alliances with other aristocrats and built bases of support with the middle and lower classes. The ultimate aim of such cynical political maneuvering and

factionalism was to establish an autocracy of one's own.[6]

The reign of Pisistratus was perceived as beneficial for the Athenians, as the tyrant, unopposed by the aristocracy, continued the good legal protection the farmers had against maltreatment from the aristocracy that they enjoyed under the archonship of Solon. However, this was not case with Pisistratus's sons, who after 514 BC triggered a far more repressive and invasive regime than was considered tolerable. Tyranny was tolerated pragmatically on the principle that it stopped the aristocracy from exploiting the farmers; however, the tyranny itself was increasingly the source of discontent.[7]

This tyrannical rule was overthrown in 510 BC, and in the political vacuum, the old self-interested aristocratic factionalism began to reassert itself. Cleisthenes, a well-educated and ambitious aristocrat, sought high office by directly mobilizing the common people to participate in politics as equals. Whereas before most Athenians were mere camp followers of individual noble families, following Cleisthenes's reforms they participated on the basis of equality.[8]

The political reforms that Cleisthenes introduced was not implemented *ad hoc* but rather was modeled on existing democratic institutions in Corinth and Argos. Cleisthenes reorganized Attica setting up self-governing units called *demes*. Each *deme* corresponded to the size of a village,

and Athens itself was divided into several. Each *deme* had a communal council in which membership was hereditary. These *demes* appointed various local officials to administer their communal property, organize festivals, and maintain the religious cults. On the larger scale Cleisthenes organized Attica into 10 tribes or *phylae*. Each *Phylae* was both a separate military formation commanded by a *Stratego* (elected general) and a political unit which supplied 50 candidates each for the *Boule* in Athens.

The *Boule* formed a council of 500 in which every representative was appointed randomly by lot and subject to strict rotation. Each representative selected served for a term of 1 year and could not be selected twice in a row, or more than twice in total. The *Boule* was tasked to deliberate ahead of time on legislation and decrees that were to be presented to the popular assembly. Whereas the popular assembly was open theoretically to all and seated 6,000, the very size of the assembly meant that it could only be called infrequently, and although any member of the popular assembly could demand a debate on any issue, in practice debates were only called for on controversial issues such as war, peace, and ostracism. The *Boule* concentrated on the day-to-day business of government such as city improvements, taxation, budget allocation, and scrutiny of public officials and political leaders. Most bills and decrees put forward by the *Boule* were approved by the assembly

without debate.[9]

Not only could bills be initiated by the *Boule*, but any citizen with a clean record had the right to submit proposals to the *Boule*, which was then obliged to consider and pass on to the popular assembly in the form of a bill. However, when the issue was up for discussion in the popular assembly, the *Boule* could propose their amendments to the bill. All citizens had the right to speak in assembly, and in Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates confirmed that carpenters, smiths, shoemakers, merchants, ship owners, rich and poor, aristocrats, and ordinary men took the floor. As the popular assembly could seat as many as 6,000 citizens, quiet and discipline were essential to prevent the meetings from degenerating into a disorderly rabble. As a result Athens maintained a detachment of Scythian archers to enforce these conditions and on occasion to expel fools who were not acknowledged experts on technical matters such as building and ships but nevertheless pretended to pass themselves off as one. On all political matters the right to speak and a present proposals was respected.[10]

Athens had no state bureaucracy that would be recognizable today; the executive functions of the *polis* were carried out by 700 magistrates who were responsible for all the administrative and organizational needs of the *polis* from naval requisition to water and sanitation. Initially 600 of these magistrates were appointed by sortition and the

remaining 100 were appointed through election on the grounds that their work required specialist skills or experience. This included the *Strategoí*, the generals who would command the hoplite phalanxes in battle, financial officers, and those magistrates in charge of the Eleusinian mysteries.[11] As in the past, the elections were dominated by the aristocracy who continued to occupy the most prestigious posts in the government as their education, status, and connections gave them a clear advantage in the competition for votes. They also continued to play an advisory role through the *aeropagus*, which was a council made up of 300 former *archons* (the highest ranked magistrates).[12] The authority of the *aeropagus* was much reduced following the expansion of citizenship to the *thetes*, an urban class who unlike the farmers owned little or no land but formed the bulk of the manpower required by the Athenian Navy.[13]

Whether magistrates were elected or selected by lot, the *Boule* rigorously checked the accounts of each magistrate every year to guard against corruption. They also would scrutinize the performance of each magistrate in office and impose sanctions against those who failed to perform their duties. In addition, individual citizens had the right to mount court actions against those considered to be acting against the best interest of the *polis*. This ensured a high standard of public behavior in their officials considering the very low

entry barriers to political office.[14]

The final part of the Athenian constitution in which sortition played a role was in the *Dikasterion* or jury courts. Juries were selected annually from a list of 6,000 citizens by sortition. Selected from any social class, the size of the jury was most commonly 501, but this varied depending on the type of case presented before the *Dikasterion*. The courts not only dealt with commercial and criminal law, but they served a political function in delivering judgment against magistrates accused by individual citizens of corruption or incompetence and also functioned like a supreme court in testing the constitutionality of controversial laws passed by the *Boule*. Unlike in the popular assembly or *Boule*, the jury had an entirely passive role in the proceedings. They would listen to the claims and counterclaims of the contesting parties and then without deliberation deliver a yes or no verdict by secret ballot.[15]

These reforms ultimately led to the emergence of a new type of politics among the aristocracy, in which aristocratic identity was increasingly focused on serving the common good of the *polis*. These elected magistrates were selected on the grounds of competency and were held accountable to the citizens. The political leaders who emerged in Athens were not organization men whose influence depended on position within a party or alliance but rather skilled orators who aligned themselves with the interests of the majority.[16]

Sortition in Athens played a key role in diffusing the concentrations of power and factionalism that had hitherto destabilized Athens, thus enabling the formulation of policies that were in the interests of the majority of Athenians. The offices that were subject to sortition and carefully scrutinized by a representative group of Athenian citizens were an effective guard against ambitious men who would have subverted them for their own ends by establishing patronage networks for their supporters. In these respects the crowd was kept well-informed, and their choice of leaders and laws were certainly wiser than in the older system. The social position of the aristocracy became greatly reduced and it is no coincidence that the lavish burial practices of the aristocracy ceased shortly after Cleisthenes' reforms.[17] But social hierarchies, inevitable in nature, remained in Athenian society, as did significant class barriers.

Hellenistic culture was focused on great deeds and the celebration of heroic ideals, so the surviving records of this period are orientated towards this. Nevertheless it is possible to piece together enough fragments to gain a glimpse into the impact that sortition-derived democracy had upon the ordinary people of Athens. Athens possessed a rudimentary welfare system which largely dealt with both the positive and negative consequences of waging war. Grain given as tribute was distributed among the citizenry, and provision was made for children orphaned through

war.[18] Also jury duty played an important welfare role as those employed as rowers for the navy in wartime often became jurors in peacetime in return for a modest stipend. It also provided elderly Athenians with an income and so provided a measure of social security.[19]

Although the Athenian citizens did not contemplate redistribution of land from their own aristocrats, land captured from other aristocrats in war was considered fair game and divided widely among the citizenry. For example after defeating Chalcis in the 6th century BC, the land taken from the Chalcidian aristocrats was divided up among 4,000 Athenian citizens.[20]

At the same time there is evidence that the Aristocracy complained about the *Dikasterion*, which they perceived as biased against them, which is somewhat ironic considering that previously the courts were in the pockets of the aristocrats, and debtors who defaulted could find themselves seized as an asset and sold into slavery.[21]

Not only did sortition lower the threshold to office and increase the sense of self-worth of all Athenians, it also promoted stability and unity by eliminating or at least greatly reducing the factionalism and social conflict that threatened to undermine the *polis*. The Athenians were able to mobilize themselves for great collective projects, none more so than the reorganization of their military. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus credited the rise of Athens as a military

power to the new democratic form of government in Athens. He stated that when the Athenians lived under tyranny they did not excel over any of their neighbors, but when they threw off their tyranny, they became the premiere military power.[22] The Athenians constructed a new fortified harbor at Piraeus and built and trained a formidable navy. They also mobilized the entire population of Athens to construct a network of walls over 26 kilometers long to secure Attica from invasion by land. As the Athenians possessed the most powerful navy in the region at that time, their entire territory could be turned into a fortified island in the event of a siege, with their lines of communication with the rest of region protected by their navy.[23] The military prowess of the Athenians on land and sea is observed in their famous defeat of the Persian Empire at Marathon in 490 and Salamis in 480.

The defeat of the Persians led to the emergence of Athens as a hegemonic power in Greece until their defeat in the Peloponnesian War at the hands of Sparta in 404. Athens was the leading member of the Delian league, an alliance of up to 200 Greek city-states that was dedicated to liberating the Ionian Greeks from Persian domination and resisting further encroachments. The Delian League later morphed into an informal empire centered on Athens.[24] Thucydides recognized this dynamism in the Athenian Greeks stating, The Athenians are addicted to innovation and their designs

are characterized by swiftness alike in conception and execution. . . . They are adventurous beyond their power, and daring beyond their judgement, and in danger they are sanguine. . . . Their unwavering determination is matched on your side by procrastination; they are never at home, you are ever away from it [The Athenians] were born into the world to take no rest themselves and to give none to others.[25]

In terms of the scientific, philosophical, and artistic achievements of the Athens, the argument that the blind mechanism of sortition played a decisive role in this development is certainly unfounded. Such achievements have been reproduced under varied political systems. However, a case can be made that sortition was one factor in creating and maintaining a stable civil society which provided ideal conditions for these developments to arise. Western civilization's inheritance owes more to Athens than to Sparta, and the question is worth asking whether Hellenistic civilization would still have had a major impact on the history of the western world if the Athenian state merely alternated between tyranny and aristocratic oligarchy.[26]

Having considered the great achievements of Athens, one must also qualify it by stating that although sortition contributed to success of the Athenian *polis*, the Athenian constitution was far from perfect, and there were key factors which limited the democratic crowd's wisdom. The popular

assembly was not selected by sortition, but the vast numbers who attended the assembly compared to the actual population of Attica, which meant that the people were directly represented. Unlike the *Dikasterion*, citizens played an active role in the proceedings. This meant that the citizens were subject to conformist pressures, which, in controversial matters of war and peace would certainly sway the judgment of the assembly as whenever the Athenians met to discuss the merits of peace and war, the proponents of war usually won the debate. This is because opponents risked disgrace by being labeled cowards, if a majority or even a sizable minority wanted war the opponents unwilling to pay the social price of dissension found themselves easily intimidated into line.[27] In addition as citizenship was extended to the lowest *thete*, the *aeropagus*, the elite aristocratic council, was dissolved. This was a foolish move as the *aeropagus* was made up of former magistrates, *stratego*i, and diplomats who had held the highest offices and accordingly held the most political experience and knowledge, especially in foreign affairs. Soon after this political revolution, Athens canceled its alliance with Sparta and initiated a series of geopolitical realignments which ultimately resulted in the Peloponnesian War with Sparta that tore the Greek world apart and led to the fall of Athens as a great power. The twin factors of conformity and ignorance had turned what was a wise and informed crowd in domestic matters into a herd of stampeding buffalo

whenever it turned to foreign affairs.[28]

The defeat of Athens led to the first collapse of Athenian democracy and the emergence of a short-lived pro-Spartan oligarchy which became known as the rule of the thirty tyrants. Their despotic rule reminded the Athenians that whatever the fault of their democracy, it was certainly preferable to the alternative. During a single year an estimated 1,500 men were killed, and many more forced into exile.[29]

When democracy was restored in 410 BC, greater reliance was placed on sortition as a method of selection. The powers of the popular assembly were greatly reduced and those of the *Dikasterion* were increased, as the Athenians had recognized that the democratic crowd was far wiser and delivered better judgment in the *Dikasterion*, where the people sat in passive judgment, than the emotive cut and thrust of the popular assembly.

Secondly all magistrates were now to be selected by lot. This change can be explained by reference to the fact that the thirty tyrants seized power through a conspiracy within the administration. By removing the electoral element, it not only broke up centers of power to prevent another conspiracy to impose a tyranny from succeeding, but also in view of the Athenians recent traumatic history of war and repression, sortition was also intended to prevent the *polis* from disintegrating into factionalism. However, the price of

this was that positions that required professional skills and knowledge were now being filled by candidates who lacked them. This was an inappropriate use of sortition and certainly made the institution easier to demonize as the chaotic rule of incompetents.[30]

Notes

[1] Edgar Steele, *Defensive Racism* (Sagle, Id.: ProPer Press, 2005), 370.

[2] Oliver Dowlen, *The Political Potential of Sortition* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008), 12-13.

[3] Keith Sutherland, *A People's Parliament* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2008), 139-40.

[4] Sutherland, 75.

[5] Dowlen, 33.

[6] Christian Meier, *Athens: A Portrait of the City in its Golden Age* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), 71.

[7] Meier, 81.

[8] Meier, 82-83.

[9] Meier, 164-67.

[10] Meier, 414-15.

[11] Dowlen, 35.

[12] Meier, 179-80.

[13] Meier, 288-300.

[14] Dowlen, 38.

[15] Dowlen, 417-18.

[16] Dowlen, 286.

[17] Dowlen, 187.

[18] Dowlen, 428.

[19] Dowlen, 333.

[20] Dowlen, 184.

[21] Dowlen, 419.

[22] Dowlen, 86.

[23] Dowlen, 316.

[24] Dowlen, 257-58.

[25] Dowlen, 304.

[26] Dowlen, 309.

[27] Dowlen, 239.

[28] Dowlen, 313.

[29] Dowlen, 586-87.

[30] Dowlen, 58-59.