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A Spirited and Nativist Democracy – The Occidental Observer

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21-26 minutes





Pericles, Athenian leader at the city's zenith

The Persian Empire was driven by a certain logic, certain feedback loops pertaining to domestic conditions and foreign relations, which led to that great state's steady expansion.[\[1\]](#)

The waves of this expansion were finally dashed on the rocks of Greek freedom, embodied in the city-states of Athens and Sparta. Athens and Sparta themselves were each driven by their own logic, their own virtuous circles of power, which defeated the Persian logic in Europe. If Persian power was that of a multinational military monarchy, a culture of empire, Greek power was that of patriotic, fractious little republics, defined by civic freedom.

The particular form of civic freedom and the virtuous circle of power at Sparta were very different however than those at Athens. At Sparta, a rigorous communitarian discipline was maintained by the demands of lordship, the need for the society to be constantly militarily organized to guard against the threat of rebellion by the enslaved Helots. The result was centuries of stability and regional power. At Athens, the virtuous circle of international trade and naval power led to rapid and constant demographic and imperial expansion, resulting in a short-lived empire which almost achieved hegemony in the eastern Mediterranean. Athens also underwent a stunningly creative artistic and philosophical

flourishing with few rivals in all human history.

Athens and Sparta seem to embody a recurring dialectic in Western history: between sea-power, commerce, democracy, individualism, and technology on the one hand, and land-power, autarky, hierarchy, community, and discipline on the other.

The verdict of the philosophers and men of the Right has generally been harsh towards Athens: a regime characterized by excessive democracy, individualism, and belly-chasing. Nonetheless, the fact is that Athens was a uniquely dynamic and powerful state, and one which even as a democracy still embodied or honored many wider Hellenic virtues. The political works of Athens' great lawgivers and statesmen, such as Solon, Cleisthenes, and Pericles, are not without ethnopolitical content. Athenian democracy was founded on family, patriarchy, community, military courage, ancestry, and an intense patriotism. One scholar has gone so far as to argue that the role of ancestry was so pronounced that Athenian democracy was based on an early notion of "racial citizenship."^[2]

The Athenian regime significantly evolved over time, fluctuating between tyranny and more-or-less democratic forms of republican government. In the early sixth century BC, Solon reformed the city and was later credited with establishing its democratic tendency. The Assembly (*Ekklesia*), which made day-to-day decisions with a quorum

of 6,000 attendants, and the juries were opened to all free male citizens. However, Solon's regime was a 'moderate' democracy, maintaining property qualifications and thus restricting certain political offices to the rich. Solon's poems emphasize law, community, balance between rich and poor, equality before the law, and frugality.

Solon also abolished existing private and public debts and banned usurious loans for which the penalty for defaulting was enslavement. In his poems, Solon condemns the nation-shattering effects of usury and poverty, which lead unfree citizens to wander the world, homeless:

For if men injure their own people, they soon find their lovely city scarred and faction-torn. Among the people these evils roam at large, and many of the poor folk find themselves in foreign lands, sold into slavery, and bound in shameful bonds . . . [3]

And many to Athena's holy land I brought back, sold abroad illegally or legally, and others whom their debts had forced to leave, their speech no longer Attic [i.e. Athenian], so great their wanderings . . . [4]

The abolition of debt and the struggle against usury were then integral to the founding of Athenian democracy, that early great experiment in participatory politics.

Solon's reforms were pursued further in the late sixth century by Cleisthenes, who really gave Athens her fully

democratic character. Treasurers and members of the annually-rotating the Council of Five-Hundred (*Boule*) —effectively the city’s government in charge of enforcing the decisions of the Assembl— were chosen by lot, a measure aimed at reducing corruption and giving the people the most direct say possible. Generals however continued to be elected by the people, an electoral system which was said to favor the rich. The tradition of ostracism was instituted, whereby a plurality of citizens could exile anyone for ten years, a practice which was supposed to increase stability by temporarily neutralizing potentially dangerous leaders. Cleisthenes also sought to reinforce a sense of common Athenian identity by replacing traditional family names with ten new names based purely on geographical district (*deme*).

The importance of familial and religious piety in the Athenian democracy, as in all Greek city-states, is apparent from the questions addressed to those being considered for political office:

When they are examined, they are asked, first, “Who is your father, and of what *deme*? Who is your father’s father? Who is your mother? Who is your mother’s father, and of what *deme*?” Then the candidate is asked whether he possesses an ancestral Apollo or a household Zeus, and where their sanctuaries are; next if he possesses a family tomb, and where; then if he treats his parents well, and pays his taxes,

and has served on the required military expeditions.

(Pseudo-Aristotle, *Athenian Constitution*, 2.2.14-55)

Thus, those who failed in their familial, religious, or military duties were not considered eligible for service of the State.

The most famous Athenian statesman is no doubt Pericles, who presided over the city's Golden Age as a democracy and an empire. Pericles was a great orator who was regularly reelected to serve as general in the military.

Something of a populist, he combined democratic, socialistic, and exclusionary policies. Pericles sought to educate the poor and increase their political participation by subsidizing theater tickets and jury-duty, which simple craftsmen would otherwise have found too costly to attend. Among the plays one could attend was Aeschylus' *Persians*, which had been partly financed by Pericles, celebrating Athens' triumph at the Battle of Salamis with the battle cry: "O sons of Greece, go on! Free your fatherland, and free your children, your wives, and the shrines of your paternal gods, and the tombs of your ancestors! Now the struggle is for all!" (*Persians*, 401–05).

Over the course of the Persian Wars, Athens established a large military alliance-cum-empire composed principally of coastal and island cities in the Aegean. Pericles used the wealth from Athens' maritime empire to finance a great public works program, which created ancient Greece's most iconic surviving architectural masterpiece: the Parthenon.

In the face of a massive wave of immigration driven by Athens' economic prosperity, citizenship was restricted to those with two Athenian parents. This restriction not only enabled Athens to provide more benefits to her citizens but was also aimed at increasing group loyalty. As Melissa Lane observes: "While that measure might sound more restricting than democratizing, it was aimed at curbing the elite's habits of inter-city kin and friendship marriages, which, in the eyes of democrats, watered down elite allegiance to Athens to suspiciously low levels."[\[5\]](#)

The most eloquent defense of the Athenian regime is no doubt that given by Pericles in his famous and moving Funeral Oration. This speech, as recorded in an idealized version by Thucydides, was given in celebration of the war dead in the early days of the Peloponnesian War (against Sparta). The Oration affirms the democracy's virtues: rule in the interests of the majority, individual freedom, meritocracy without concern for wealth, a lively cultural and intellectual life of games and festivals, a relatively open society without secrecy or systematic eviction of foreigners, the importation of a huge variety of foreign goods, and free speech and debate. At the same time, Pericles stressed that these freedoms have not made the Athenians weaker than the more sternly-educated and austere Spartans, and that the country had maximal self-sufficiency.

Pericles proudly affirmed the specificity of Athens'

democratic way of life: “We are unique in the way we regard anyone who takes no part in public affairs: we do not call that a quiet life, we call it a useless life” (Thucydides, 2.40). At the same time, this was an emphatically manly ideal of citizenship: “You should now seek to emulate these men [the fallen]. Realize that happiness is freedom, and freedom is courage” (Thu., 2.43). This simultaneously participatory and manly ideal of citizenship was, no doubt, a major source of Athens’ power and dynamism.

Pericles’s Oration also eloquently appealed to the ethnopolitical aspects of Athenian citizenship. The Oration in fact begins by honoring the ancestors who had built Athens and the empire:

I shall begin with our ancestors first of all. It is right, and also appropriate on such an occasion, that this tribute should be paid to their memory. The same race has always occupied this land, passing it on from generation to generation until the present day, and it is to these brave men that we owe our inheritance of a land that is free. (Thu., 2.36)

Pericles praised the honor gained in war as far more valuable than individual wealth. He, strikingly, consoled the parents of those who had already fallen and then urged them to have yet more children as a social duty:

Those of you who are still of an age to bear children should hold firm to the hope of further sons. In their own lives some will find that new children help them forget those they have

lost, and for the city there will be a double benefit — both maintenance of the population and also a safeguard, since those without children at stake do not face the same risks as the others and cannot make a balanced or judicious contribution to debate. (Thu., 2.44)

The final comment is an interesting one, asserting that the childless, having less responsibilities, are to that extent less fit for citizenship because they have less concern for the long-term prospects of the city.

Athens therefore reflected the widespread Greek assumption that those who sustained the community, especially biologically and militarily, could rightly claim to have a say in politics. The anonymous author of the fourth-century pamphlet *The Constitution of the Athenians*, conventionally named ‘the Old Oligarch’ in the English-speaking world, was highly critical of the Athenian democracy and empire. But he could concede that at Athens “the poor and the people generally are right to have more than the highborn and wealthy for the reason that it is the people who man the ships and impart strength to the city” (*Constitution of the Athenians*, 1.2).

Pericles asserted he gave the speech to the benefit both of citizens and to metics (mostly Greek resident foreigners), and claimed that “our city as a whole is an education to Greece . . . That this is no passing puff but factual reality is proved by the very power of the city: this character of ours

built that power” (Thu., 2.41). He presented Athens as a model to the wider Greek nation, something which also had a certain reality, insofar as the city was indeed the cultural leader of Greece. However, for all the talk of protecting, educating, and leading Greece, it seems never to have occurred to the Athenians to give their colonial subjects a say through a federal government. Periclean Athens was a decidedly chauvinist democracy, a particularly brittle empire, prone to collapse in a wave of secessionist rebellions.



From fairly early on, Athenian democracy became tinged with what Susan Lape calls a “racial ideology.”[\[6\]](#) Whereas Herodotus had argued that the Athenian population was the product of a mixing between Hellenic settlers and Pelasgian natives, the Athenians claimed to be racially pure in contrast with the other Greeks, having supposedly sprung from the Attic soil as true *autochtones*. As the fourth-century orator

Isocrates said:

It is admitted that our city is the oldest and the greatest in the world and in the eyes of all men the most renowned. But noble as is the foundation of our claims, the following grounds give us even a clearer title to distinction: for we did not become dwellers in this land by driving others out of it, nor by finding it uninhabited, nor by coming together here a motley horde composed of many races; but we are of a lineage so noble and so pure that throughout our history we have continued in possession of the very land which gave us birth, since we are sprung from its very soil and are able to address our city by the very names which we apply to our nearest kin; for we alone of all the Hellenes have the right to call our city at once nurse and fatherland and mother.

(4.23–25)

The Athenians, Isocrates insisted, “were not of mixed origin” (12.124). Autochthony is also affirmed and questioned in the surviving fragments of Euripides’ play *Erechtheus* and in Plato’s dialogue *Menexenus*. While claims to autochthony must be considered mythical, this widely-held belief underpinned Athenian citizenship and patriotism. The myth of autochthony justified exclusion or participation in the benefits of Athenian democracy, exhorted the citizens to be worthy of their lineage and forefathers, and demanded sacrifice for what was thought to be their literal motherland. Athens’ radical and unique experiment in direct democratic

politics and citizenship was grounded in a strong racial identity and pride in one's lineage.

The Virtuous Circle of Athenian Power: Trade, Ships, & Empire

The combination of individual liberty, social mobility, manliness, and patriotism inherent in the ideal of Athenian democracy gave that city a fundamentally different foundation to her power than Sparta's. Athens' rise to hegemony began with the expansion of the Athenian fleet and the liberation of island-dwelling and Asiatic Greeks during the Persian Wars. Herodotus is clear that Athens played the greater role in defeating the Persians, fighting more battles both at land and at sea. He expresses "an opinion [which] will offend a great many people . . . the Athenians proved themselves the saviors of Greece" (Herodotus, 7.139.). These victories entrenched a powerful virtuous circle of commerce, sea-power, demographic expansion, and empire. Athens became *the* commercial, migratory, and cognitive node of the ancient Mediterranean. The population swelled to 250,000—enormous for a Greek city.

Only Athens had sufficient funds and population to create a critical, self-sustaining mass of naval power large enough to police both the surrounding seas and the Aegean Greeks. The latter became dependencies of Athens, providing either ships or coin, thus magnifying again Athenian power.[\[7\]](#) A

sizable percentage of Athenian citizens were employed in what was, in effect, a vast military-industrial complex, as administrators, jurymen, ship-builders, and as workers on public projects. Athens' alliance, the Delian league, gradually morphed into an Athenian empire in which membership was no longer voluntary and recalcitrant members were crushed. Athens' centralized empire was both more coercive and more administratively advanced in terms of taxation and the judiciary than Sparta. We should not exaggerate the degree of individual freedom and equality at Athens: colonial subjects, slaves, house-bound women, and metics were deprived of political rights. Athens was also something of a caste society, albeit not to the same degree as Sparta.

Athens embodied the long-term superiority of dynamic, commercial, democratic-individualist, and technologically-advanced systems over static, austere, hierarchical-communitarian, and primitive ones. The democratic-individualists tend to be far more dynamic and expansive in peacetime, while at the same time they were able to adopt sufficiently hierarchical-communitarian characteristics in wartime. Great Britain and the United States have been characterized by a similar liberal dynamism to that of Athens, a dynamism which has overwhelmed Continental Europe, but which no doubt was only possible because these two nations were protected by the seas. In the Peloponnesian War in contrast, Sparta triumphed over

Athens, tearing down her city walls and abolishing her empire. Pericles once asked rhetorically: “if we were an island, could any be more invulnerable than us?” (Thu., 1.143) To which the Spartans could no doubt have answered: “If . . .”

Athens’ cognitive and cultural pull is evident from the numerous foreign philosophers and sophists who came to the city from the mainland—Ionia, Cyprus, the Black Sea Coast, southern Italy, and elsewhere: Anaxagoras, Democritus, Protagoras, Aristotle, Diogenes, Zeno, and Epicurus are just some of the great names who established themselves there, in both classical and later times. Athens’ cultural leadership would long outlast her military-commercial empire.

Given Athens’ relative freedom of speech and intellectual fertility as the Mediterranean’s central cultural node, one can certainly understand those Athenians who were frustrated with the ever-critical philosophers, such as Socrates, who might have been told: “You did not choose to go to Sparta or to Crete, which you are always saying are well governed” (Plato, *Crito*, 53a). Only a handful of Athenians ever went to live in much-praised Sparta, namely Tyrtaeus, who became the Spartan national poet, and Xenophon, who had his children educated there.

Until quite recently, Western thinkers both ancient and modern have tended to be critical of democracy, that rare

phenomenon which had so conspicuously existed at Athens. [8] We must be aware and critical of democracy's flaws. At the same time, we must not be blind to the very real virtues of the Athenian regime, which after all combined dynamism, power, equality of opportunity, intellectual inquiry, and cultural fecundity to a degree rarely seen in human history. Athenian democracy fostered, at the individual level, that spirit of experimentation and enterprise without which there can be no learning. If both Sparta and Athens made great and comparable political accomplishments, culturally there is no contest. The Golden Age of Greece as we know it was largely an Athenian phenomenon.

Democracy certainly presents risks, in terms of cultural decline, of rejection of necessary disciplines, of failure to recognize harsh truths, let alone higher Truth. In the contemporary postwar era, certainly, democracy seems to mean an oscillation between obesity and effeminacy. Nonetheless, there is no denying the collective power and dynamism which, in the right conditions, flows from the willing, democratic participation of the citizens. The challenge for republics is to secure the buy-in and collective wisdom enabled by widespread civic participation while guarding against the gradual leveling and loss of virtue caused by excessive egalitarianism and individualism. Ideally, each citizen's degree of influence over the polity should be exactly that amount which promotes the common

good, which would be proportional to his wisdom and virtue.

Athenian power derived from the city's particular combination of democratic dynamism and the wider communitarian, competitive, and spirited character of Greek society and culture. At Athens, individual freedom and direct democracy were embedded in a familial, religious, communal, martial, patriotic, and even racial ideal of citizenship which gave pride of place to parents and soldiers. In short, ancient Athens' civic ideal was a decidedly spirited and biopolitical one.

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[1] Yuval Harari has said that organisms can be likened to algorithms, complex mathematical formula. The same could be said for nations and states, which are highly complex social organizations characterized by innumerable feedback loops.

[2] Susan Lape, *Race and Citizen Identity in Classical Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ix.

[3] M. L. West (trans.), *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), “Solon,” 4.

[4] *Ibid.*, 36.

[5] Melissa Lane, *Greek and Roman Political Ideas* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 102.

[6] Lape, *Race and Citizen Identity*, p. 59.

[7] The Old Oligarch writes on Athens’ ability as a

maritime empire to keep her subjects weak and divided:

Someone might say that the Athenians' strength consists in the allies' ability to pay tribute-money; but the rabble thinks it more advantageous for each one of the Athenians to possess the resources of the allies and for the allies themselves to possess only enough for survival and to work without being able to plot defection. (*Constitution of the Athenians*, 1.15)

[S]ubject peoples on land can combine small cities and fight collectively, but subject peoples at sea, by virtue of being islanders, cannot join their cities together into the same unit. For the sea is in the way, and those now in power are thalassocrats. (*Constitution of the Athenians*, 2.2)

[8] See Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).