



Democracy's Dangers & Discontents

*The Tyranny of the Majority
from the Greeks to Obama*

Bruce S. Thornton

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For Esau Kane Thornton
At tibi prima, puer, munuscula

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FOREWORD

Bruce Thornton has written a number of books about the history and nature of democratic government in the past and present, especially the dangerous tendency of majority-rule societies to embrace a therapeutic mindset rather than to accept the tragic limitations of the human condition (*Plagues of the Mind: The New Epidemic of False Knowledge*).

Thornton sees limited, republican government as the salvation of civilized societies, but he has also warned that through affluence and license consensual societies can ossify into self-gratification and indifference to their own long-term health and viability (*Decline and Fall: Europe's Slow Motion Suicide*, written well before the European Union financial crisis).

In the recent *The Wages of Appeasement: Ancient Athens, Munich, and Obama's America*, Thornton turned to complacent democracies' unfortunate habit of shorting defense spending and finding themselves unable to deter aggressive and authoritarian states. Now, in *Democracy's Danger and Discontents: The Tyranny of the Majority from the Greeks to Obama*, Thornton has combined those prior investigations of democratic maladies, both their internal and external affairs, into a comprehensive explanation of the cause of these disturbing symptoms of majority rule. What follows is a 2,500-year annotated exploration about why and how democracies seem to implode—and the correctives for their excesses offered by brilliant ancient and modern observers.

There are plenty of examples of democratic excess—and dire warnings about it—in the life and thought of Western civilization. Thucydides's wartime Athenians ordered the execution of all the Mytileneans one day, and not quite all of them the next. Plato abhorred rule by the majority. The trajectory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's call to arms that "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains" ended with the French Revolution's *Comité de salut public*. Alexis de Tocqueville hoped that perhaps America's unique homestead farmer and an autonomous middle class might check the passions on a fickle underclass. *Democracy's Danger and Discontents* adds lots more examples of democracy's strengths but also its myriad excesses. Whereas faces change, causes come and go, crises appear and reappear, the problems of radically democratic societies stay the same. Why do such governments, so ideal in theory, so often—to borrow an earlier Thornton phrase—commit slow motion suicide in fact?

Most of what modern egalitarians chafe at in our own system of government—the Electoral College, the allotment of two senators per state regardless of population size, the Second Amendment—are the constitutional remnants of the Founding Fathers' worries that a *demos* might degenerate into an *ochlos*, a veritable mob demanding that its always increasing appetites be met by the state.

contrast, republican government, representative government, and constitutional government were the Founders' solutions to square the circle of ensuring consent of the governed while protecting property, unpopular expression, and minority rights.

Bruce Thornton is also a research fellow at the Hoover Institution and a member of our Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict, which seeks to make sense of contemporary national security issues in light of the history of the past. *Democracy's Danger and Discontents* repeatedly warns about the predictable populist hatred for the better off, the capricious nature of direct voting that was so often predicated on gifted speakers rousing the crowd to fury, and the inevitable lowering of standards to ensure the widest participation of the populace in civic and public life. That said, Thornton is most concerned about the consistent democratic tendency to show collective defense in favor of subsidies for the people. These indulgences, Thornton reminds us, can lead to a society that equates each drachma, sestertius, or euro invested in a hoplite, legionary, or NATO jet as one less devoted to ensuring free admission to the theater, a supplement to the daily grain dole, or a cost-of-living increase in a government pension.

The democratic desire to cut defense and expand redistributive payouts to the citizenry might explain why the descendants of the heroes of Salamis could not stop Philip of Macedon. The latter, like the Persians a century and a half earlier, invaded from the north, but this time successfully with an army only a tenth of the size that had failed under Xerxes. Rome of the fifth century AD—a million square miles, seventy million citizens—could not stop the onslaughts of motley tribes crossing the Rhine and Danube, though their far poorer and less numerous Republican ancestors defeated Hannibal, the greatest military genius of his age.

Thornton argues that nothing much has changed in the new twenty-first century. Yet he is even more worried that consumption and entitlements are now energized as never before by the advent of modernism and high technology, the former offering the rationale for spending what you do not have and the latter the means of even more addictive gratification.

In the high-tech, nuclear age, there is less margin of error than in the Athens of Cleon or the Rome of Caesar and Brutus. Shorting defense these days can lead to nuclear Armageddon, serial 9/11-like attacks, or the collapse of entire computer systems that run the United States. Providing expanded entitlements for tens of millions of Americans can lead to chronic \$1 trillion deficits that end national security altogether—debts of a magnitude that might astonish even bread-and-circus Romans.

Cheap consumer goods and electronics mean that poverty is no longer Dickensian, given that the urban impoverished have more computing power in their readily accessible iPhones than did Silicon Valley aristocrats just ten years prior. The poor of Rome or Paris may have agitated for bread; today, American poverty is mostly a relative condition. It matters little whether today's high-tech entry-level Kia is accessible to the poor and a far better automobile than yesterday's top-of-the-line Mercedes—some people still must settle for Kias while the 1 percent enjoy an updated and more impressive Mercedes.

Thornton warns of a world where standards always relax, rarely tighten, minimal responsibilities

give way to greater rights, budgets grow more than shrink, and an intrusive state becomes all the more intrusive. He also cautions that acknowledging these tendencies—and the brilliant critics of them—is not the same as curtailing them. The end of democratic society is reached not when petroleum is exhausted or soils depleted or the atmosphere artificially warmed, but when we reach a state of egalitarian ennui, and the passive citizen remains unconvinced that his own democracy is any better than the alternative. At that point the public purse is usually exhausted, and what were once minor challenges become existential obstacles that cannot be overcome.

Democracy's Danger and Discontents offers a spirited defense of constitutional government with a warning that its enemies are more likely found within ourselves than abroad—and that being equal matters little if we are not first free and safe.

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The Triumph of Democracy and the Antidemocratic Tradition

On Christmas Day 1991, the hammer-and-sickle of the USSR that had flown above the Kremlin for over seven decades was lowered and replaced by the tricolor flag of Russia. In those few moments the Soviet Union, the nuclear-armed communist superpower that had challenged and threatened the liberal democracies of the West, was left in the dustbin of history that its rulers had long predicted would be the fate of liberal democracy. For many, the end of the Cold War, which had been cast as a conflict between democratic freedom and totalitarian servitude, was more than just one nation's victory over an undemocratic regime and a repudiation of domestic challenges such as socialism or the antidemocratic New Left of the 1960s and '70s.

The victory over the Soviet Union was also the vindication of liberal democracy and freedom as the “single principle,” as political philosopher Pierre Manent calls it, the universal political system most suited for the modern capitalist societies to which all the world's people presumably aspire.¹ In subsequent decades the expansion of democracies across the globe seemingly confirmed this optimism. According to Freedom House, in 1989, when the Eastern bloc broke from the Soviet Union and began its dissolution, there were 69 electoral democracies. Today, there are 117.² More recently many greeted the “Arab Spring,” the uprisings and revolutions that started in December 2010 in the Middle East, as yet another expansion of democracy and a sign of its inevitable triumph.

The disappearance of the last major challenge to democracy and the latter's apparent global expansion have enhanced democracy's prestige, giving it what historian Michael Mandelbaum calls the “the best of good names,” a form of government “honored and valued everywhere” with “the same kind of aura that surrounds medicine,” and esteemed as “a high human achievement that improves the lives of those fortunate enough to come into contact with it.”³ This universal reputation has culminated the two-century-long elevation of popular government into the only acceptable form of government, and democracy promotion a noble foreign policy goal, a belief still powerful in the twenty-first century despite the recent evidence that internationally democracy is in retreat, as Joshua Kurlantzick documents.⁴

Democracy indeed is an astonishing historical phenomenon. That political freedom and citizen equality, liberal democracy's most important goals, should have arisen at all in the city-states of ancient Greece of the eighth century BC is a remarkable occurrence. The notion that free citizen

collectively rule and exercise autonomy over their lives based on laws, offices, and the distribution of power through neutral electoral procedures and public accountability is equally bizarre in the context of the other civilizations of antiquity. More typical was the pyramidal power-structures of empires such as Egypt or Persia, in which kings and tiny elites monopolized force and resources and ruled the societies as personal possessions—societies in which the mass of people were coerced, unfree subjects, in contrast to the self-governing free citizens of the Greek city-states.

Yet democracy—the empowerment of all male citizens regardless of birth or wealth—was just one form of constitutional government invented by the ancient Greeks. And it was the one most criticized and feared even before the fall of Athenian democracy in the late fourth century BC seemingly confirmed democracy’s fatal flaws. Indeed, until the early nineteenth century, as a form of government “democracy” was looked on as dangerously unstable, prone to violent upheaval, class warfare, and the redistribution of property that followed from endowing the mass of people, Alexander Hamilton’s “great beast,” with political power.⁵

From the perspective of the antidemocratic tradition, today’s idealization of democracy is itself remarkable. This tradition began with the history of the world’s first democracy, ancient Athens. The failures and excesses of the Athenians, particularly their oppressive imperial rule over other Greek cities, and their near-destruction after the Peloponnesian War with Sparta, seemingly validated the dangers of radical popular rule. This criticism set the tone for subsequent political philosophers, giving point to historian J. S. McClelland’s observation, “It could almost be said that political theorizing was *invented* to show that democracy, the rule of men by themselves, necessarily turns into rule by the mob.” Thus the tradition of Western political theory began with a “profoundly antidemocratic bias.”⁶ Any admiration of Athens was limited to its artistic, literary, and philosophical achievements, or the lives and deeds of a few historical figures like Solon, Themistocles, and Pericles—and even those heroes at times were tarnished by their involvement in the creation of Athenian democracy. When it came to practical government, for most political theorists the mixed constitution of Sparta or Rome were considered better models, and for some even monarchy was preferred to democracy.

Despite this long antidemocratic tradition, seldom have today’s champions of democracy acknowledged its complexities and flaws. However, from the ancient Greeks to the framers of the US Constitution, that tradition raised numerous questions. Are the people wise or knowledgeable enough to be entrusted with political power? Can they resist the wiles and manipulations of demagogues? Can elected officials pursue the long-term good of the state when they are accountable to those who put them in office, and who often seek the gratification of their own short-term interests and passions? Do the verbal processes of deliberation and decision-making among a multitude of voters render democracy even more vulnerable to demagoguery? Will not the people use their political power and control of institutions to redistribute property from the rich to the poor? Can a democracy, focused on it is on the short-term interests of the people, and dependent on the decision-making of the masses, armed with the vote and able to hold politicians accountable, conduct foreign policy effectively? Are

finally, do not the political freedom and equality of opportunity pursued by democracy inevitably degenerate into appetitive license and radical egalitarianism, and create the demand that government power be used to satisfy both?

The American founders, schooled in this tradition, recognized all these dangers and sought to avoid them by creating the mixed government of the Constitution. The power of the people to elect direct their representatives was limited to the House of Representatives. The remaining officials, including senators, the president, and the Supreme Court, were elected indirectly to provide an institutional “filtering” that would temper the interests and passions of individuals and factions in order to find virtuous and wise leaders, and to check the power of the majority over the minority, and the power of elites over the majority. The innate hunger for power in all people, whether taken in the mass or elites defined by wealth or birth, would then be held in check, their factional interests limiting each other, so that the federal government could not become the instrument of tyranny. And tyranny was the great fear of democracy’s critics going back to the ancient Athenians. Give the masses power, and they will be so corrupted by license and egalitarianism that the first tyrant who offers to restore order will seize power by promising the people to redistribute wealth from the rich.

Starting with the first term of Thomas Jefferson in 1800, the democratic sentiments that had been held in check by the Constitution began to seek more scope. The great transformation, however, came with the Progressive movement of the late nineteenth century. The Constitution of checks and balances founded on a mistrust of human nature and its passions and interests was rejected as outmoded given the unprecedented changes wrought by science, technology, and industrialism. The power of the federal government had to increase in order to solve the numerous problems created by these changes. The Constitutional “filters” that helped limit the people from precipitately acting on their self-interests and passions, like the election of senators by state legislatures that was an important expression of federalism and state sovereignty, were weakened or eliminated. As the twentieth century progressed, under the stress of depression and war federal power expanded and created a coercive regulatory regime, an incursion upon citizen autonomy sweetened by the redistribution of property from the well off through the income tax and entitlement transfers.

Since the New Deal legislation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Great Society programs of Lyndon B. Johnson, the Leviathan entitlement state has continued to expand. The republic of the founders has become more democratic, but it is a “Potemkin democracy,” as James Kalb puts it, in which political freedom has become hedonistic license, while self-government and individual autonomy have been diminished by a powerful federal government, transformations made palatable by social welfare transfers.⁷ This epochal change from the constitutional order of the founders in our own time has been made easier by modern developments that have perpetuated and worsened the flaws of democracy long catalogued by the antidemocratic tradition. As a result, we have created the “soft despotism” prophesized by Alexis de Tocqueville as the great danger of modern democracy.⁸

Many of democracy’s flaws, from ancient Athens to the modern United States, can be traced to the perennial weaknesses and flaws of human nature that freedom and popular rule unleash. An uncritical

view of democracy, then, is a kind of utopianism that ignores the tragic nature of human beings, the propensity to be driven by passions and interests rather than reason and the good. As such it can lead to policies doomed to failure because that destructive capacity of human nature is ignored and idealized. The critics of democracy from Athens to the US founding all started with a tragic view of human nature and its self-destructive passions, selfish interests, and propensity to let both override reason and fact.

Yet as the US government has evolved away from its Republican origins into something closer to Athenian democracy, the dangers and flaws of democracy acknowledged by critics for twenty-five hundred years have become more evident. Nor does it help, as classicist Loren Samons writes, that many people within the US population are confused about the type of government under which they live, a representative republic designed to protect freedom against the excesses of popular rule as well as elite dominance. In contrast, today “we believe we live in a democracy [and] we also have come to act, and to expect our political leaders and system to act, as if our government *is* a democracy (traditionally defined) and as if the popular will represents a moral ‘good’ in society.”⁹ And as the government has indeed evolved and institutionalized some of the flaws of direct democracy first analyzed in the history of ancient Athens, this confusion undermines the founders’ architecture of mixed government, federalism, and the balance of power that in part was designed to check the excesses of popular government inevitably given the passions and interests of human nature.

An uncritical promotion of democracy, then, as a self-evident good beyond argument or caveat, reflects the modern belief in a universal, rational human nature continually progressing beyond the destructive behaviors and passions that have marred human history and that trouble the world today. History offers little evidence that such improvement has indeed taken place, or that the suspicion that either a minority or a majority monopolizing power that underlay the crafting of the Constitution is no longer necessary. The aim of this book is to recover that forgotten antidemocratic tradition and its tragic vision of human nature, and to show that the dangers and discontents of democracy still afflict us today—not, as Tocqueville wrote, “to render it weak and indolent, but solely to prevent it from abusing its aptitude and strength.”¹⁰

1. In *Democracy without Nations?*, trans. Paul Seaton (Wilmington, DE, 2007), 83.

2. “Freedom in the World 2012–2013”

http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/Electoral%20Democracy%20Numbers%20FIW%201989-2012–Draft_0.pdf.

3. In *Democracy’s Good Name* (New York, 2007), 96.

4. In *Democracy in Retreat* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2013).

5. Attributed to Hamilton in *The Memoirs of Theophilus Parsons* (1859); in Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*, abr. and ed. Ernest Samuels (Chicago and London, 1967), 65.

6. In *The Crowd and the Mob* (London and Boston, 1989), 1–2.

7. James Kalb, *The Tyranny of Liberalism* (Wilmington, DE, 2008), 46.

8. *Democracy in America*, ed. Philip Bradley, rev. Frances Bowen (New York, 1994), vol. 2, 316.

9. *What’s Wrong with Democracy?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004), 5.

10. *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, 323.

CHAPTER ONE

The Monitory Failures of Athenian Democracy

The town I come from is controlled
By one man, not a mob. And there is no one
To puff it up with words, for private gain,
Swaying it this way, that way. Such a man
First flatters it with wealth of favors; then
He does it harm, but covers up his blunders
By blaming other men, and goes scot-free.
The people is no right judge of arguments;
Then how can it give right guidance to a city?
A poor man, working hard, could not attend
To public matters, even if ignorance
Were not his birthright. When a wretch, a nothing,
Obtains respect and power from the people
By talk, his betters sicken at the sight.

—Euripides, *The Suppliant Women*¹

Around the eighth century BC the Greeks invented the idea of constitutional government.² Rather than rule by force that elites monopolized, the governments of the ancient polis or city-state dispersed the power to rule throughout the whole community of free citizen males, who collectively governed not by coercion and force controlled by men and imposed on subjects, but by laws, institutions, offices, public deliberation, and political protocols determining the scope and limits of a power now belonging to the citizenry. This citizen community was the ultimate arbiter of the state's actions, and recognized no earthly power or authority above popular sovereignty. The autonomy of the citizens in turn made them free. The Athenian orator Lysias around 400 idealized these innovative elements of constitutional government in a funeral oration. The founders of democracy, Lysias says, believed “the liberty of all to be the strongest bond of agreement; by sharing with each other the hopes born of the perils they had freedom of soul in their civic life, and used law for honoring the good and punishing the evil. For they deemed that it was the way of wild beasts to be held subject to one another by force, but the duty of men to delimit justice by law, to convince by reason, and to serve these two in act by submitting to the sovereignty of law and the instruction of reason.”³

Not every free male, of course, could be a citizen. In the some thousand city-states of ancient Greece, citizenship could be limited to the few or expanded to the many. Some city-states were ruled by oligarchies of various stripes, with citizenship frequently defined by property qualifications or by

birth. Others broadened the base of citizenship, and these were called “democracy,” rule by the “many” or more accurately the *demos*, “masses.” By the mid-fifth century in Athens, the “many” comprised about one-sixth of the whole population, the thirty to forty thousand adult males, whether rich or poor, noble or commoner, proven to be born of a free Athenian mother and father. This was what Aristotle called “extreme democracy,” in which birth to Athenian parents was the only requirement for citizenship, and the more numerous poor dominated. As Aristotle writes, “Where the poor rule, that is a democracy.” This empowerment of the poor was an “astonishing novelty,” a historian Moses Finley observed, unprecedented for that time.⁴

More important, these citizens, whatever their class or birth, did not just have the right to vote, but they directly managed the state, being eligible with some few exceptions to serve in every public office and board that ran the city, and personally to participate in all political and judicial institutions and public deliberations that determined policy and held politicians accountable. As Pericles says of Athens in his Funeral Oration delivered at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War in 430 BC: “Advancement in public life falls to reputation for capacity, class considerations not being allowed to interfere with merit; nor again does poverty bar the way, if a man is able to serve the state, he is not hindered by the obscurity of his condition.”⁵ Such a government was literally rule “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

The main organs of Athenian direct rule were the Assembly, the Council of 500, the law courts, and the numerous offices and boards responsible for the day-to-day functioning of the city and for executing both domestic and foreign policy. The Assembly was the gathering of several thousand citizens that met about forty times a year. There each citizen in attendance had the right to speak, make motions, and vote on all the policies of the state whether major or minor, domestic or foreign. The agenda for the Assembly meeting was prepared by the Council, five hundred citizens, fifty members from each of the ten Athenian “tribes” chosen by lot to serve for the whole year. For one of the ten months in the Athenian calendar each tribal contingent, the “prytany,” prepared the motions or open questions to be put before the Assembly. The law courts also were in the control of ordinary citizens rather than professional judges or prosecutors. Each year six thousand citizens were enrolled by lot into the jury pool, which provided the several hundred randomly chosen jurymen to hear a particular case, determine which laws applied, and vote on guilt or innocence. These cases resulted from indictments brought by citizens, and included, with a few exceptions, not just criminal and civil complaints but also political charges as well. Finally, nearly seven hundred magistrates, the majority chosen by lot and most serving a one-year term, managed the daily running of the state in matters including war, diplomacy, finance, public works and buildings, religious festivals, and theatrical presentations. At the end of their terms, they would be subjected to an “accounting” that could lead to indictment and trial with punishments including fines or loss of citizen rights. By the early fourth century, Athenian citizens were paid to attend the Assembly, serve as a juror, and fill some offices.

Even from this brief sketch we can see how different Athenian democracy was from our own republican government, in which elected representatives debate and set policy that is implemented and

managed by federal, state, and local government agencies. In addition, in Athens there was no notion of “inalienable rights” all people possessed, as rights were given by the state only to citizens, and political rights could be taken away for certain dishonorable behaviors. Yet it is the fundamental assumptions behind democratic direct rule, as well as the mechanics of governing, that critics found wrong-headed and dangerous in ways still relevant for the United States of today.

Who Is Qualified to Rule?

The notion that any man born to an Athenian mother and father was qualified to run the state was hotly disputed in antiquity. Aristocrats or *eupatridai*, those “born of good fathers,” found such a notion sheer folly. To them, only noblemen belonging to ancient families that traced their ancestry to the gods possessed what the fifth-century celebrator of aristocratic athletic prowess, Pindar, called the “splendor running in the blood,” a capacity for excellence, virtue, and wisdom that made them natural rulers: “The wise man knows many things in his blood,” Pindar sings, “the vulgar are taught.”⁶

Given the lack of innate wisdom among the *demos*, critics argued, political power in their hands could lead only to violence and disorder, particularly class warfare against the rich. A particularly gruesome example took place in the city of Miletus, a wealthy state on the coast of modern-day Turkey. There the poor seized power after a civil war and burned to death wealthy families. After the rich returned to power, they returned the favor and trampled to death with oxen many of the poor.⁷ The excesses that had occurred in Megara, a city-state near Corinth, influenced the antidemocratic verse of the sixth-century poet Theognis. Plutarch described the violence of popular rule that occurred in Megara after a tyrant had been overthrown some years before Theognis was born, particularly attacks against the rich and their property. Mobs of the poor entered the homes of the rich and demanded entertainment and banquets, and if denied “they would treat all the household with violence and insult.” The poor finally passed a decree allowing them to get back the interest they had paid on their debts.⁸ Aristotle writes of Megara that the “demagogues drove out many of the notables in order that they might be able to confiscate their property.”⁹ For the aristocrat Theognis, such vicious behavior was to be expected from people “who formerly knew neither judgments or laws but clothed themselves in goatskins and wore them til they were rags and pastured themselves outside the city like deer.”¹⁰

These prejudices against the poor masses—that they were incapable of political wisdom and virtue and perforce had base characters, and so if given power would use it to attack the well off and redistribute their property—persist throughout the antidemocratic tradition. The lack of wisdom and virtue could reflect low birth, as Pindar and Theognis suggest. But sometimes poverty itself accounted for the lack of intellectual and moral development that makes the poor unfit to rule. The earliest critic of Athenian democracy is an anonymous author conventionally called the Old Oligarch, who wrote his brief work in the second half of the fifth century. The Old Oligarch does assume the moral and intellectual superiority of the aristocracy, but then writes, “Among the common people are the greatest ignorance, ill-discipline, and depravity. For poverty tends to lead them into base behaviour, and

do lack of education and lack of learning because of lack of money.”¹¹ The Old Oligarch does not address the question whether or not the poor could be elevated from their inferiority by education and affluence. But he consistently characterizes the ruling democratic masses in negative terms such as “bad men,” “poor men,” “the worse men,” the “mob,” and the “worst elements.”¹²

Since the masses are badly educated and poor, they have to earn their living by manual labor, the daily drudgery that also promotes a lack of character and self-control. Aristotle denigrates “extreme democracy” because the citizen masses have to work, a necessity that makes their lives “inferior” to those of farmers or herdsman, for “there is no room for excellence in any of their employment, whether they be artisans or traders or labourers.” Thus “the best form of state will not admit the [artisans] to citizenship,” for “no man can practice excellence who is living the life of a mechanic or labourer.”¹³ Implicit in these remarks, apart from obvious elitist prejudice, is the notion that governing requires knowledge and virtue, both of which are difficult to acquire when one’s time is spent in physical labor rather than in developing the mind.

Such characterizations of the non-noble masses quickly became a cliché in the antidemocratic tradition. Herodotus in his *Histories* (c. 430) imagines a debate among the Persian king Darius and two courtiers concerning the best form of government. Megabyzus, the champion of oligarchy, scorns the “mob” as “ineffective,” and says there is “nothing more stupid or more given to brutality” than the common people. The masses are “unruly,” for “knowledge and the masses are incompatible. How could anyone know what is right without either having been taught or having innate awareness of it? As such, the “general populace” is like “a river swollen with winter rains: they rush blindly forward and sweep things before them.”¹⁴ The ignorance of the volatile masses is likewise a constant theme in Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War* (c. 390). In his description of his historical method, Thucydides contrasts his own painstaking effort to verify facts, with the habits of the common people whose usual practice “is to receive [the traditions of their own country] all alike as they are delivered without applying any critical test whatsoever,” and who take little pains in investigating the truth, “accepting readily the first story that comes to hand.” He explicitly links the disaster of the Sicilian Expedition of 415—in which the Athenians lost over six thousand soldiers and two hundred ships—making it exhibit number one in the traditional indictment of Athenian democracy and its excesses—to the fact that the Athenian masses were “ignorant of its size and of the number of its inhabitants, Hellenic and barbarian, and of the fact that they were undertaking a war not much inferior to that against the Peloponnesians.”¹⁵ And like Megabyzus, Thucydides comments frequently on the fickleness of the masses, swaying this way and that and changing their minds with the whim of the moment, “according to the way of the multitude,” “as the multitude is wont to do,” or “as is the way in a democracy,” as Thucydides puts it.¹⁶

These critics posit a nexus between the lack of knowledge and virtue, particularly self-control over the passions and appetites, and the failures of democracy. This link is a major theme of Plato’s *Apology*, a reconstruction of Socrates’s defense speech at his trial in 399 for atheism and corrupting the young. At least in Plato’s version, Socrates used his right to address his accusers not to get himself

acquitted, but to highlight how foolish and unjust were the assumptions that any Athenian citizen had enough knowledge, virtue, and understanding to justly bring an indictment against a fellow citizen and that several hundred randomly selected jurors could then deliberate on and decide the truth of a capital charge. According to his follower Xenophon, Socrates in contrast believed that the citizen masses comprised “dunces and weaklings,” the “fullers or the cobblers or the builders or the smiths or the farmers or the merchants or the traffickers in the market-place who think of nothing but buying cheap and selling dear.”¹⁷ Concerned with their selfish interests and private gain, how could they possibly have developed the disinterested knowledge or the virtue necessary to sit in judgment on questions such as what makes a good and virtuous citizen, what is the purpose of a political community, or what actions were in the long-term interest of the state?

Rather than such knowledge, Socrates argues, most people possess mere opinion, hearsay picked up from their parents or teachers or the theater, the received wisdom that they never question or examine but unthinkingly repeat as truth. And if they base political decisions and actions on this presumed truth, they are more likely to harm the state and citizens than to benefit them. Socrates makes this point by using an analogy from crafts and other specialized skills. During his defense, he recalls a conversation with an Athenian who had spent a fortune on educating his two sons. If his sons were colts or calves, Socrates had asked him, it would be easy to find someone to “make them excellent in the kind of excellence proper to them; and he would be a horse-trainer or a husbandman; but now since they are two human beings, whom have you in mind to get as a overseer? Who had knowledge of that kind of excellence, that of a man and a citizen?”

The implication, which he draws out later during his cross-examination of one of his accusers, is that “he who is able to make them [horses] better is some one person, or very few, the horse-trainer, where most people, if they have to do with and use horses, injure them,” a truth that holds for people as well.¹⁸ Neither Socrates’s accusers nor the jurymen sitting in judgment have reliable knowledge of what improves the young, and so are disqualified from indicting Socrates for corrupting them, or deciding his guilt or innocence. But they arrogantly believe they do have such knowledge because they happen to have more mundane skills. Socrates earlier had discovered the origins of this mistaken confidence during his critical “examination” of his fellow citizens about virtue and the good, the knowledge necessary for justly managing the state. Each of Socrates’s interlocutors did have a particular skill, but “because of practicing his art well, each one thought he was very wise in the other more important matters, and this folly of theirs obscured that wisdom.”¹⁹ Having this ignorance publicly pointed out to them created the enmity and prejudice that has led to Socrates’s indictment and ultimately his conviction and death—illustrating his point that the people make judgments based on irrational emotions like resentment or envy rather than knowledge of justice and virtue.

Socrates’s most famous follower, Plato, agreed that the ignorant many could not justly and efficiently manage the state, for political wisdom and virtue were specialized skills possessed only by the few. As historian Donald Kagan writes, “the only proper basis for government is *epistêmê*, science, a body of true, unchanging wisdom open only to a few philosophers whose excellence of character and

mind and devotion to philosophy have led them to a vision of reality. The training of such men requires a degree of specialization which is the very opposite of the democratic ideal of versatility.” Like Socrates, Plato found it ridiculous that the people would consult a ship-builder when the issue under discussion was ships, or builders when buildings were the issue, “But when the question is an affair of state, then everybody is free to have a say—tinker, cobbler, sailor, passenger; rich and poor, high and low—any one who likes gets up, and no one reproaches him” for his lack of knowledge and training.²¹ Rather than rule by the many, or by the uneducated one or few, Plato in the *Republic* famously imagined a utopia in which an elite of highly trained philosophers runs a state in every way the opposite of Athens, not the least in its jettisoning of the political freedom and equal citizen rights under law that were Athens’s most important contribution to Western politics.

Socrates’s and Plato’s skepticism that the average Athenian could have the knowledge and virtue necessary for running the state perforce indicted the Athenian practice of filling important offices by “sortition,” that is, drawing lots, one of Aristotle’s key components of direct democracy.²² The use of the lot in part reflected a religious belief that the correct choice would be in the hands of the gods. But it also logically followed the assumption that every Athenian, unless disqualified by dishonorable behavior such as running away in battle or neglecting his parents, was capable of filling the office. Socrates scorned this notion, deriding “the folly of appointing public officials by lot when none would choose a pilot or a builder or a flautist by lot, nor any other craftsman for work in which mistakes are far less disastrous than mistakes in statecraft.”²³ Once again, to the democracy’s critics, specialized knowledge possessed only by an elite trained in wisdom and virtue is necessary for governing a state.

This belief that political wisdom is the purview of a few strikes at the heart of Athenian democracy, which believed so strongly in the capabilities of random citizens that they could be chosen to fill offices by a lottery—though military leaders were chosen by vote, a tacit admission, as some critics pointed out, that when it came to truly important offices, even the Athenians believed some people were more capable than others. To democracy’s critics, sortition was foolish, since the citizen masses make life-and-death decisions based not on a knowledge that they are incapable of acquiring, but on unexamined opinions and irrational emotions. Thus as Socrates rhetorically asks his follower Critias: “In questions of right and wrong and disgraceful and noble and good and bad ... ought we to follow and fear the opinion of the many or that of the one, if there is anyone who knows about them?” Democracy’s false assumption that the many indeed have such knowledge dooms it as a political system. From this mistake follows the other malign consequences of direct popular rule.

Ignorance Begets Demagoguery

If the masses lack the knowledge and virtue necessary to govern justly, but instead are moved by irrational passions and self-interest, then they are easy prey for political leaders who can manipulate or pander to the people in order to further their own ambitions. Such a government can succeed only if good leaders arise who can lead the masses into making the right decisions and can rein in their passionate self-interest. The great Athenian statesman Solon, whose constitutional reforms laid the

foundations of the democracy around 600, set the pattern for such leaders. In a fragment from his poetry, Solon wrote, “I gave the people as much privilege as they have a right to: / I neither degraded them from rank nor gave them a free hand; / and for those who already held the power and were envied for money, / I worked it out that they should have no cause for complaint.”²⁵ The masses were freed from oppression and given a stake in the government, but not the sort of expansive power that would allow them to redistribute the property of the rich to gratify their envy. This is the idealized early Athenian democracy that later critics continually harken back to when attacking the radical democracy of the later fifth century.

Thucydides saw in Pericles, who guided Athens to its “golden age” starting in the mid-fifth century, a leader like Solon, one whose “rank, ability, and known integrity” allowed him “to exercise an independent control over the multitude—in short, to lead them instead of being led by them; for he never sought power by improper means, he was never compelled to flatter them, but, on the contrary, enjoyed so high an estimation that he could afford to anger them by contradiction.”²⁶ But the state cannot rely on such men always appearing when needed, and in a democracy, even Pericles had to be elected and reelected to the office of *strategos*, one member of the board of ten citizens that oversaw military affairs, in order to wield his influence. And a year before his death from the plague in 429, Pericles was recalled and deposed from his post as a *strategos* and fined by the people because he failed to capture Epidaurus. The lesson is that in a democracy, even a uniquely great leader is still accountable to the passions and interests of the masses.

The leaders of Athens after Pericles, in Thucydides’s estimation, were much different. “More on a level with one another, and each grasping at supremacy, they ended by committing even the conduct of state affairs to the whims of the multitude.” They allowed “private ambitions and private interests in matters quite foreign to the war [against Sparta], to lead them into projects unjust both to themselves and to their allies—projects whose success would only conduce to the honor and advantage of private persons, and whose failure entailed certain disaster on the country in the war.” This pandering ambition led to “blunders” like the Sicilian Expedition, which failed because the people and the politicians chose “to occupy themselves with private squabbles for the leadership of The People, by which they not only paralyzed operations in the field, but also first introduced civil discord at home.”²⁷

Thucydides’s encomium to Pericles and his contrast with the demagogues who followed him establishes the standard by which later Athenian politicians like the ambitious, charismatic Alcibiades, the driving force behind the decision to invade Sicily, are measured. Rather than the “shepherd of the people” concerned with their long-term welfare, such leaders become “worthless demagogues,” as Aristotle calls them, panderers to the people, buying their support by redistributing public money to them.²⁸ As Demosthenes, the last great leader of the Athenian democracy, said in 344, this “new breed of orators” asks the people, “ ‘What would you like? What shall I propose? How can I oblige you?’ ” and as a consequence “the interests of the state have been frittered away for momentary popularity.”²⁹

The Athenian demagogue whom Thucydides contrasts most sharply with Pericles is Cleon, for nearly a decade the most powerful politician in Athens until his death in 422 at the battle of Amphipolis. He was, according to Thucydides, “the most violent man at Athens, and at that time [422] by far the most powerful with The People.”³⁰ Plutarch makes Cleon a class-warrior: he was “rough and heavy against the upper classes and subjected himself to the masses in order to win their favor.”³¹ The author of the fourth-century *Constitution of Athens*, doubtfully attributed to Aristotle, links Cleon’s popularity to a new style of blustering oratory: Cleon “seems, more than any one else, to have been the cause of the corruption of the democracy by his wild undertakings; and he was the first to use unseemly shouting and coarse abuse on the Bema [the speaker’s platform in the Assembly].”³² Cleon doubled the tribute on the Athenian subject states, raised taxes on the rich, and prosecuted politicians, some say to obtain the funds necessary for buying political support—he raised the pay for jurors by one-third—and perhaps enriching himself.

Cleon’s most brutal critic was the comic playwright Aristophanes, who saw in Cleon the besetting flaw of democracy: it created political leaders who pandered to the people in order to further their own ambitions no matter the cost to the interests of the state or the well-being of the citizens. Aristophanes’s play the *Knights*, produced in 424, the word *demagogos* appears for the first time in surviving Greek literature, and it is used to describe Cleon. In the play, he is depicted as Paphlagon, a slave of “Demos,” the personified Athenian citizenry. The slave is always “crouched” in front of Demos and “flattering and fawning and toadying and swindling” the “cranky, half-deaf old codger” who is profiting from the war with Sparta and raising taxes on the rich or prosecuting them to buy the support of the poor citizens and enrich himself: “you devour public funds before you’re allotted an office,” the Chorus Leader scolds him.

As bad as Paphlagon/Cleon is, however, in the play he vies for the affections of Demos with Sausage-Seller, an occupation even more base than being a tanner, as the historical Cleon was. The Sausage-Seller has all the qualities that Aristophanes, like the Old Oligarch, believes a successful democratic leader must have: he is a scoundrel from a low-born family, “ignorant and loathsome” and, like making sausages, is able to “stir up the business [of the polis], mince it all together, / And always get the people on your side” with deceiving rhetoric and bribes. Nor do the Athenian citizens come off any better. The Chorus scolds Demos, “You’re easily led astray; / you enjoy being flattered and thoroughly deceived, / and every speechmaker / has you gaping.”³³ In Aristophanes’s critique, the self-interested, uninformed, gullible citizenry will surrender itself to unscrupulous demagogues who promise to use state power to enrich them.

The Problem of Rhetoric in Democratic Deliberation

Woven through these critiques of democratic demagogues is the distrust of rhetoric and public oratory as an instrument of deception and manipulation. One of the great glories of constitutional government is the use of free verbal deliberation and persuasion rather than force to manage society and the state. Deliberative public speech was thus the life-blood of the democracy, the “indispensable preliminary

any wise action at all,” as Pericles says in his funeral oration.³⁴ In Athens almost all the functions of the state took place through public speeches that tried to persuade fellow citizens to vote for one course of action rather than another. As a consequence, rhetoric, Aristotle’s “art of persuasion,” became an important technical skill necessary for those in Athens ambitious for a political career.

Yet a skill at effective speaking could obscure the issue of right or wrong or good and bad by appealing to emotion and selfish interests rather than to principle, sound argument, and the larger good. With political power widely distributed to the citizens, the inability of the ordinary man to set aside emotion and self-interest and think critically about the good of the whole state both for now and the future made oratorical prowess a dangerous weapon in the hands of ambitious and unscrupulous leaders. In the *Republic* Plato describes the manipulation and corruption of citizens who have been aroused by a powerful orator. At any meeting of citizens, Plato writes, “there is a great uproar, and they praise some things which are being said or done, and blame other things, equally exaggerating both, shouting and clapping their hands ... at such a time will not a young man’s heart, as they say, leap within him? Will any private training enable him to stand firm against the overwhelming flood of popular opinion? Or will he be carried away by the stream? Will he not have the notions of good and evil which the public in general have—he will do as they do, and as they are, such will he be?”³⁵

The ability to speak persuasively and impassion an audience allowed an orator to “make the weaker argument appear the stronger,” as Socrates says—to make lies and injustice and the wrong sound like truth and justice and the right.³⁶ Dramatizing this point, Aristophanes in the *Clouds* (423) brings on stage a personified *Hêttôn Logos*, the “worse argument,” who brags that he “pioneered the idea of arguing what’s contrary to established principles of justice,” and shows him out-debating and ultimately corrupting *Kreittôn Logos*, the “better argument.”³⁷ In a direct democracy dependent for its functioning on public oratory, this skill at clever speaking conferred a power greater than wealth or physical force when it came to controlling the uneducated masses that sat in the Assembly.

Plato has the rhetorician and philosopher Gorgias claim that the greatest good, which gives men personal freedom and power over others, is “the word which persuades the judges in the courts, or the senators in the Council, or the citizens in the Assembly, or at any other political meeting,” and “if you have the power of uttering this word, you will have the physician as your slave, and the trainer your slave, and the money-maker of whom you talk will be found to gather treasures, not for himself, but for you who are able to speak and persuade the multitude.” A bit later Socrates draws out the implication of Gorgias’s praise of rhetoric as a means for acquiring power apart from truth or goodness: “The rhetorician need not know the truth about things; he has only to discover some way of persuading the ignorant that he has more knowledge than those who know.” He does not need to know anything about medicine, for example, to persuade the “multitude” that he knows more than the physician. So too the orator may be “as ignorant of the just and unjust, base and honourable, good and evil, as he is of medicine,” but all he needs is “a way with the ignorant of persuading them that he knowing is to be esteemed to know more about these things than some one else who knows.” Perceptions created by clever speaking will be more powerful than knowledge of facts and reality.

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