

Athenian Democracy

Martin Small

November 1964

Contents

1. The anarchist case: the relevance of history.	3
2. The foundations of Athenian democracy.	4
3. The development of Athenian democracy.	6
4. Democracy and empire.	8
5. The meaning of democracy.	10
6. Some suggestions.	14

1. The anarchist case: the relevance of history.

THE ANARCHIST MAINTAINS THAT ALL MEN HAVE THE POWER to organise their own lives: he maintains that this power does exist and should be used—or at least, using a purely aesthetic and personal rather than ethical form of judgment, that he would find it more pleasing if they did use it. And a situation which would demonstrate conclusively the truth of what he maintains, is conceivable. But since he maintains only that the use of the power which he describes is possible, his case cannot be disproved by any demonstration of how rarely this power has been used, or of how difficult it is to learn to use it. Since what the anarchist desires, either as an absolute good or merely for his own private satisfaction, can be brought about only if people believe what he says, he wishes to be believed. But though the incredulity of others may shake his own conviction, no amount of disbelief, no matter how far and wide the words and deeds in which it is expressed, can refute his case: that there is a power, and that it should be used.

Those who doubt the anarchist case may say that there is little evidence in history that this power exists, none that it exists in all men; the anarchist will reply that there is much evidence of the failure to use the power of which he speaks, none that it does not exist in all men. He will say, do we not, in effect (however many different ways of expressing it there may be), describe and assess ourselves and each other as having been more or less able to use this power of which I speak, as having learnt more or less well how to use it? And when the anarchist appeals to history, he will appeal, not so much to what has happened, as to how men naturally think of what has happened: not in this way to escape from an objective fact to a subjective impression, but rather in this way to emphasise that the deeds of men through time are the different manifestations of an endeavour which is one and the same in all men and that all men in their different ways have been aware of this. And, the anarchist will say, in the societies and civilisations which they have built to contain their common life men have expressed their feelings about this endeavour: it has been glorious, perilous, hopeless, absurd, and every man has found himself encouraged or discouraged in his own individual interpretation of the common endeavour by the expectations of the society in which he lives.

Of every society it must be asked, What encouragement has it given to that power whereby men are able to build and create their own lives, and what provision does it make for men to learn the use of this power—or does it merely make provision for the failure to use this power, does it merely ensure that the failure to use it will cause the least possible damage to the social framework, forgetting that the social framework is not the object of man's common endeavour but merely an interpretation of that object, an interpretation which may be wrong? Does this society believe in freedom, or not? From the study of any past or present society the anarchist cannot exactly learn anything new about the ideal society which he has already conceived in accordance with his theory of man. But he may be reminded of what it is that he believes, he may be enabled to clarify his understanding and his knowledge: he will be brought, not to any new conviction, but to a better understanding of what has always been his conviction.

This sketch of the democracy of ancient Athens will be an attempt to understand the theory of man upon which it was built and how it developed: it will also attempt some examination of the theory of man in terms of which that democracy was criticised by contemporaries. How well did the Athenians learn the truth of the remark of their great lawgiver Solon, that the best-policed city is "the city where all citizens, whether they have suffered injury or not, equally pursue and

punish injustice”?¹ How justified are the claims that Pericles made in a famous speech at the height of Athens’ pride and splendour, at the end of the first year of the war (the Peloponnesian War, 432–404) which put an end to the Athenian empire? “Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people. When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses. No one, so long as he has it in him to be of service to the state, is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. And, just as our political life is free and open, so is our day-to-day life in our relations with each other ... Taking everything together, I declare that our city is an education to Greece, and I declare that in my opinion each single one of our citizens, in all the manifold aspects of life, is able to show himself the rightful lord and owner of his own person, and to do this, moreover, with exceptional grace and exceptional versatility.”²

2. The foundations of Athenian democracy.

“About 1200 B.C. the secure prosperity of Mycenaean Greece was abruptly terminated.”³ The Mycenaeans had partially replaced and partially taken over the Minoan civilisation of the Aegean: they now in their turn succumbed to invasions from the mountains in the north: the invaders were semi-nomadic tribesmen, among whom the most important were the Dorians. The Dorians were ill-suited to the tedious business of the Mycenaeans’ agriculture and industrious palace bureaucracy. They preferred tribal assemblies over which the king was supreme, though ruling by the consent of his soldiery. But in Greece during the age of reconstruction from the twelfth to the eighth centuries the monarchical organisation of society survived only in the north, in Macedonia. In the rest of Greece the city-state (perhaps first brought over from Asia Minor) came into being, a “synoecism” or “bringing together of households” not so much into a single conurbation as under a single judicial and military authority, a form of political organisation which represented the triumph of the interests of the lowland farmers and traders over the highlanders. Most Hellenic city-states—Athens was a signal exception to the rule—started life handicapped by a division of the people into a body of first-class citizens, living in the city and on the arable land adjoining it, and an outer circle of second-class citizens descended from the subjugated highlanders; and this schism in the community was a fruitful cause of subsequent social conflict.”⁴

“‘Demos’, the people, can mean the whole community, including everyone within it whether the community is large or small. It can also mean, not everyone, but the mass of the people in contrast to the privileged class—it can have, that is, a party and not a national sense, an ambiguity that has attacked the word for ‘people’ in many languages. This party sense appears in Solon’s poems side by side with the more comprehensive sense, and it was probably in Solon’s lifetime, in the early sixth century, that it began to have a party meaning.”⁵ The political situation with

¹ Quoted by A. E. Zimmern. *The Greek Commonwealth* (O.U.P. 1911, 5th ed. 1931, paperback 1961), p. 133. (All my references are to the 2nd edition.)

² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Penguin Classics translation by Rex Warner, 1954), pp. 117–119.

³ G. L. Huxley, *Early Sparta* (Faber & Faber 1962), p. 14.

⁴ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Hellenism. The history of a civilisation* (Home University Library: O.U.P. 1959), p. 37.

⁵ A. Andrewes, *The Greek Tyrants* (Hutchinson’s University Library, 1956), pp. 35–6.

which Solon had to deal was one in which the people (in the party sense of the word) were becoming politically conscious and articulate, at least partly as a result of military and economic developments of the seventh century.

The replacement of expensive bronze by cheap iron “brought within the means of the yeoman farmer an equipment that had previously been the monopoly of a small aristocracy, and the consequent large increase in the number of a city-state’s heavy-armed fighting-men made it possible, for the first time in the Hellenic World, to make the weight of metal tell by substituting, for the chariot-borne champion, a phalanx of peasant infantry, whose virtue lay not in individual physical prowess but in drill and discipline and ‘esprit de corps.’”⁶ The military revolution brought into existence a vast new class of “hoplites”, that is, “shield-bearers”, whose effectiveness in battle depended upon their formation, since the shield, borne on the soldier’s left arm, protected only his left side and he depended for the protection of his right side on the shield of the soldier at his right just as the soldier on *his* left depended upon *his* shield for the protection of his right side. And if class solidarity was encouraged, so was self-confidence: “When they see each other in moments of danger, the rich man will no longer be able to despise the poor man; the poor man will be lean and sunburnt, and find himself fighting next to some rich man whose sheltered life and superfluous flesh make him puff and blow and quite unable to cope. Won’t he conclude that people like this are rich because their subjects are cowards, and won’t he say to his fellows, when he meets them in private, ‘This lot are no good; they’ve had it’?”⁷

The eighth century rise in population had made necessary, first ventures in colonisation, and then commercial expansion. There emerged a class of moderately prosperous merchants, who resented the hereditary privileges of the aristocratic magistrates who in the previous centuries had quietly usurped the functions of the kings. The nine annually elected magistrates of Athens were called “archons”: the council of retired magistrates was the “Areopagus”: it is not certain that election was ever officially confined to the “Eupatridae” aristocracy, but in practice they controlled the machinery of government: and Solon, who was elected archon in 594, broke their monopoly.

Solon’s “Shaking off of Burdens” cancelled all the debts of the entire population: for the future, he prohibited the use of one’s own body as security for debt or the sale of oneself or one’s children into slavery (except that a father might sell a daughter detected in illegal sexual relations). Having “set free the land from slavery” Solon sought a political arrangement which would combine the virtues of aristocracy with those of democracy. He divided the citizenry into four classes, a citizen’s class depending upon the number of bushels of com or measures of oil his land produced, i.e. upon his income. The wealthy commoners were the most obvious beneficiaries of Solon’s reform: they (it is not clear whether it was the top two classes which received this right, or only the top one) became eligible for election to the archonship, though this was not conceded by the old aristocracy without a struggle: in the fifteen years which followed Solon’s archonship there were two years which appeared in the records as “anarchiai”—that is, no archon was elected, or no election was recognised as valid. The third class (the “zeugitai”, roughly the hoplite class) gained access to minor political office; the fourth class (the “thetes”, literally the labourers) were confirmed in their right to attend and vote at the assembly. But the character of this right was much changed by Solon’s reforms.

⁶ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, 556 (Penguin Classics translation by H. D. P. Lee, 1955, pp. 328–9).

It seems that before 594 the assembly had met but seldom, which rather restricted the practical effectiveness of the ordinary citizen's right to attend and vote. After 594 all legislation and all major questions of policy had to be brought before the assembly, and it was freed from the control of the Areopagus by Solon's institution of a new lower council of 400 members, for election to which the second and third classes, but not the fourth, seem to have been eligible. But Solon's "greatest achievement", says Sir Alfred Zimmern, "was to 'make the people master of the verdict' ... (The Magistrates remained.) But in exceptional cases, where the law was not clear or the decision hotly disputed. Solon granted an appeal to a large popular court of several thousand citizens—a sort of Grand Assize of the nation sitting under open heaven by the market-place. The exact powers and composition of this body, the Heliaea as it was called, are not known; we only become familiar with popular justice when the Heliaea had been split up into the numerous courts, consisting of several hundreds, instead of thousands, of judges (the people acted as both judge and jury and there were no lawyers), which we find in the time of Pericles. We do not know who decided what cases should be submitted to it. But Solon enacted one provision which made it quite certain that, in the case of friction, the people had the whip-hand of their magistrates. He ordained that every magistrate when he went out of office should give an account before the assembly of the people of his conduct during its tenure."⁸

3. The development of Athenian democracy.

Tyranny, when it came to Athens in the middle of the sixth century, came in a far milder form than that experienced by other cities where the violence of class conflict had not been assuaged by the wisdom of a Solon. "Peisistratus' two failures to establish a tyranny and his eventual triumph organised from abroad do not look like the career of a social revolutionary leader."⁹ His government, writes the author of the treatise on the Constitution of Athens (probably a pupil of Aristotle rather than Aristotle himself), "was moderate, and more consonant with the character of a constitutional statesman than with that of a tyrant. He was generally humane and mild, and ready to pardon offenders; and, more especially, he pursued a policy of advancing money to the poor to give them employment and to enable them to make a living by farming. There were two reasons for this policy. The first was to stop the poor from spending their time in the central city, and to spread them out over the country-side; the second was to ensure (by giving them a moderate competence and some business to engage their attention) that they should have neither the desire nor the leisure to concern themselves with public affairs."¹⁰ But the effect, according to Professor Andrews, was rather different: the tyranny destroyed what remained of "feudalism" (using the word in its conventional pejorative sense), it made the mass of the people more independent of the upper class and accustomed them to greater stability: "the strife of upper-class parties was a form of disturbance unfamiliar to most Athenians when it broke out

⁸ Zimmern, op. cit., pp. 134–5.

⁹ Andrewes, op. cit., p. 104.

¹⁰ Ernest Barker, *The Politics of Aristotle*, translated and with an introduction (O.U.P. 1946); appendix: On the Constitution of Athens, p. 377.

afresh, after the fall of the tyranny, between Isagoras and Cleisthenes.”¹¹ “And Cleisthenes”, writes Herodotus, “finding himself the weaker, called to his aid the common people.”¹²

The democracy established by Cleisthenes’ reforms in 507 was “a regime based on a property-qualification that had been reduced almost to zero.”¹³ The membership of the council was increased from 400 to 500, to be chosen annually by lot, 50 from each of the ten tribes (“demes”) with which Cleisthenes had replaced the older and more decentralised tribal organisation of Athens: no citizen was to sit on the council for two successive years or more than twice altogether. These provisions, “this simple device”, as A. W. Gomme calls it, “prevented the growth of anything like that corporate feeling which comes when men work side by side for many years together, and which is so powerful a factor in the creation of privilege.”¹⁴ It prevented also the concentration of political experience in a small body of men, and at the same time spread political experience among as large a number of citizens as possible; and in this way worked both positively and negatively towards the predominance of the assembly.” Like the archons councillors had to be over thirty years of age, to take an oath and to submit individually to preliminary scrutiny and final examination:

“It may be conjectured that technically they had, like magistrates, to be of at least zeugite (i.e. third class, vid. p. 332) status.”¹⁵

The council sat every day except on festivals, and it had a standing sub-committee which dined every day in the city hall and whose task it was to prepare the order paper (“programma”) for the council, which in its turn prepared one for the assembly if it was to meet—as it did on four days in every sub-committee’s period of office: no decision might be taken by the assembly except on a motion voted by the council, and placed by the council on the agenda. The fifty members of each tribe on the council served in turn for a tenth of the year as the council’s sub-committee, the sub-committee for each period being selected by lot at the end of the preceding period: every day a new president of the committee was chosen by lot from their number, and he also presided over the assembly if it met. (In the fourth century another president of the assembly was chosen by lot from among those councillors who were not on the sub-committee.) It cannot be said that the Athenians did not take their democracy seriously.

It may be that Cleisthenes’ intention was that the council should be the effective governing body, only referring major and contentious issues to the people. If that was his intention, it was not his achievement. The people had come into their own, or so it would appear from Herodotus’ description of the Athenians’ successful repulse of an attempt by Cleomenes king of Sparta to restore Isagoras: “And it is plain enough, not from this instance only, but from many everywhere, that freedom is an excellent thing; since even the Athenians, who, while they continued under the rule of tyrants, were not a whit more valiant than any of their neighbours, no sooner shook off the yoke than they became decidedly the first of all. These things show that, while undergoing

¹¹ Andrewes, p. 114.

¹² *The History of Herodotus*, Book 5 chapter 66 (translated by Georg Rawlinson, Everyman’s Library 1910, volume, p. 29).

¹³ Toynbee, p. 72.

¹⁴ A. W. Gomme, *More Essays in Greek History and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell 1962), pp. 184–5.

¹⁵ A. H. M. Jones, *Athenian Democracy* (Oxford: Blackwell 1957), p. 105. (The indispensable modern work on the subject.)

oppression, they let themselves be beaten, since they worked for a master; but so soon as they got their freedom, each man was eager to do the best he could for himself.”¹⁶

Ephialtes (who was murdered in 461) and Pericles carried the democracy a few stages further. In 462 or 461, at their instance, the Assembly passed a bill which deprived the Areopagus (which had already lost much of its importance, its members now being chosen by lot from the archons) of all its powers except those of a supreme court for charges of murder: its customary jurisdiction in moral and constitutional questions went, respectively, to the popular jury-courts (vid. p. 332) and to the council. A few years later the chief archonships were thrown open to the “zeugitai”, and before long even the poorest class (the “thetes”) were accepted as candidates if they wished to stand—which in fact they usually didn’t, since the office demanded by tradition expenditure in excess of its meagre pay, and had some rather exacting duties, like the choice of dramatists to compete at the Dionysia. Far more significant was the introduction of the system of payment for the members of the juries. For this too Pericles seems to have been responsible.

4. Democracy and empire.

Pericles was born not long before the battle of Marathon (490) at which the Athenians defeated the Persian invading force before the arrival of their (the Athenians’) Spartan allies—ten years later the Athenian naval contribution and the cunning of her general Themistocles were the decisive factors in the destruction of Xerxes’ great invading fleet at Salamis, though a Spartan commanded the allies on land and a Corinthian commanded their sea forces. If this was an opportunity to achieve that political unity they needed, the ancient Greeks missed it. But the Athenian navy (on which, rather than upon any private—or public—frivolities, Themistocles had persuaded the assembly in 483 to spend the large profit made by the state silver mines) became the instrument of empire. When the Delian League—from which Sparta and the Peloponnesian League were always quite distinct—was formed in 477 against the threat of any future Persian invasion, the allies of Athens contributed men and ships to a common navy. But more and more did it become the system that Athens built the ships¹⁷ and provided the men for their crews while her allies made monetary contributions; and as the Persian threat receded the navy seemed to become the instrument of purely Athenian interests and policies: the great city’s allies began to resent what had ceased to protect and reassure, what was now the sign, not of their safety, but of their subjection.

After the reduction of the archons to election by lot in 487, the ten annually elected generals remained the only chief officers of state elected directly by majority vote. (In general direct election was distrusted as an instrument of aristocratic rule: candidates would be elected for their personality or private influence; but occasionally the need for a certain technical skill reduced or at least modified this danger and at the same time made election by lot impractical.)

“Anything like a continuous government”, writes Professor Jones, “was only achieved when one man (or a coherent group of men) succeeded in holding the confidence of the people over a long period, in which case he (or they) was usually in the fifth century regularly re-elected general.” But, he warns, “the idea that the board of generals acted as such as a government is man-

¹⁶ op. cit., Book 5 chapter 78 (op. cit. volume 2, p. 35).

¹⁷ These ships were galleys and they were rowed by Athenian citizens—a task which was the occupation of slaves and criminals in other civilisations.

ifestly false ... The generals were primarily executive officers in the military and naval spheres, and their duties were to mobilise armies and fleets on the instructions of the assembly, and to command such armies and fleets with a view to achieving objectives laid down, in more or less detail, by the people.”¹⁸

Pericles was elected general for the first time in 463 or thereabouts. The period of his continual re-election began in 443, after 443 in all the years until and including that of his death (429) only once did the people of Athens fail to elect him general; and that once was in the year of the plague which devastated Athens during the second year of the Peloponnesian War (430: the plague lasted into the summer of 429 and after a pause in 428 flared up for the last time in 427). But even before 443 his influence upon Athenian policy is discernible: the reforms which he and Ephialtes initiated have already been mentioned, so has his introduction of payment for jury-service. In 453 Athens.

began to plant strategic settlements of her citizens (“cleruchies”) in the territories of her allies, allowing a remission of their naval contributions (or tribute) to those whose territories she used: in 447 the Athenian assembly decided that this money could legitimately be used to rebuild those temples and other public buildings which had been destroyed by the Persians in 480–79. For, says Plutarch, Pericles wanted those who stayed at home to enjoy the benefits of empire as much as those who were paid to serve in the navy: but not for doing nothing: and so he instituted the greatest social welfare scheme of public works that there has ever been, and among other things the Parthenon was built. And all the while it was claimed that it was for the Delian League that this was being done: for after all the Parthenon was Athena’s temple, and Athena was the patron-goddess of the League. But at the same time the League’s treasury was moved from Delos to Athens, and the periodical League conferences lapsed.

In 451 Pericles had proposed to the assembly that Athenian citizenship should be restricted to persons of citizen parentage on both sides: his proposal was accepted: perhaps he made it only because if he did not someone else would—and he would lose influence in the assembly. Six years later an Egyptian prince sent Athens a gift of 30,000 bushels of wheat. There were still people on the registers of the various wards who were no longer citizens by the terms of the act of 451. The assembly ordered a public scrutiny, there followed 19,000 cases of disputed citizenship (a number, it has been estimated, equal to the total number of adult “thetes” claiming citizenship in the urban wards), and 5,000 names, it is said, were struck off the registers. “The Athenian people had become—even the poorest of them—a privileged minority in the Empire. The antithesis of Empire and democracy has never been more brutally and clearly posed.”¹⁹

How far was Pericles responsible for Athenian policy during the years of his generalship? Could he have influenced his fellow-citizens in the direction of a different policy even if he had wanted to? What did Pericles think he was doing? What did his fellow-citizens think he was doing? What was he doing? What did he achieve? Professor Jones emphasises Pericles’ continuous accountability to the people or at least to the assembly²⁰, his absolute dependence upon their approval. “He had to persuade the people to vote for every measure that he wished to have passed, and if they lost confidence in him they could, as they once did, depose (sic) and fine him, and they could flout his advice, as again they did in trying to parley with the Spartans in 430.

¹⁸ Jones, *op. cit.*, pp. 126, 125, 124.

¹⁹ A. R. Burn, *Pericles and Athens* (London: English Universities Press 1948), p. 91.

²⁰ On a good day 6,000 might attend out of a citizen population—i.e. excluding women, slaves, children and foreigners—which has been estimated to have been about 30,000 in the last quarter of the fifth century.[20]

Athenian policy”, he concludes, “was really determined by mass meetings of the citizens on the advice of anyone who could win the people’s ear. The success of Athens is a testimony to the basic sense of the ordinary Athenian citizen.”²¹ Thucydides, who had the advantages of being a contemporary, argues somewhat differently. “Pericles, because of his position, his intelligence, and his known integrity, could respect the liberty of the people and at the same time hold them in check. It was he who led them, rather than they who led him, and, since he never sought power from any wrong motive, he was under no necessity of flattering them; in fact he was so highly respected that he was able to speak angrily to them and to contradict them. Certainly when he saw that they were going too far in a mood of over-confidence, he would bring back to them a sense of their dangers; and when they were discouraged for no good reason he would restore their confidence. So, in what was nominally a democracy, power was really in the hands of the first citizen. But his successors, who were more on a level with each other and each of whom aimed at occupying the first place, adopted methods of demagogy which resulted in their losing control over the actual conduct of affairs. Such a policy, in a great city with an empire to govern, naturally led to a number of mistakes.”²²

But another contemporary or near-contemporary judgment was that the mistakes of Pericles’ successors were but the natural and inevitable consequence of a completely wrong course taken by Pericles and the other great Athenian statesmen of the fifth century. “They have glutted the state with harbours and dockyards and walls and tribute and rubbish of that sort, regardless of the requirements of moderation and righteousness, and when the inevitable fit of weakness supervenes the citizens will hold their current advisers responsible, and go on extolling Themistocles and Cimon and Pericles, the real authors of their woes.”²³

5. The meaning of democracy.

The counterfeit of the real art of government is pandering: “pandering”, Socrates explains to Gorgias, “pays no regard to the welfare of its object, but catches fools with the bait of ephemeral pleasure and tricks them into holding it in the highest esteem.” All the great Athenian statesmen have failed, they have not even tried to succeed, in the real art of government, the only object of which is to make men better, that is, to purify their desires and appetites by detaching them from all merely corporeal and transient images and fixing them upon the ultimate and unchanging reality of which these images are but the shadows. Callicles protests that “one of the men of today” (the dramatic date of the dialogue seems to be, accepting some large anachronisms, about 405; the year before the end of the Peloponnesian War) can compare with Themistocles, Miltiades (the general who commanded the Athenians at Marathon), Cimon, or Pericles; and Socrates agrees that “they seem to have been better servants of the state than the present people, and more able to provide the state with what it desired. But when it is a matter of diverting men’s desires into a new channel instead of allowing them free course, or of driving one’s fellows by persuasion or constraint to the adoption of measures designed for their improvement, which is the sole duty of a good citizen, there is practically nothing to choose between your men and their successors.”²⁴

²¹ Jones. pp. 127, 132.

²² *op. cit.* (Penguin Classics tr., pp. 13 5).

²³ Plato. *Gorgias*, 519a (Penguin Classics translation by W. Hamilton 1960, p. 135).

²⁴ *ibid.*, 464, 517 (pp. 46, 133).

The “Gorgias” is the earliest of Plato’s political dialogues; and, in its contrasting of the true art of government with what merely imitates it, it outlined what was to be the theme of all the later political dialogues. “Born in 427, nearly two years after Pericles died, Plato knew only the growing disillusionment with the glories of Periclean democracy.”²⁵ At first he hoped for a regeneration of public life after the coup d’etat of the Thirty Tyrants in 404, but the violence of their government showed him that this was not to be. The democracy was restored in 403 and Plato was impressed by the moderation and clemency of the returning party; but in 399 Socrates was executed, for what at another time and in another place would have been called crimes against the state. “The result was that I, who had at first been full of eagerness for a public career, as I gazed upon the whirlpool of public life and saw the incessant movement of shifting currents, at last felt dizzy ... and finally saw clearly in regard to all states now existing that without exception their system of government is bad.”²⁶ Plato decided that what was needed was a re-examination of first principles: an inquiry into the function and purpose of government which would show in what way contemporary constitutions were defective instruments of government and how they might be remedied. He founded the Academy (c.388) to promote this inquiry in the minds of others, and as the inquiry proceeded he saw more and more clearly and convincingly the nature of man’s common end and the necessity for educating him in order that he may achieve it.

Plato’s objection to democracy was much more directly to an attitude of mind than to a form of political organisation which he assumed to be so bound up with it as to be almost identical: the form of political organisation being either the effect of the attitude of mind or the social evidence of its individual existence. This attitude of mind was one of not understanding and of not caring to understand the nature of government: above all, one of not knowing the need for education and the need for a teacher. In “The Republic” democracy appears as the natural consequence of the breakdown of an aristocratic society in which the rulers have turned aside from the common good and pursue merely their own private interest. “Oligarchy changes into democracy because of its lack of restraint in the pursuit of its objective of getting as rich as possible ... This failure to curb extravagance in an oligarchy often reduces to poverty men born for better things. Some of them are in debt, some disfranchised, some both, and they settle down, armed with their stings, and with hatred in their hearts, to plot against those who have deprived them of their property and against the rest of society, and to long for revolution ... Democracy originates when the poor win, kill or exile their opponents, and give the rest equal rights and opportunities of office, appointment to office being as a rule by lot ... In democracy there’s no compulsion either to exercise authority if you are capable of it, or to submit to authority if you don’t want to ... We said that no one who had not exceptional gifts could grow into a good man unless he were brought up from childhood in a good environment and given a good training; democracy with a grandiose gesture sweeps all this away and doesn’t mind what the habits and background of its politicians are, provided they profess themselves the people’s friends. It’s an agreeable, anarchic form of society, with plenty of variety, which treats all men as equal, whether they are equal or not.”²⁷ All this adumbrates the famous comparison of the democratic society with the ship whose captain has been locked up in his cabin: the wine-casks have been broached, everything is going merrily and joyfully, but those who can see, see only disaster ahead.

²⁵ J. B. Skemp, introduction to translation of Plato: *The Statesman (Politicus)* (Routledge 1952, Routledge paperback 1961), p. 26.

²⁶ Letter 7, 325d, quoted by G. H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (Harrap 1937, 3rd ed. 1951), p. 45.

²⁷ 555, 557, 558 (pp. 327, 328, 329–30).

“Politicus” (The Statesman), written between “The Republic” and “The Laws”, clarifies the distinction between true government and its imitation. Rule of the one may be in accordance with the laws (monarchy), or in defiance of them (tyranny): and similarly the rule of the few (aristocracy or oligarchy), and the rule of the many (called democracy in both cases). But true government is characterised, not by any constitutional form, but by the knowledge and understanding of those who rule: the constitutional form of the rule of those who possess “the art of government is unimportant.” It makes no difference whether their subjects be willing or unwilling; they may rule with or without a code of laws, they may be poor or wealthy. It is the same with doctors. We do not assess the medical qualifications of a doctor by the degree of willingness on our part to submit to his knife or cautery or other painful treatment. Doctors are still doctors whether they work to fixed prescriptions or without them and whether they be poor or wealthy ... The one essential condition is that they act for the good of our bodies to make them better instead of worse, and treat men’s ailments in every case as healers acting to preserve life. We must insist that in this disinterested scientific ability we see the distinguishing mark of true authority in medicine—and of true authority everywhere else as well.” Such authority will be productive of a juster social order than will a system of written law, for “law can never issue an injunction binding on all which really embodies what is best for each: it cannot prescribe with perfect accuracy what is good and right for each member of the community at any one time.” But where true authority is lacking, the authority of written law is necessary to ensure the very survival of the state: above all there is then one rule to which there must be strict adherence. What rule is that? “The rule that none of the citizens may venture to do any act contrary to the laws, and that if any of them ventures to do such act, the penalty is to be death or the utmost rigour of punishment.”²⁸

Professor G. H. Sabine claims that “The Laws” (Plato’s last political dialogue, on which he was still working when he died) “was written in an attempt to restore law to the place which it occupied in the moral estimation of the Greeks and from which Plato had tried to remove it.” But, if this is so, then the dialogue “closes”, in Sabine’s words, “on a note which is entirely out of keeping with the purpose which Plato has been following and with the state which he has sketched in accordance with that purpose.”²⁹ What happens is that Plato’s attempt to describe “the second-best state” in which the authority of written law rather than of the ruler is supreme, breaks down before his own realisation that it is useless to devise laws and institutions for a society unless there are persons in it capable of understanding the principle behind these laws and thus above the law in the sense that they are its guardians rather than its *their* guardian. It is for this reason that “The Laws” concludes with a description of the “Nocturnal Council”, a council of elders who will see that the laws are properly obeyed. “In order that the map of the state may be complete, it must provide for the presence of some body which understands, in the first place, the true nature of the mark a statesman must keep before his eyes, and next, the methods by which it may be attained, and the counsels—emanating principally from the laws themselves, secondarily from individual men—which make for or against it.”³⁰

But if all government requires that there should be some knowledge of its purpose possessed by those who govern, it is also necessary that those who obey should have some sort of knowledge. The need for education, and the kind of education necessary, is made clear by what Socrates

²⁸ tr. Skemp, op. cit., pp. 194–5, 196, 203 (293a-b, 294b, 297e).

²⁹ Sabine, op. cit., pp. 71, 84.

³⁰ The Laws (translated by A. E. Taylor, Dent 1934), p. 357.

says in the “Gorgias”: “We can win happiness only by bending all our own efforts and those of the state to the realisation of uprightness and self-discipline, not by allowing our appetites to go unchecked, and, in an attempt to satisfy their endless importunity, living the life of a brigand.”³¹ “Of all the great offices of state this is the greatest”, says Plato in “The Laws”: he is speaking of the director of education. “... Education is the drawing and leading of children to the rule which has been pronounced right by the voice of the law, and approved as truly right by the concordant experience of the best and oldest men. That the child’s soul, then, may not learn the habit of feeling pleasure and pain in ways contrary to the law and those who have listened to its bidding, but keep them company, taking pleasure and pain in the very same things as the aged—that, I hold, proves to be the real purpose of what we call our ‘songs’.”³²

Aristotle (born in 385 or 384) agreed with his master Plato that the aim of government is the control of the emotions in order that happiness might be sought, not in transient and inconstant pleasures, but in those which endure and are not subject to fortune. But while both believed in the education of the individual so that his emotions might be controlled by his reason, at the same time the political theory of the one no less than that of the other seems to assume that there are and always will be some people who will need to have their emotions controlled by others. A basis of this assumption is the theory of the “natural slave” as worked out by Aristotle: “A man is by nature a slave if he is capable of becoming the property of another, and if he participates in reason to the extent of apprehending it in another, though destitute of it himself.”³³

Are there any “natural slaves”? asks Professor Charles O’Neil, and answers his own question: “it is simply dishonest not to answer: yes, there are. There simply are some men who are unable ‘on their own’ to contribute to the common good life, the common life of common political virtue.” The principle of the political life, of the life of men living in common, is justice, the idea that each man should have his share of what society produces and possesses. And thus the knowledge which is necessary to the government of a society—the knowledge of which government should be merely the application—is the knowledge of what is due to a man: as Professor O’Neil says, “in its innermost and most exquisite expression, in its being, an Aristotelian ‘polis’ is a knowing of the right human thing to be done.”³⁴ But there are some men (this seems to be the Platonic as well as the Aristotelian argument) who will know what is good for a man, what is his due, better than he will know that himself. And this is the explanation of the inadequacy, so Aristotle says, of the democratic principle of equality. “Democracy arose in the strength of an opinion that those who were equal in any one respect were equal absolutely, and in all respects ... Democrats seek to widen the principle of equality until it is made to include all the masses. What is certainly just—and expedient as well as just—is that the principle should extend to all who are really ‘peers’.”³⁵ The principle of equality which underlies the concept of justice, explains Aristotle in the fifth book of “The Nicomachean Ethics”, does not require that every man should get an equal share in everything, but that all should receive equally what they need of each thing³⁶; similarly, one might add, cosmic justice requires, not that everyone should possess an equal amount of knowledge, but that each man equally should possess that knowledge which is required by his

³¹ 507 (p. 117).

³² The Laws, Book 2: 659 (op. cit., p. 37).

³³ The Politics, Book 1 chapter 5: ¶9 (tr. Barker, p. 13).

³⁴ C. J. O’Neil, Aristotle’s Natural Slave Reconsidered (The New Scholasticism, July 1953, pp. 259, 278).

³⁵ The Politics, Book 5 chapter 1: ¶3; Book 5, chapter 8: ¶6 (pp. 204, 225).

³⁶ vid. in particular chapters 3 and 5 (Penguin Classics translation by J. A. K. Thompson 1955, pp. 146–7, 151–4).

social position: “The soul has naturally two elements, a ruling and a ruled; and each has its different goodness, one belonging to the rational and ruling element, and the other to the irrational and ruled ... (Similarly, the different elements of society must share in the possession of moral goodness, possessing it not in the same way, but each in the way appropriate to the discharge of its separate function.) The ruler must possess moral goodness in its full and perfect form, because his function demands a master-artificer, and reason is such a master-artificer; but all other persons need only possess moral goodness to the extent required of them ... (Slaves) need but little goodness; only so much, in fact, as will prevent them from falling short of their duties through intemperance or cowardice.”³⁷

The nature of political knowledge is also debated in the “Protagoras”. Socrates asks why it is that the Athenian Assembly will listen only to the advice of experts when the debate concerns for instance shipbuilding, but when the debate is about questions of public policy will listen to anyone. Protagoras replies by means of a myth. All animals have been given some particular ability—strength, speed, or some other means of self-preservation; but man has been given a general ability to use all things and, since this alone was not enough to ensure his survival, he was also given the ability to live together with his fellows in cities for their mutual protection. “Zeus sent Hermes to impart to men the qualities of respect for others and a sense of justice, so as to bring order into our cities and create a bond of friendship and union. Hermes asked Zeus in what manner he was to bestow these gifts on men. ‘Shall I distribute them as the arts were distributed—that is, on the principle that one trained doctor suffices for many laymen, and so with the other experts? Shall I distribute justice and respect for their fellows in this way, or to all alike?’ ‘To all’ said Zeus. ‘Let all have their share. There could never be cities if only a few shared in these virtues, as in the arts. Moreover, you must lay it down as my law that if anyone is incapable of acquiring his share of these two virtues he shall be put to death as a plague to the city.’ ” And so the Athenians listen to experts when the question before the Assembly concerns building or some other craft. “But when the subject of their counsel involves political wisdom, which must always follow the path of justice and moderation, they listen to every man’s opinion, for they think that everyone must share in this kind of virtue; otherwise the state could not exist.”³⁸

6. Some suggestions.

Perhaps neither the criticisms of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle nor its vindication by Protagoras fully appreciate the principle of democracy. All of them understand that the guiding idea of democracy is the idea of equality, but none of them examines the full implications of the idea, though Aristotle’s analysis of justice provides a clue and a starting-point. Justice is the arranging in society that every man shall have his share of what that society has: justice provides that every man shall have, not an equal amount of everything, but equally whatever he needs. In order that the work of justice—distribution and redistribution—may be done, above all else knowledge is necessary: knowledge of what justice requires. Aristotle and Plato think that this knowledge will be possessed by a small class: Aristotle seems to think that it would be better if the circle of knowledge could be extended as far as possible, though he is somewhat vague and

³⁷ The Politics, Book 1 chapter 13: ¶¶6 8, 12 (pp. 35–6).

³⁸ Protagoras, 322c-d (Penguin Classics translation by W. K. C. Guthrie 1956, p. 54).

self-contradictory on this point³⁹; but Plato is certain that this knowledge is attainable only by a few⁴⁰. Protagoras claims that all citizens must possess political skill if the city is to survive; but he speaks only of what is socially convenient and not of what is absolutely desirable and possible for all men—indeed the political skill of which he speaks seems to be something accidental rather than essential to man—and Plato is unconvinced.

But is the Platonic-Aristotelian idea of a ruling class ruling by virtue of its superior insight in fact compatible with that justice in which they themselves believe? The fact that justice deals in the material world with the distribution of things should not mislead the observer into thinking that it is concerned with nothing more: the real object of justice—the end to which the distribution of material things is but a means—is the creation of a psychological state, is to give the individual a feeling of true contentment, to show him that he is well treated and accepted by the other individuals who make up the society in which he lives. This is why justice must not only be done, but be seen to be done: if it is not seen, it has not achieved the object of justice. And that is why the sort of knowledge Plato and Aristotle describe is not enough, if justice is to be effectively realised in the world of human relationships and not to remain but an ideal with the awareness of which a few may be happy: it is not enough that one or a few men should know and do justice—there is not an extent appropriate to his social function, but know and do justice equally. If justice is a realisable social ideal, then every individual equally must have somewhere, somehow the power of knowing and doing justice to his fellows, and of recognising it when he himself receives it: the realisation of this power will be the realisation of justice.

If this is what justice is, then that slavery which Athens no less than the rest of Greece accepted and which Aristotle sought to justify cannot be just. Indeed, Aristotle's rationalising interpretation will be turned on its head: while he sought to justify and explain a social and economic situation (i.e. the use of one man by another as a tool) in terms of a psychological condition (i.e. the inability of an individual to do good except by allowing himself to be the instrument of another man's reason), the democrat will follow Marx and will denounce this same socio-economic situation (now described as one of "alienated labour") as, if not the sole cause of this psychological condition (in which the individual does not make political and moral decisions for himself, but allows his relations with his fellows to be determined by others), at least dependent upon it for its existence and thus encouraging its continuance. Slavery is, then, not a condition which is potentially just—Aristotle admits that not all legal slaves are natural slaves; and vice versa—but rather one which proclaims the non-realisation of justice: both in those who are slaves, and in those who use them.

The importance of slavery in ancient Greece has been much debated: it has been pointed out that to discuss whether Greek civilisation was "based on" slavery is usually to become bogged down in unprofitable arguments concerning just what "to be basic" means.⁴¹ Professor Jones writes: "It is unlikely that any slaves were owned by two-thirds to three-quarters of the citizen population (of Athens). The great majority of the citizens earned their living by the work of

³⁹ The Politics, 6.2 ¶1, 7.14 ¶¶2–3 19, 2.11 ¶14, 3.1 ¶12 (pp. 258, 315, 319, 86, 95); of 5.8 ¶¶17–18, 6.4 ¶¶1–4. (pp. 228, 263).

⁴⁰ The Statesman 293a (tr. Skemp, p. 194).

⁴¹ M. I. Finley, Was Greek Civilisation Based on Slavery? (*Historia* 8, 1959, p. 161): reprinted in M. I. Finley (ed.), *Slavery in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Heffer 1960). (This collection of essays contains a very interesting one by R. O. Schlaifer on "Greek Theories of Slavery from Homer to Aristotle".)

their hands, as peasant farmers, craftsmen, shopkeepers, seamen and labourers.”⁴² But it cannot be denied that the Athenian democracy used slavery; and it was silver-mines worked by slaves—“speaking generally, mining was the gravest blot on Hellenism”⁴³—that provided the capital which brought the Athenian imperial navy into being.

The Athenian democracy of the fifth century B.C. certainly brought to a high pitch of development the participation of the individual citizen in the political activity of his city: on this all contemporary witnesses, whether hostile or favourable, agree with Pericles: the contrast between the city’s splendid public buildings and the miserable private dwellings shows, says Sir Alfred Zimmern, that the fifth-century Athenian “knew very well that a man who practises politics and ignores housekeeping, though he may possibly starve, at least remains sane and companionable.”⁴⁴ Slavery is one sign that Athens did not fully understand the democracy it professed. Its acceptance of war is another. Wars arise, says Socrates, from the desire for material things: “All wars are undertaken for the acquisition of wealth; and the reason why we have to acquire wealth is the body, because we are slaves in its service.”⁴⁵ And even if we seek merely to defend ourselves against the unjust demands of an aggressor, it may be possible to do this only at the expense of ceasing to be able to defend ourselves against, what is far worse and more harmful than suffering injustice, doing injustice.⁴⁶ The first requirement of justice is not that a man should receive his share of those material things which are as it were the instruments of justice (of pp.23–4), but that there should be a willingness on the part of his fellows to give him that which is his due. Thus, the most and indeed the only effective way in which a man can defend himself against suffering injustice is not, as even Socrates thought, by the use of power, but by the building up of the spirit of justice in his fellows.

Neither the policy of the Athenian democracy nor the Socratic-Platonic-Aristotelian criticism of it fully realised the universal nature of the democratic principle of equality. But an understanding of the Athenian experience—of the slow, groping, incoherent and never altogether complete evolution of an idea of citizenship, together with an appreciation of the criticisms of the great Athenian philosophers⁴⁷ (and it is important to remember that these criticisms were in terms of an idea of citizenship fostered to a great extent by the political development of Athens): may nonetheless help us to understand the nature of this equality. We may accept the philosophers’ contention that the art of government depends upon education, that in a sense government is education, and even (some of us at least) that education is the training of the individual’s libidinal capacity so that he seeks after the true happiness and not after ephemeral pleasures. But the anarchist will want to modify—perhaps he will claim, to clarify—the original picture of the ideal.

It is strange that Plato with his strong sense of the common nature and destiny of man—“there is none so worthless whom love cannot impel, as it were by a divine inspiration, towards virtue”⁴⁸—should nonetheless have made so sharp a distinction between those who govern and

⁴² Jones, p. 17.

⁴³ Sir William Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilisation* (Edward Arnold 1927, 3rd ed. 1952), p. 254: he gives some details.

⁴⁴ *op. cit.*, p. 212 (cf. pp. 213–4, 293–4, 296).

⁴⁵ *Phaedo*, 66 (*The Last Days of Socrates*: Penguin Classics translation by Hugh Tredennick 1954, p. 111).

⁴⁶ *vid. Gorgias*, 509–513, 522 (pp. 119–25, 141–2).

⁴⁷ Both Socrates and Plato were Athenian citizens who lived and died in Athens (Socrates’ service in the Athenian army and Plato’s expeditions to Sicily were the only time they spent away from their native city); Aristotle neither was born or died in Athens, but spent there twenty years in Plato’s Academy (367–347) and another thermo (335–323) in his own.

⁴⁸ *Symposium* 179a 7–8 (also in Penguin Classics translation).

those who obey: the explanation lies perhaps in a misconceived psychological analogy—Plato compared the rule which rational men ought to exert over irrational men to the rule which the rational part of the soul ought to exert over the irrational part.⁴⁹ But the anarchist ideal of the universal rule of reason and justice is of a rule whose instruments are not—cannot be—the understanding of a few or even of a majority: the idea of justice is that all shall be saved. And the object of education is the awakening or the bringing back to life of the power of understanding in every man: education is education in the use of freedom, in the use of the power of every individual man to rise above the fleeting and insatiable pleasures of material things to the contemplation of the divine harmony of which the spirit of justice is the earthly sign or symbol. Justice is the achievement of freedom: where there is understanding of freedom, there is justice, and where freedom is obscure, unrealised, there can be no justice. And even while the universal power of freedom remains slighted and unfulfilled, every just man and every just act is a testimony that it is universal.

⁴⁹ vid. *The Laws*, Book 3: 689 (p. 70).

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Martin Small
Athenian Democracy
November 1964

Retrieved on 22nd September 2020 from <https://libcom.org/library/athenian-democracy>
Originally published in *Anarchy* #045: Ancient Greece

theanarchistlibrary.org