

Democracy in athens | essay



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Where did the real power lie in Athens' radical democracy?

Fifth-century, Athenian democracy has often served as a paradigm for democratic radicalism: from the French and American Revolutions to contemporary Anarchist Thought. And yet, the historical reality of the Athenian constitution may have been very different to what modern ideologues have envisaged. Was Athenian democracy truly a 'rule by the many', as the Greek word suggests? Or did the upper classes maintain their grasp over 'real power' down to the 4th century? This serious tension is exemplified in two contrasting passages in Thucydides' narrative. In the so-called 'Funeral Oration', Thucydides has his Pericles proudly declare that 'our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people' ^[1]; but a few chapters later Thucydides will turn this statement on its head by claiming that 'in what was nominally a democracy power was really in the hands of one man': Pericles himself ^[2]. This essay will argue that although 'real power' did indeed reside with the demos, in practice a special position was reserved for wealthy citizens who would dominate the assembly as orators.

Democracy first emerged in the end of the 6th century as a reaction to 'stasis' or civil strife ^[3]. The Cleisthenic reforms of 508-7 BC resulted in an isonomic constitution, founded on ten new tribes and the reorganization of Attica in *demes*, while the assembly, archons, Council of Areopagus and Heliaea still functioned as they had done under Solon and Peisistratus. The new council of 500, based on the 10 tribes, was now gradually replacing the aristocratic institution of the Areopagus, while the extensive use of lot in selecting the officials, emphasized the equality of all citizens, who now

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enjoyed equal political rights in the election of officials whether at the deme level (demarche), the tribal level (general) or the state level (archons and councillors). Democratic reforms continued throughout the 5th century. In 501/0 the importance of the archonships was greatly reduced by the introduction of the ten *strategoí* (generals). By 487 archons were selected by lot, while in 462 the democratic leader Ephialtes was assassinated for his involvement in further weakening the jurisdiction of the Areopagus ^[4]. Soon after, Pericles will introduce political pay of jurors and other officials while even the chief archonships were now opened to smallholders and -at least in theory- to the *thetes*. In post-Periclean Athens, a new generation of wealthy non-aristocrats like Cleon, Hyperbolus and Androcles dominated the Athenian political scene as ‘champions of the people’ and promoted further the interests of the Athenian masses.

The Athenian constitution of the middle and late 5th century was therefore a genuinely popular constitution, a form of government that was primarily concerned with improving the welfare of the citizen mass. The Athenian demos was empowered with direct voting in the Assembly and the popular jury-courts, by raising hands, drawing ballots, or inscribing on *ostraca*. They enjoyed political liberty, freedom of speech and equality before the law. The people –rather than the Areopagus- were directly responsible for the examination of one’s conduct while in office ^[5]. With respect to foreign policy, democratic Athens embarked on a staunch imperialistic policy which entailed significant benefits for the citizen mass. Measures such as state pay for jurors, Assembly members and sailors, the cleruchies, the

liturgies and the *eisphorae* imposed on the rich, were tantamount to an indirect form of redistribution of state funds to the lower classes.

Yet in practice the Athenian democracy retained a hint of elitism throughout its long history. Politicians -democrats and oligarchs alike- were always members of the upper classes of Athenian society. Cleisthenes, Alcibiades and Pericles himself were all members of the Alcmeonid family, one of the oldest and most illustrious ‘gene’ of Attica. And even ‘new men’ like Cleon and Hyperbolus or even Demosthenes were wealthy enough to afford the appropriate rhetorical education provided by the sophists. While the wider demos would exercise its political power by voting for or against the issue at stake, it was always men from the propertied classes that would put forth a proposal or move a decree. As a consequence Athenian politics tended to be personal rather than ideological, revolving around personal charisma and rhetorical skills rather than party organization ^[6]. This explains the typical view expressed by conservatives such as Thucydides, Aristophanes and Plato that the demos was always being ‘led’ by the ‘rhetores’: led wisely under Pericles, and led astray by his ‘lesser’ successors ^[7].

While acknowledging the special role played by these wealthy Athenians vis-à-vis the citizen mass one should dismiss the oligarchic view of the Athenian demos as a naïve, passive spectator of the rhetorical skills of its leaders as an exaggeration. Athenian Assemblies were proverbially harsh in holding their leaders responsible for failures. One should think of the aftermath of Arginusai in 406 BC and the fate of Thucydides himself ^[8]. Even Pericles’ own political career was far from rosy. As one reads through Plutarch’s ‘Life

of Pericles' the Thucydidean concept of Athens as 'essentially the rule by one man' seems less and less plausible. Pericles, his wife and his protégés, Pheidias and Anaxagoras, were repeatedly -and often successfully- prosecuted by political opponents like Thucydides son of Melesias ^[9]; his sons were never granted an Athenian citizenship despite his passionate plea before the Assembly; and a fine was imposed on him when the invading Spartans pillaged most other country estates but not his ^[10]. Unfair as these measures may sound, they demonstrate that even the 'Olympian' was susceptible to the fierce criticism of the Ecclesia. The Athenian demos was not only one of the most powerful citizen bodies in the Greek world; it was also the most experienced and demanding when it came to judging personalities, abstract concepts, law cases, policy recommendations or even theatrical plays. Politicians could come and go but the Athenians knew that the final word would always rest with the demos.

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Footnotes

[1] Thucydides, II. 43

[2] *ibid.*, II. 65.

[3] For the relation between stasis and democratic reforms see Pseudo-Aristotle, 20. 1: ' Cleisthenes, getting the worse of the party struggle,

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attached the people to his following by proposing to give political power to the masses’.

[4] For the weakening of the Areopagus see Plutarch, ‘Life of Kimon’, 15 and Aeschelus, ‘Oresteia’; for dating the introduction of the lot see Hornblower (2002: 25) and Meiggs & Lewis (1988: 89-94); for the first recorded instance of a paid council see Thucydides, VIII, 69.

[5] All greek words in brackets are taken from Pericles’ Funeral Oration.

[6] Hornblower (2002: 25)

[7] Thucydides, II. 65

[8] *ibid.* IV, 104-7

[9] Plutarch, ‘Life of Pericles’, 32

[10] Thucydides, II. 65