

'There is no direct institutional legacy of Athenian or any other direct democracy to any modern form of democracy' (Paul Cartledge). If this is so, what if anything do modern democracies owe to classical Athens?

In an article for the Guardian newspaper, Professor Mary Beard described 'our own modern political fetish' for Athenian democracy.¹ She cites Bush Sr and his introduction to the 1992 exhibition, on the 2500th anniversary of democracy, 'The Greek Miracle,' where he shared his appreciation for classical Athens and 'our shared democratic heritage.' Boris Johnson, in the 2015 Greek vs Rome debate against Mary Beard, argued that 'the Athenians gave us our modern system of government.'² In 2016, on his final foreign trip as president, Barack Obama, described, while visiting Athens, the debt that modern democracies owe to the classical Athenians and how 'the flame first lit here in Athens never died.'³ Such is the fetish Mary Beard described: '...democratic Athens as the foundation of modern political virtues: one man one vote, freedom of expression, communal decision-making, the sovereignty of the law and equality before it, and so on.'

In his seminal book 'Democracy: A Life,' Paul Cartledge argues that we owe little, in terms of institutions, to the classical Athenians. There is 'no direct institutional legacy' of Athenian democracy to the modern democracies we recognise today.⁴ The critical distinction he draws out is that our democracy is representative, whereas, in classical Athens, they practised direct democracy. In fact, in an article for 'The Conversation,' he asserted that the democracies we recognise today would be seen as oligarchies by the Ancient Greeks, or at best oligarchies in disguise.⁵ The fundamental difference is our practice of elections. To us, elections and the idea of voting for our representatives seem inherently democratic. The vote is what, in our modern democracy, gives the power (κράτος) to the people (δῆμος): it is the ordinary person's political voice. In the Suffragettes' 'Give Women Votes' campaign, the vote was indicative of power and agency; still today, we view voting as a symbol of coming of age. Throughout modern history, the idea of the vote has been glorified. However, in classical Athens, as Paul Cartledge observes, 'elections were considered to be in themselves

¹ Mary Beard, "The Origins of Democracy", *The Guardian*, 2006.

² Intelligence Squared, *Greece Vs Rome, With Boris Johnson And Mary Beard*, 2015.

³ C-SPAN, *President Obama on the Greek Origins of Democracy*, 2017.

⁴ Paul Cartledge, *Democracy: A Life* (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 293.

⁵ Paul Cartledge, "Ancient Greeks Would Not Recognise Our 'Democracy'", *The Conversation*, 2016.

oligarchic.⁶ There is a startling paradox: the classical Athenians, whom we hail as the founding fathers of our political system, would reject what we commonly see as the epitome of democracy – elections.

The distinction should be made between ideas and institutions: the Athenians may have inspired, and still inspire, the attractive thought of decision-making by the people; but, in terms of institutions, have we inherited anything? In classical Athens, only male citizens were able to participate in political life: about 30,000 men, as Mary Beard illustrates, the size of Manchester University today.⁷ The Athenian assembly operated under the principle of 'anyone who wishes' (ὁ βουλόμενος), in this spirit, any male citizen could attend the assembly and address their fellow citizens, propose a law or a public lawsuit. The positions on the council and jury were chosen by lot and had strict term limits to prevent governing classes and political parties from forming. The only positions that were elected were those that required particular expertise such as senior military commands; these roles were aristocratic meaning, in the Greek sense, 'rule by the best.'⁸ Taking solely into account classical Athens's inclusive institutions, it may be viewed as a perfect state where the people dictate their destiny. Many maintain, however, not least Paul Cartledge himself, that everyday practical realities matter most, as guided by the institutions, not the institutions themselves.⁹

In the fourth century BC, the Athenian assembly voted as often as every nine days on matters of public interest, which is the equivalent of having a referendum every nine days.¹⁰ At an assembly meeting, a herald would ask 'who wishes to speak?' but most Athenians would never speak in their lifetime. The speakers, as Melissa Lane argues, 'were the closest thing to professional politicians in Athens.'¹¹ These speakers were ambitious men often hoping to be elected general (as with Aristides, Themistocles and Pericles). Lane also describes the danger of speaking: 'those who risked speaking in the assembly knew that

⁶ Cartledge, "Ancient Greeks Would Not Recognise Our 'Democracy'"

⁷ Beard, "The Origins of Democracy"

⁸ Christopher W Blackwell, "An Introduction To Classical Athenian Democracy", *Chs.Harvard.Edu*, 2002.

⁹ Cartledge, *Democracy: A Life*, 296.

¹⁰ Cartledge, "Ancient Greeks Would Not Recognise Our 'Democracy'"

¹¹ Melissa Lane, *Birth of Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 86.

they could be rejected, punished or cast aside at any moment by the people whom they were trying to lead.¹² Invoking the American Revolutionary leader, James Madison, Paul Cartledge encapsulates the practical reality perfectly: 'Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.'¹³

Jeffrey Rosen, United States Deputy Attorney General, in an article aptly called 'America Is Living James Madison's Nightmare' argued that with the advent of social media, we are engaged in a system of communication which Madison would equate with mob rule.¹⁴ He likens social media to the Athenian assembly, both a forum for the public to share their views and hear other's views on a large scale (within the context of the citizenship of Athens and a modern democracy). James Madison feared the passion of the mob and how this could skew thoughtful decision making; he also feared the ambitious politicians who could appeal emotively to the people, rather than rationally. As Rosen himself states, Madison believed 'the Athenian citizens had been swayed by crude and ambitious politicians who had played on their emotions.' Politicians now try to engage with the mob by tweeting: it has become a game of who can get the biggest reaction in 140 characters, the most retweets, likes or shares which echo the cheers and boos of the Athenian assembly. In this way, social media is perhaps giving us a flavour of Athenian democracy, providing a space akin to the assembly, where anyone can share their opinions or more likely become part of the singular mob to cheer or boo the speakers. The difference is that the speakers of the Athenian assembly did not hold any elected public office; the reaction of the people was decisive. Whereas today, no matter how unpopular, politicians cannot be booed out by their fellow citizens, at least not until an election.

Free speech, *parrhesia* (παρρησία), was an essential principle in classical Athens. In Homer's Iliad, there is a character called Thersites who 'was the ugliest man that had come to Ilium.'¹⁵ During Book 2, he spoke out in the circle of kings, partly repeating Achilles's speech. Odysseus silenced him with threats and struck him on the back with a sceptre. The

¹² Lane, *Birth of Politics*, 87

¹³ Cartledge, *Democracy: A Life*, 284

¹⁴ Jeffrey Rosen, "America Is Living James Madison's Nightmare", *The Atlantic*, 2018.

¹⁵ Homer and others, *The Iliad*, 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 2003), 27.

aristocratically structured Greek camp excluded him from political decision-making. Thersites had not shown *aidos* (αἰδώς): as a quality, *aidos* was a feeling of shame or reverence that prevented people from speaking freely, especially to those of a higher rank. The classical Athenians rejected *aidos*, as an idea of the past and created a space where, in theory, anyone could speak out. In the words of Arlene Saxonhouse, 'contempt for the past and its norms were at the core of the founding of Athenian democracy.'¹⁶ However, once again, the practical reality undermines the ideal. For example, Socrates, as Saxonhouse observes, spoke freely but without respect and forced others to see the contradictions in their opinions. Arousing anger, he was put to death. Saxonhouse contends: 'there is only so much *parrhesia*, or absence of *aidos*, that even a democracy can endure.'¹⁷

This notion forces us to question how free, in a modern setting, we are to speak. Saxonhouse explains Diodotus's argument that speakers in Athens 'do not speak what they believe because they fear evil motives will be imputed upon them.' This sentiment rings true today where those who speak out are often 'trolled' on social media, while the 'trolls' enjoy the anonymity of the mob. *Parrhesia*, as Saxonhouse observes, 'is one of the terms Athenians used in singing the praises of their democracy;' still today, we value the freedom to express ourselves. However, there is a striking contradiction between the ideal of freedom of speech and the practical reality, both in classical Athenian and modern democracies.

The freedom to satirise and so scrutinise our leaders is one of the most important ideals we have inherited from the ancient Greeks. Aristophanes, who was not afraid to mock public figures such as Pericles and Cleon, is often held out as an example. However, Stephen Halliwell argues that satire 'which flagrantly flouted otherwise common standards of public propriety' was 'inseparable from the context of festive celebration,' such as the Festival of Dionysus. Halliwell contends that 'it was only within the 'protection' of this setting that such consistently outrageous humour as we find in Aristophanes' fifth-century works could have

¹⁶ Lee C. Bollinger, Arlene Saxonhouse and Robyn Meredith, "Free Speech at The End of The Century: Panel Discussion", *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 52.4 (1999), 39.

¹⁷ Bollinger, Saxonhouse, Meredith, "Panel Discussion", 40.

been tolerated.¹⁸ Following Halliwell's line of thinking, if satire had to be protected in the setting of festive celebration, the state of free speech in classical Athens is ambiguous. It is too simplistic to conclude that, as theatre and satire flourished in classical Athens, there was universal freedom of speech: the everyday realities must be considered.

Along with free speech, the law, as in modern democracies, was sovereign in classical Athens. However, the Athenian law courts have often been presented negatively. As Adranni Lanni observes 'the most well-known example of Athenian justice is an outrage: the trial and execution of Socrates.'¹⁹ This poor reputation is usually put down to amateurism; the jurors were selected by lot and had no legal experience. Today, we still select a jury randomly; however, rather than 12 jurors, there may have been as many as 500 in Athens: mainly to prevent bribery. Paul Cartledge argues that Socrates was guilty as charged: his charges – impiety and corrupting the young – as Cartledge asserts, 'seem ridiculous to us but in ancient Athens, they were genuinely felt to serve the communal good.'²⁰ Cartledge rejects this idea that Socrates's trial was a consequence of mob rule. However, how could 500 amateur jurors make a reasoned decision without a judge or legal guidance? Andrew Alwine addresses this question: 'this system of amateur jurors worked because Athens never developed a massive body of legal literature preventing the ordinary citizen from understanding and participating in the process.'²¹ Therefore, by calling these 500 jurors mob rule because they are amateurs, is judging the classical Athenians by modern standards. While we have inherited the ideals of the classical Athenian law courts – free trial, innocent until proven guilty, a jury of peers – honed over 2500 years, today, the practical application is and must be different.

Once again, the distinction must be made between ideas and institutions. In arguably one of the most powerful speeches of all time, Pericles in his famous funeral oration, relayed to us by Thucydides, hardly mentions Athens's institutions. Pericles draws upon the ideas behind

¹⁸ Stephen Halliwell, "Comic Satire and Freedom of Speech in Classical Athens", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, (1991), 48-70.

¹⁹ Victor Bers and Adranni Lanni, "An Introduction to the Athenian Legal System", in *Athenian Law in Its Democratic Context* (Center for Hellenic Studies Discussion Series, 2003), 2.

²⁰ Paul Cartledge, *Ancient Greek Political Thought in Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 101-121.

²¹ Andrew Alwine, *Enmity and Feuding in Classical Athens* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 12.

democracy and not the democratic institutions to honour the men who died in battle. Pericles boasts that they 'shall not need the praises of Homer';²² this is not the personal eternal glory that the Homeric heroes longed for, it is an even greater glory that transcends the individual: the glory of the democratic state. It appears Pericles realises that the ideas are immortal; the institutions cannot, realistically, stand the test of time due to an ever-changing society: it is the ideas of classical Athens that are worth fighting and dying for. Transcending generations, in the words of Ronald Reagan: 'democracy is worth dying for because it is the most deeply honourable form of government ever devised by man.'²³

Idealising democracy, Melissa Lane argues, can be dangerous. She describes how Athens acquired its empire: 'the regime dedicated to freedom and equality at home confronted the temptation to exploit others abroad.'²⁴ Over the course of gaining its empire, Athenian democracy became a collective tyranny. Even Cleon bluntly states: 'your rule [meaning your imperial rule] is a tyranny.'²⁵ The Athenians, overcome by their god-like democracy and glorious empire, became hubristic, making, as Lane observes, 'self-interested, short-sighted decisions' for the good of Athens like a tyrant. This feeling of superiority due to a political system is relevant, particularly of Western cultures, in more recent history: a prominent example being colonisation. Still today we have this hubris: often we view Western ideals of freedom and equality as superior to other cultures. Pericles sums this up in his funeral oration perfectly, as he hubristically asserts 'Athens is the school of Hellas.'²⁶

Returning to the 'political fetish' for Athenian democracy, described by Mary Beard, modern democracies owe, on the one hand, everything to classical Athens, and, on the other hand, nothing. To us, classical Athens appears a microcosm of the perfect political system, hazy enough in history for us only to recognise the guiding principles, so that it has become a symbol of the voice of the people. However, the supporting institutions have inevitably melted away in the face of everyday realities, which have been continuously changing over

²² Thucydides., Rex Warner and M. I Finley, *History of The Peloponnesian War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990), 215.

²³ Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, *Ceremony Commemorating The 40th Anniversary of D-day*, 1984.

²⁴ Lane, *Birth of Politics*, 92

²⁵ Lane, *Birth of Politics*, 94

²⁶ Thucydides, Warner, Finley, *History of The Peloponnesian War*, 215.

2500 years. Yes, we still hold referendums and have trial by jury and, yes, we can still propose laws through a petition; however, these are distant echoes of Athenian democracy, not necessarily institutional legacies. Take trial by jury, for instance; it could equally be traced back to the Magna Carta, it is impossible to conclusively evaluate how much, or how little, we owe to different past events. However, what still endures are the fundamental values behind democracy: 'the flame first lit here in Athens never died.'²⁷

²⁷ C-SPAN, *President Obama on the Greek Origins of Democracy*, 2017.

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