

Lecture I: Greek Democracy

The first mention we come across in Greek history of the word for “freedom” (*isonomia*) is in a document from the island of Samos dating to the year 522 BCE. The inhabitants had recently overthrown the rule of a tyrant and although they were still not a democratic polity, they declared the right to equal justice for all citizens. The local nobility who had ruled under the tyranny were expelled from the island and the “people” (*demos*) took control of the government. A few years later, the biggest step toward democratic government came in 508 BCE in Athens when the elder statesman Cleisthenes “proposed from the floor of a public meeting that the constitution should be changed and that, in all things, the sovereign power should rest with the entire adult male citizenry. It was a spectacular moment, the first known proposal of democracy, the lasting example of the Athenians to the world.” (Fox, *The Classical World*, p. 87)

Cleisthenes made the proposal as a way of countering the claim to power of a rival aristocratic faction, but, in the end, his seemingly reckless maneuver met with general agreement among the approximately 25,000 citizens of Athens, and a system of popular government in which public officials (*archons*) were chosen by lot from the whole body of the citizenry – with no one allowed to serve more than one term in any given office – inaugurated a whole new way of governing. The system was rooted in elections at the local level (most Athenians actually lived outside the city itself in the countryside of Attica), with each village council electing a governing council of men called “demarchs.” A popular assembly of citizens met four times each year in Athens and voted on the most important matters for decision. A permanent council was chosen from the assembly, with no councilman allowed to serve more than two terms during his lifetime. The word “democracy” – Greek for government of the people – is not found in any surviving Greek text before the mid-460’s BCE. (Fox, p. 88) These were large bodies of people – with the popular assembly likely to number some 6,000 people when it met and the directing council elected from the assembly likely to consist of 500 people. Public offices were filled “by lot” from council members, but other business was conducted by open voting. Here, for the first time in human history, citizens could vote and take part in open debate of pending measures. To our knowledge, the Athenian example was not followed anywhere else in Greece.

A cautionary note regarding the meaning of “liberty” in the ancient Greek (and Roman) world is struck by the French historian Fustel de Coulanges in his classic book *The Ancient City*, a study of the religious and civil institutions of ancient Greece and Rome published in 1864 and still in print one hundred years later.

“It is a singular error . . . to believe that in the ancient cities men enjoyed liberty. They had not even the idea of it. They did not believe there could exist any right as against the city and its gods. . . . The government was called by turns monarchy, aristocracy, democracy; but none of these . . . gave man true liberty, individual liberty. To have political rights, to vote, to name magistrates, to have the privilege of being archon – this was called liberty; but man was not the less enslaved by the state. The ancients, especially the Greeks, always exaggerated the importance, and above all, the rights of society; this was largely due, doubtless, to the sacred and religious character with which society was clothed in the beginning.” (Coulanges, p. 223)

Coulanges views on ancient “liberty” are somewhat contradicted by Pericles in his Funeral Oration cited below, but the almost sacred nature of civil and military service to the state does come through in Cicero’s writings quoted in the lecture on the Roman Republic.

Distrust of public officials remained a hallmark of Athenian democracy. After leaving office every official had to face a “scrutiny committee” which performed a more or less rigorous review of his official acts. Any official whose behavior was judged to have threatened democracy could be “ostracized” by the

assembly, where a majority of the votes scratched on the pieces of pottery known as *ostrakons* could send the offending person into ten years of exile. Athenian democracy lasted in this form for about 180 years, until Athens lost its freedom following the conquest of Greece by Philip of Macedon in 328 BCE.

I would now like to look at two works by the great Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle discussing the various forms of government known to man. I have excerpted those parts of these two works – the *Republic* of Plato and the long essay entitled *Politics* by Aristotle – that deal with democracy, and especially the pros and cons of this form of government as seen by these two eminent men.

Plato (428-348 BCE) penned this first major work on government (later translated into Latin and entitled *Republic* by the Romans) around 375 BCE. In this work, Plato imagines a dialogue in which Socrates discusses with his students, Glaucon and Adeimantus, the various forms of government. He names five: timocracy, aristocracy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny. “Timocracy” is defined as rule by property owners or the wealthiest citizens, but seems to be more of an ideal than a reality, since it quickly degenerates into oligarchy, in which the leaders are mercenary figures whose sole object is to increase their wealth. Aristocracy also had a tendency to degenerate, with the founding fathers, so to speak, honorable and virtuous men, but their sons and grandsons less dedicated to the common good and prone to dissolute overconsumption. Oligarchy tends to lead to severe economic inequality, with the poor eventually overthrowing the oligarchs and instituting democracy. Socrates has a number of good things to say about democracy: it allows maximum freedom to citizens to develop their individual lives; its diversity makes for a richer and more creative society, for instance. But the passion for equality tends to erode the authority of any person elected (or chosen by lot) to public office. The democratic person tends to think he knows as much, if not more, than any purported expert or authority. This mentality eventually leads to a break down in the system of rule and an attack on the rich in the name of greater equality. A demagogue emerges who gains the support of the masses and finally succeeds in getting himself selected as the leader. He then expropriates the rich and builds his own personal party, leading to arbitrary rule – i.e., total disregard for established laws – and continuous chaos or anarchy.

Here are a few of the relevant quotations from the *Republic* where the system of democracy is discussed in dialogue form between Socrates and his students. It’s not always clear who is talking at any given time, but the dialogues are all recreations by Plato of what he assumes these men would have said. In the final analysis, all the dialogues are Plato talking. (The page references refer to Alan Bloom’s translation entitled *The Republic of Plato*, Basic Books, 2016).

Socrates seems to think that a bloody revolution leads to the establishment of democracy:

“Then democracy, I suppose, comes into being when the poor win, killing some of the others and casting out some, and share the regime and the ruling offices with those who are left on an equal basis; and, for the most part, the offices in it are given by lot.” (*Republic*, p. 235)

This sounds more like France or Russia after their revolutions. Those killed, we are to understand, are the rich.

“Then democracy, [Socrates] said, “would have all this and other things akin to it and would be, as it seems, a sweet regime, without rulers and many-colored, dispensing a certain equality to equals and unequals.”(p. 236)

Democracy, in this way, is a system that allows everyone to more or less make their own rules and to live as they please.

And what does democracy consider the ultimate good. “Freedom, I said, for surely in a city under a democracy you would hear that this is the finest thing it has, and that for this reason it is the only regime worth living in for anyone who is by nature free.” (p. 240)

But Socrates soon shows his own distaste for this untrammelled democracy. After listing several “evils” of democracy, he maintains that democracy breaks down all authority and traditions: “In such a state of society the master fears and flatters his scholars, and the scholars despise their masters and tutors; young and old are alike; and the young man is on a level with the old, and is ready to compete with him in word and deed; and old men condescend to the young and are full of pleasantry and gaiety; they are both loath to be thought morose and authoritative, and therefore they adopt the manners of the young.”

“The last extreme of popular liberty is when the slave bought with money, whether male or female, is just as free as his or her purchaser; nor must I forget to tell of the liberty and equality of the two sexes in relation to each other.”

Socrates says even the domestic animals in a democracy feel they are as good as their masters and “they will run at anybody who comes in their way if he does not leave the road clear for them.”

Finally, the citizens “chafe impatiently at the least touch of authority, and at length as you know, they cease to care even for the laws, written and unwritten; they will have no one over them.”

And Socrates concludes: “Such, my friend . . . is the fair and glorious beginning out of which springs tyranny.” (The quotations without page numbers are from the Gutenberg on-line version of Benjamin Jowett’s 19th century translation of the *Republic*)

Glaucon asks Socrates: “Aren’t the people always accustomed to set up some one man as their special leader and to foster him and make him grow great?” “Yes, they are accustomed to do that,” Socrates replies. (p. 244)

A much more upbeat take on Greek democracy came from the Athenian leader Pericles, whose eulogy for Athenian soldiers killed in the Peloponnesian War was captured by the historian Thucydides, who wrote his history a few decades before Socrates came on the scene:

“Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighboring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favors the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy. If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences; if to social standing, 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. The freedom which we enjoy in our government extends also to our ordinary life. . . . We do not feel called upon to be angry with our neighbor for doing what he likes”

“To the Athenian the fruits of other countries are as familiar a luxury as those of his own. . . . We throw open our city to the world, and never by alien acts exclude foreigners from any opportunity of learning or observing. . . . At Athens we live exactly as we please”

Athens was, of course, defeated by the authoritarian city-state Sparta in these wars and went into decline under Spartan domination. Its brief experiment with democracy, however, inspired later nations and still serves as the model of democracy, albeit one that supposedly rested on the labor of some 400,000 enslaved people.

Next we look at Aristotle's *Politica* or *Politics* and, specifically, what he had to say about democracy. I will cite passages from the Oxford World Classics edition of the work edited and translated from the Greek by Ernest Baker (Oxford University Press, 1995; paperback version issued in 1998 and 2009).

Aristotle was a much more systematic thinker than Plato, in fact Aristotle's whole approach to knowledge was to organize and define as much of creation as he could bring under his observation or learn about through studying the works of other thinkers. He starts (in somewhat the same way as Plato) by identifying the "constitutions" of various Greek city states. He divides them into aristocracies, oligarchies, democracies, and tyrannies. By "constitution" he means *political system*, not a written document such as the American Constitution.

He starts his discussion with a very broad generalization about why people organize themselves into communities or "polities." He reiterates his frequently stated assertion that "man is a political animal." "For this reason people desire to live a social life even when they stand in no need of mutual succor; but they are also drawn together by a common interest, in proportion as each attains a share in the good life. The good life is the chief end, both for the community as a whole and for each of us individually. But people also come together, and form and maintain political associations, merely for the sake of life; for perhaps there is some element of the good even in the simple fact of living, so long as the evils of existence do not preponderate too heavily. It is an evident fact that most people cling hard enough to life to be willing to endure a good deal of suffering, which implies that life has in it a sort of healthy happiness and a natural quality of pleasure."

(p. 98)

"Today because of the profits to be derived from office and the handling of public property, people want to hold office continuously." (p. 99)

"The real ground of difference between oligarchy and democracy is poverty and riches. It is inevitable that there should be an oligarchy where the rulers, whether they are few or many, owe their positions to riches; and it is equally inevitable that there should be a democracy where the poor rule." (p. 102).

Since Greece in Aristotle's time was organized in many city-states, the word "city" should be understood in modern terms as "nation" or "country." For the people of the time, the "city" was their "country."

"Any city which is truly so called, and is not merely one in name, must devote itself to the end of encouraging goodness." (p. 104).

"What constitutes a city is an association of households and clans in a good life, for the sake of attaining a perfect and self-sufficing existence." (p. 106).

"A city with a body of disfranchised citizens who are numerous and poor must necessarily be a city which is full of enemies." (p. 109).

Aristotle observes that some "experts" do not believe that the mass of the people are competent to choose their rulers:

But then he remarks that this is not "well-founded" as a general rule: "Each individual may indeed be a worse judge than the experts, but all, when they meet together, are either better than experts or at any rate no worse." He also notes that the end user of a product is the best judge of its quality (i.e., usefulness), "the diner," he writes, "not the cook, will be the best judge of a feast." (pp. 110 and 111).

Aristotle seems convinced that “many people” making a decision on a matter will come up with a better result than a single individual or a small number of people. Referring to the Greek system of popular assemblies for legislation, and more restricted assemblies for administration – called councils – and even smaller groups called upon to decide innocence or guilt in legal cases – juries – he writes: “the people should be sovereign on the more important issues, since the assembly, the council, and the court consist of many people.” (p. 111)

“The good in the sphere of politics is justice, and justice consists in what tends to promote the common interest.” (p. 112).

Again, the importance of numbers “the many” in determining what is just and good for the common interest:

“the many have a justified claim against the few: taken together and compared with the few they are stronger, richer, and better.” (p. 115).

Not everyone is fit for democratic government, however.

“these barbarian peoples are more servile in character than the Greeks (as the peoples of Asia are more servile than those of Europe); and they therefore tolerate despotic rule without any complaint.” (p. 121).

But, monarchy (which is what he is discussing in this section) can be an appropriate form of government

“When it happens that the whole of a family, or a single individual among the ordinary people, is of merit so outstanding as to surpass that of all the rest, it is only just that this family should be vested with kingship and absolute sovereignty, or that this single person should become king.”

Of course Aristotle was reputed to be the tutor to the young Alexander of Macedon, who went on to become “Alexander the Great.”

Then Aristotle compares democracy and oligarchy:

“Democracy exists wherever the free-born are sovereign, and . . . oligarchy exists wherever the rich are sovereign.”

“There is a democracy when the free-born and poor control the government, being at the same time a majority, and similarly there is an oligarchy when the rich and better-born control the government, being at the same time a minority.”

He then discusses the various levels of property qualification for holding public office. The higher the office, the greater wealth a person needed to possess.

Then there are the perversions of democracy:

“Demagogues rise in cities where the laws are not sovereign. . . . A democracy of this sort, since it has the character of a monarchy and is not governed by law, sets about ruling in a monarchical way and grows despotic; flatterers are held in honor and it becomes analogous to a tyrannical form of monarchy.” (p. 145)

“It is popular leaders who, by referring all issues to the decision of the people, are responsible for substituting the sovereignty of decrees for that of the laws.” (p. 145)

“When the farming class and the class with moderate means are the sovereign power in the constitution, they conduct the government under the rule of law. Because they are able to live by their work, but cannot enjoy any leisure, they make the law supreme, and confine meetings of the assembly to a minimum; while the remaining citizens are allowed to participate in the constitution as soon as they attain the property qualification determined by the law. . . . Of course, there cannot be opportunity for leisure where there is no income.” (p. 147)

Here Aristotle stresses the modest income of those who govern a healthy democracy. They are neither rich nor poor. Entry into the ranks of governing citizens is open to all those who attain a certain level of wealth. Payment for attending the assembly enables more people to participate in public life:

“All alike join in political activity, owing to the facilities for leisure which are provided even for the poor by the system of state-payment for attendance in the assembly and the courts.” (p. 148)

But, the poor are not best suited to govern the city:

“It seems impossible that there should be good government in a city which is ruled by the poorer sort, and not by the best of its citizens.” (p. 152)

“Merit is the criterion of aristocracy, as wealth is the criterion of oligarchy, and free birth of democracy.” But in all three systems “the principle of the rule of majority-decision is present. . . .” (p. 152)

Again, the issue of a property qualification for voting arises: “it is considered to be democratic that a property qualification should not be required, and oligarchical that it should be.” (p. 154)

Aristotle then discusses the degeneration of democracy into “tyranny.”

“Tyranny is bound to exist where a single person rules over people who are all his peers or superiors, without any form of accountability, and with a view to his own advantage rather than that of his subjects. It is thus a form of rule exercised over unwilling subjects, for no free man will voluntarily endure such a system.” (p. 156)

Then he highlights the preeminent position of the middle class in a good political system:

“The truly happy life is one of goodness lived in freedom from impediments and . . . goodness consists in a mean. . . . In all cities there are three parts: the very rich, the very poor, and the third class which forms the mean between these two. . . . Those who are in this condition are the most ready to listen to reason.”

And is the least likely to degenerate into tyranny:

“Tyranny grows out of the most immature type of democracy, or out of oligarchy, but much less frequently out of constitutions of the middle order. . . .” (p. 158)

Finally, he warns against the danger of too much influence by the rich:

“Illusory benefits must always produce real evils in the long run, and the encroachments made by the rich are more destructive to a constitution than those of the people.” (p. 162)

The poor are actually a lesser danger to the political system:

“Even when they have no part in the constitution, the poor are ready enough to keep quiet, provided that no one handles them violently or deprives them of any of their property.” (p. 164)

Moving on to the subject of “factional conflict” in cities, Aristotle again compares democracy and oligarchy by noting their differing origins:

“Democracy arose out of an opinion that those who were equal in any one respect were equal absolutely, and in all respects,” (p. 179)

While oligarchy,

“arose from an opinion that those who were unequal in some one respect were altogether unequal. (Those who are superior in point of wealth readily regard themselves as absolutely superior.)” (p. 179)

But only merit (not clearly defined) justifies the creation of a political party or “faction,”

“Those who are pre-eminent in merit would be the most justified in forming factions (though they are the last to make the attempt); for they, and they only, can reasonably be regarded as enjoying an absolute superiority.” (p. 179)

Then Aristotle makes the questionable assertion that,

“. . . it must be admitted that democracy is a form of government which is safer, and less vexed by faction, than oligarchy. . . . In democracies there is only faction-fighting against the oligarchs; and there are no internal dissensions – at any rate none worth mentioning – which divide the populace against itself. Furthermore, the form of constitution based on the middle [group of citizens], which is the most stable of all forms with which we are concerned, is nearer to democracy than to oligarchy.” (p. 181)

He also seems to believe that successful cities must have homogeneous populations,

“A city cannot be constituted from any chance collection of people. . . . Most of the cities which have admitted others as settlers . . . have been troubled by faction.” (p. 185)

Aristotle says his studies of various democratic cities have shown that “demagogues” emerge to attack the rich, either individually, or as a class, and that popular election of leaders eventually tends to produce demagogic leaders:

“Where the offices are filled by vote, without any property qualification, and the whole of the people has the vote, candidates for office begin to play the demagogue. . . .” (p. 191)

Aristotle emphasizes the importance of what we might call “civic education”:

“The cardinal importance of educating citizens to live and act in the spirit of the constitution: this is too often neglected, especially in extreme democracies, which encourage the idea of living as one likes.” (p. 205)

And lays out two “first principles”:

“There are two features which are generally held to define democracy. One of them is the sovereignty of the majority; the other is the liberty of individuals.” (p. 208).

He repeats this idea later in *Politics*:

“The underlying principle of the democratic type of constitution is liberty,” and “each citizen should be in a position of equality; and the result which follows in democracies is that the poor are more sovereign than the rich, for they are in a majority, and the will of the majority is sovereign.” And Aristotle asserts once again the principle element of democracy is “living as you like.” “Such a life is the function of the free man, just as the function of slaves is not to live as they like. This is the second defining feature of democracy.” (p. 231)

But Aristotle is not all that crazy about democracy (he actually prefers aristocracy):

“It may be remarked that while oligarchy is characterized by good birth, wealth, and culture, the attributes of democracy would appear to be the very opposite – low birth, poverty, and vulgarity.” (p. 232)

And, finally,

“To live by the rule of the constitution ought not to be regarded as slavery, but rather as salvation.” (p. 209).

Toward the end of *Politics*, Aristotle takes up once again “tyranny,” which he considers to be another political system, along with monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy.

“Tyrants . . . are drawn from the populace and the masses, to serve as their protectors against the notables, and in order to prevent them from suffering any injustice from that class.” (p. 210)

“The aim of a tyrant is his own pleasure, the aim of a king is the Good.” (p. 211)

Aristotle expressed sexist views frequently:

“Slaves and women are not likely to plot against tyrants: indeed, as they prosper under them, they are bound to look with favor on tyrannies and democracies alike.” (p. 220)

“Tyrants love to be flattered and nobody with the soul of a freeman can ever stoop to that.” (p. 220)

“It is the habit of tyrants never to like anyone who has a spirit of dignity and independence. The tyrant claims a monopoly of such qualities for himself.” (p. 220).

Aristotle criticized Plato’s *Republic* in which he has Socrates explaining the change from oligarchy to democracy without actually citing any examples from Greek experience

“Oligarchies . . . turn into democracies if the poor become the majority. Conversely, democracies change into oligarchies if the wealthier classes are stronger than the masses and take an active interest in affairs while the latter pay little attention.” (p. 228).

Aristotle (like Jefferson) thought farmers were most suited to democracy:

“The best kind of populace is one of farmers, so where the bulk of the people live by arable or pastoral farming, there is no difficulty in constructing a democracy.” (p. 235)

On the other hand, he considered city-dwellers poor material for democracy:

“None of the occupations followed by a populace which consists of mechanics, shopkeepers, and day-laborers leaves any room for excellence.” (p, 237)

Later, Aristotle clarified that by “farmers” he means “landowners.”

“. . . citizens [should not] engage in farming: leisure is a necessity, both for growth of goodness and for the pursuit of political activities.” (p. 271) Therefore “The cultivation of all the land should be assigned to slaves or serfs.” (p. 273). He concludes this chapter by promising to “discuss later” “how slaves who till the soil should be treated, and why it is wise to offer all slaves the eventual reward of emancipation. . . .” However, there is no record of his taking up this topic again. (p. 275)

He alludes once again to the fact that there will be poor people in the city (and, presumably, these poor will not be part of the citizen body).

“It is the duty of a genuine democrat to see to it that the masses are not excessively poor. Poverty is the cause of the defects of democracy. . . . Measures should be taken to ensure a permanent level of prosperity. This is in the interest of all classes, including the prosperous themselves, and therefore the proper policy is to accumulate any surplus revenue in a fund and then to distribute this fund in block grants to the poor.” (p. 241)

Aristotle’s *Politics* concludes with a chapter on the importance of public education for the citizenry:

“The system of education must be one and the same for all, and the provision of this system must be a matter of public action. It cannot be left as it is at present to private enterprise.” **And finally**, “We must not regard a citizen as belonging just to himself: we must rather regard every citizen as belonging to the city, since each is a part of the city.” (p. 298)

This is reminiscent of Pericles’s Funeral Oration in which freedom to do as one likes is matched by the total devotion of each citizen to the good of the state. In essence, the citizen in a democracy must be prepared at any time to subordinate his private interests to those of society as a whole, as determined by the city-state’s elected officials.