RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Of the People, By the People

Roger Osborne

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About the Book

‘Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.’

Churchill had more reason than most to rue the power of democracy, having been thrown out of office after leading Britain to victory in 1945. Democracy, when viewed from above, has always been a fickle master; from below it is a powerful but fragile friend.

Most books on democracy focus on political theory and analysis, in a futile attempt to define democracy. *Of the People, By the People* takes the opposite approach, telling the stories of the different democracies that have come into existence during the past two and half millennia. From Athens to Rhaetia, Jamestown to Dehli, and Putney to Pretoria, the book shows how democratic systems are always a reflection of the culture and history of their birthplaces, and come about through seizing fleeting opportunities. Democracy can only be understood through the fascinating and inspiring stories of the peoples who fought to bring it about.

The book raises profound questions about whether democracy is the engine of prosperity, or a luxury that only the prosperous can afford; and whether its assumption that good government arises from mass participation is an illusion.

By giving the individual histories of different democracies, the book shows that real and lasting democracy always arises from beneath, and needs a process of never-ending communal creativity to sustain itself.

About the Author

Roger Osborne's work has provided a range of innovative insights into our views of the past, and how they infect the present. His previous books include *The Floating Egg: Episodes in the Making of Geology*, *The Deprat Affair: Ambition, Revenge and Deceit in French Indo-China*, *The Dreamer of the Calle San Salvador: Visions of Sedition and Sacrilege in Sixteenth-Century Spain* and *Civilization: A New History of the Western World*. He lives in Scarborough.

Also by Roger Osborne

The Floating Egg:
Episodes in the Making of Geology

The Deprat Affair:
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The Dreamer of the Calle de San Salvador:
Visions of Sedition and Sacrilege
in Sixteenth-Century Spain

Civilization:
A New History of the Western World

The Art of Persuasion
(play)

AS CO-AUTHOR

The Atlas of Earth History
The Atlas of Evolution

Of the People, By the People

A New History of Democracy

Roger Osborne

THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

PROLOGUE

LET'S BE CLEAR from the beginning: democracy is humanity's finest achievement. Championed, idealised, misused, abused, distorted, parodied and ridiculed it might be; courted by unfaithful lovers, glad-handed by false friends and skinned by unscrupulous allies it undoubtedly has been; but democracy as a way of living and a system of government is the avenue by which modern humans can fulfil their need to construct lives of real meaning. More than all the paintings and sculptures on earth, more than all poems, plays and novels, and more than every scientific and technological invention put together, democracy shows humanity at its most creative and innovative; democracy is a continual, collective enterprise that binds us together while allowing us to live individually. While it endures there is hope, without democracy the world is bereft.

If we're looking for a way of thinking about democracy, then change is a good starting point. In 2009 Barack Obama ran his campaign for the US presidency under the slogan 'Change We Need'; in 2010 David Cameron asked the British people to 'Vote For Change', while future coalition partners the Liberal Democrats promised 'Change That Works For You'. Though our leaders may not like it, the best way to achieve change is by voting them out of office. The ultimate sanction against any government is to throw them out, and democracy's great asset is that it allows this to happen peacefully. Those choreographed moments of transition in front of the Capitol building, when the new president takes the oath of office watched by his defeated predecessor, or the outgoing British prime minister appearing in Downing Street to tell the world that he (it still is almost always a he) is looking forward to spending more time with his family, are the essential rituals of democracy – the equivalent of the public funeral where death is marked so that

life can go on. They, and similar scenes in Paris, Berlin, Delhi, Tokyo and Santiago, are formal expressions of the agreement of our rulers to govern only with the consent of the people – and when that consent is withdrawn, they must go.

Peaceful transitions of power, ruling by consent, free and fair elections, universal suffrage – these are all elements of democracy, yet when we try to pin down exactly what democracy is, we find ourselves chasing rainbows. The problem is that every time we get near to a definition, or compile a list of conditions that any democracy must fulfil, we find examples of fully functioning democracies that do not comply, or of societies that are not regarded as democratic but nevertheless fulfil *some* of the criteria. Moreover, every democracy that has ever existed has been different from every other and the more we find out about democracies, the more we realise that any definition will always remain beyond us.

One reason for this elusiveness is that, despite being an apparently Western invention, democracy falls foul of one central intellectual tradition of the West. Ever since Plato, Western thinkers have made it their task to consider the world conceptually. They have set about constructing ideas such as justice, truth and goodness believing that within them lies the route to wisdom, knowledge and understanding. Along with other descriptive terms such as 'civilisation', democracy has had the misfortune to be allocated the status of a concept[1] which then needs to defined, analysed and contested in order for us to gain some kind of greater understanding about the world. This impulse is understandable; if we could define the essential nature of democracy, if we could draw up a manual, then we could apply the 'democracy blueprint' to any society on earth. But in fact democracy is rooted in the converse tradition of the West, one which has emerged in parallel and in rebuke to the world of abstract concepts, and is instead based on practical experience and continual human interaction. Democracy, despite the efforts of philosophers and political scientists, thumbs its nose at theory, rolls up its sleeves and gets on with the task in hand. Democracy does not seek its own perfection, and at times when its

adherents do so – through rigid constitutions or immutable laws – they often hasten its demise. Instead it remains in a continual state of adaptation. The truth that there is no blueprint for democracy may dismay some scholars and policy advisers, but it should fill the rest of us with joy.

In newspapers, TV and radio programmes, in everyday conversations as well as in books and scholarly journals, the meaning of democracy is endlessly argued over. And sooner or later we realise that the never-ending nature of this discussion holds the clue to its own resolution. Democracy is ever changing, ever adapting and impossible to formulate, precisely because its major function is to sustain societies where change and adaptation can freely occur. Democracies – both the institutions of government and the practice of governing democratically – exist in a symbiotic relationship with the society in which they are embedded. Where societies resist change, democratic politics cannot operate; where democratic institutions and practices are set in stone, society ossifies.

This elusive and adaptive nature may be a cause for celebration but it leaves open the question of how to write a history of democracy – and of what to include and what to exclude. But here too an answer awaits us. Instead of striving to produce a definitive history of democracy, we should contribute to democracy itself by showing different aspects of its past, revealing the complexity, diversity and creativity that has underlain its fleeting existence. The aim of this book therefore is not to tie up loose ends or to tuck the subject neatly away, but to provide a stimulating historical framework that will help to inform our thinking about democracy and about the way our societies are governed.

With that in mind, this book will take the reader on a journey beginning in the crowded marketplaces of ancient Athens and Rome where we see not only the foundation of active democracy, but the building of the multiplicity of institutions needed to support it. The ancient world also introduces us to a functioning republic: a state without a monarch where the people are sovereign. From the Mediterranean we travel to the great tribal gatherings of the Norse

people that show a sophisticated understanding of participation in power; and from there to the parliaments of medieval Europe which introduced political representation, and to the burgeoning cities of the Netherlands and Italy where civic loyalty and the practical needs of government brought about the foundation of the modern state. The next stopping point is sixteenth-century Graubünden in the high Alps, the first truly democratic state of modern times, which held up democracy as the highest expression of communal life. From there we travel to a church hall in Putney where common soldiers, fresh from the battlefields of the English Civil War and with vernacular Bibles in hand, argued for the right of every man to have a say in government. Across the Atlantic we see how the practice of democracy came to America, rooted in the church gatherings, town meetings and beliefs of its immigrant settlers. France in the 1790s provides the greatest contradictions on our journey – the French Revolution combined a passionate belief in equality and democracy with political violence. The new democracies in nineteenth-century South and Central America reveal how government is embedded in the cultural history of society, and how difficult it is to overcome entrenched interests.

The tumultuous nineteenth century in Europe shows how political reforms were originally brought in precisely to keep democracy at bay, before democratic government was forced into reality by the power of industrialised labour and through political expediency. In the early twentieth century we will see democracy springing up across the globe, before suffering a worldwide and catastrophic retreat in the 1930s. The post-1945 period offers differing fortunes in the stories of India and other ex-colonies, while in the 1950s democracy in the United States faced its greatest challenge from inside. In 1989 European communism collapsed, leaving a world in which democracy became the passport to membership of the international community. At the end of our journey we inspect the conditions for democracy in China, due to become the biggest economic power in the world, before looking finally at the changing face of democracy in Western societies.

Not all of the societies we will examine tick all the boxes of a full democracy. But in each of these times and places we witness the development of democratic practices (such as ballots) or institutions (such as parliaments) that came to be adopted later as essential ingredients of a democracy. Societies develop solutions to their own unique problems, some of which are then available to political activists and reformers elsewhere, eager to adapt them again to their own circumstances.

Before embarking on this historical journey, there is one more point to bear in mind. A chronological narrative seems to imply development and this can lead us to false assumptions. First, that democracies have learned from what has gone before. In fact almost every democracy has had to create democratic institutions and practices in its own way. We have come to believe that, for example, Thomas Jefferson devised the American Constitution based on his knowledge of classical Athens and Rome; but, as we shall see in Chapter 6, American democracy was far more influenced by the practice of town ballots which its citizens had brought with them from Britain, and by the governance of Puritan churches, than by the ancient world. The second false assumption would be that development means improvement. This stands even less scrutiny. Ancient Athens was in many ways the most highly developed democracy that has ever existed, while in recent times democracy has been subject to continual bouts of decline, retrenchment and burgeoning. Our story shows that *democracies* exist at different times, but *democracy* does not necessarily improve over time.

Democracy is always under siege. Yet it is our defence, not just against an overpowering state but against the power of entrenched privilege and of corporate and individual wealth. Democracy is not a dry intellectual concept, it is a set of beliefs and assumptions embedded in our culture – and it is something worth fighting for. However imperfectly, democracy attempts to solve the great dilemma of human life: how to flourish as an individual while existing as part of a community. With all that in mind, let us embark on an imperfect history of an indefinable subject.

1

ATHENS AND THE ANCIENT WORLD

The Involved Citizen

WALKING TOWARDS THE city from Eleusis you might notice an increase in the number of your fellow travellers. Go through the Sacred Gate, where the Eridanos river flows into the city and the walls tower over you, and then head south-east along the Panathenaic Way, towards the agora and the heart of the city. Men have come from all over Attica, some making a day-long journey, and the open space of the agora is getting more and more crowded. The traders are struggling to do business as men gather in groups, talking and arguing. Here they are surrounded by monuments to the glory of their city – temples where they can thank the gods for their good fortune, commemorations of fallen heroes and public buildings where the business of government goes on.

What a grand city this is. To the south-east lies the hill of the Acropolis, crowned by the recently built Parthenon temple; directly south is the Areopagus, the meeting place of the council of nobles; to the west is a hillside topped by the temple of Hephaestus. Around the agora itself are the Bouleuterion, the meeting place of the Council of 500; two law courts with a third under construction; the mint with its weights-and-measures officials at hand; the Strategeion, the meeting house for the generals; the Tholos, the official residence for the council leader; and a series of *stoas* or roofed 'porches' used for worship and teaching. Crowding in too are temples to Apollo and Aphrodite and the altar to the twelve great gods of Greece. Finally, standing within the agora on the west side

are the statues of the heroes after whom the ten groups within the city-state, or polis, are named.[1] This is the year of the archonship of Lysimachus – 436–5 BC – and Athens is at the summit of its power and prestige.

Suddenly the agora starts to empty as men make their way up the hill towards the Pnyx, the vast amphitheatre carved out of the side of the Hill of the Nymphs. As a citizen it is your right and duty to join them in the citizens' assembly, or *ekklesia*, held every ten days throughout the year. Clerks with ropes dipped in red paint will sweep the agora to discourage citizens from lingering. The business of the assembly will have been prepared by the Council of 500, on which each citizen sits in turn for one year. The 500 members sit on benches facing the 6,000 or so in the assembly, arranged on the tiered rows carved out of the bare rock. But before the business can begin a sacrifice is made to one of the gods: Athenians believe their democracy has been granted to them as a divine favour. Then citizens take turns to stand on a small stage to address the assembly before votes are taken, either by a show of hands or by dropping pebbles into different urns. The assembly is not divided into parties (it is illegal to collude) and each citizen votes for himself; the decisions are recorded and filed in the city archives. The meetings are respectful but occasionally they can get rowdy. Taxation and public works are debated and passionate speeches from leading figures present the assembly with the choice of war or peace. The assembly has to decide whether to accept peace offers from the city's enemies, whether to sanction invasions and naval expeditions, whether to be a peaceful neighbour or an aggressive power. As the day's business ends the citizens file out, making their way home to resume their livings as farmers, traders, craftsmen and sailors.

We have just witnessed democracy in action, but the open meetings were only one part of the framework of democracy in ancient Athens. Early on in this first fully recorded democracy, the citizens of Athens had realised that for their will to be properly refined, articulated and acted on, a host of institutions had to be created to support the assembly of the people. Firstly, the Areopagus, or

council of nobles, scrutinised any measures passed by the assembly. After 460 BC this function was handed to the jury courts, which then had a political and judicial function. The jurors' political powers were underpinned by a further measure. Under Athenian law any citizen could challenge a measure passed by the assembly on the grounds that it was unlawful or, more controversially, if it was unfair.

Jury courts and citizens' rights supported and regulated the power of the assembly, but at the heart of Athenian democracy was the Council of 500, drawn from every part of the polis through a complex system of lots. This body both elected officials to serve for one year, and examined their performance. These officials oversaw building programmes, street cleaning, festivals, processions, and weights and measures; they served as jurors, civil and military magistrates and, last but not least, *strategoi* or generals. Athenians were acutely aware of the danger that their democracy could be undermined by those intent on accruing personal power, so in addition to monitoring their officials they introduced the famous system of ostracism in order to rid themselves of the politically overambitious.[2]

A key element in this complex system was openness. In most other societies in the ancient world crucial decisions were taken in private, citizens could be punished without recourse to public appeal, and trials took place behind closed doors. Though we do not know every detail of life in ancient Athens, it is clear that major decisions about high-level policy were taken after public discussion, while every citizen had the right to face his accusers and be tried in public. The concept of an open society became popular among philosophers in the twentieth century,[3] but Athens was fusing the practice of democracy and transparency 2,500 years earlier.

The culture that gave us the word democracy (*demos* = people; *kratos* = rule) provides evidence of its practical workings over a period of roughly 200 years, longer than almost any modern democracy: the city-state of Athens was a democracy from around 507–323 BC. That evidence is fragmentary but compelling, giving us

a convincing picture of a sophisticated and fully functioning political system. Although many other societies would to some degree have been ruled through consensus and consultation before that time, Athens is the first fully fledged democracy that we know about. How and why did democracy arise in this particular time and place?

The Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries BC saw themselves as the descendants of immigrants. Their myths told of cities being founded by the benevolence of the gods of Olympus but there is historical evidence that the peoples who occupied the Greek peninsula and islands came from the north, in the same twelfth-century BC migrations that saw others push westwards into mainland Europe. This is many centuries before the classical period, but cultural attitudes run deep and long – the central historical myth of the Greeks was the siege of Troy, an event now dated to the eleventh century BC but endlessly retold seven centuries later.

The sense of being an immigrant people is important for several reasons. Migrant societies display a large degree of social mobility; often they resist hierarchies and live without kings, princes or aristocrats. This may be because social power is connected with ownership of land, while moving to new territories dissolves social structures based on deference and allows the possibility of a more egalitarian culture and society. In certain times and places these connections are discernible, but in most others the opportunity for immigrants to maintain an egalitarian society is quashed by the rapid assumption of power by small groups. The achievement of the Athenians, as we shall see, was to develop a system that would preserve the fundamental structure of their society.

The centuries from 1000 to 650 BC, known to historians as the Dark Ages of Greece, are almost a closed book with little or no historical and archaeological evidence from the region. However, some finds show that alphabetic writing made its way into the Greek world between 800 and 750 BC. The Phoenician alphabet was extended and developed by the Greeks and two finds from the late

eighth century BC – Nestor's cup from southern Italy and the Dipylon vase from Athens – both carry long inscriptions written in recognisable alphabetic Greek.

By this time Greek city-states were becoming more prosperous through trade, agriculture, mining and the manufacture of metals. Some of these cities began to set up colonies along the shores of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Eretria, Chalcis, Corinth and Rhodes were notable colonisers, founding settlements as far west as Neapolis (Naples), Massilia (Marseilles) and Saguntum (Sagunto in Spain). Athens was not at the forefront of these developments, and it is likely that its size and geography worked against it. At that time the city-state was more like a collection of farms, with settlements spreading across the 4,000 square kilometres of the Attican plain, rather than a tightly defined centre-with-catchment such as Corinth or Thebes. The first recorded political event in Athens was the unsuccessful attempt by a man named Cylon to seize power in 632 BC. This is evidence that the polis of Athens had come into existence as a political entity.

We know that customary laws in Athens and Attica at this time were based around the use of land. In a system known as *hektemoriori*, farmers paid one-sixth of their produce as rent to landowners. These had probably acquired the land as settlement of debts in a process that began to change Attica from a society of small farmers into a hierarchy of wealthy landowners and tenant farmers. Yet the process of *hektemoriori* began to break down in the late seventh century BC when many subsistence farmers who were unable to pay their rent became the possessions of the landowners. This system of debt bondage became so widespread in Athens that, as Aristotle commented 200 years later, 'the many became the slaves of the few'.

In the seventh century BC the polis of Athens was governed through the sharing and rotation of power among the leading families. In this oligarchy a set of three leaders, or archons, were chosen by their fellow nobles. According to Aristotle, the archons were first selected for life and later for a ten-year period of office.

Once he served his term, each archon would sit on the Areopagus for life. This system served the nobility well, but the rest of the population had no voice in the government. While this was not unusual in human history, what happened next seems unique. Some time around 600 BC Athenians decided to ask an eminent citizen named Solon to draw up a set of laws to govern their polis. These laws were intended to solve the problems caused by debt bondage and make Athens a more harmonious society. But why should the wealthy ruling class have agreed to this? Why did Athens not become a polarised society of wealthy landowners and enslaved subsistence farmers? We can only guess from the little evidence we have, but some facts may help us to understand why Athens eventually became a democracy.

It appears that the polis was not as prosperous as its neighbours and the ruling class may have felt this keenly. They were unable to wring more wealth out of their lands and, in terms of trade, they had become suppliers of commodities to other wealthier cities. They may have felt the need to remedy this stagnation. In addition, after the attempted coup by Cylon, the ruling families would have feared that any one of them could raise enough support among the citizens to stage a takeover of power. As well as this, the defence of the polis depended on a volunteer army drawn from the ranks of farmers and artisans and, when banded together, the poor farmers had more military power than the rulers.

There may also have been cultural reasons for this unusual move. If we look at societies in the ancient world we see a variety of ways of allowing, restraining, delegating and acknowledging power, all of them much more subtle and sophisticated than simple labels like empire, monarchy, clan, tribe, tyranny and oligarchy suggest. The farmers, fishers and traders of Attica may well have entered into the humiliation of debt bondage while retaining a strong belief in old customs and practices that gave justice, access to power and dignity to all members of their society. Once the effective enslavement of the farmers reached epidemic levels, the ruling class could have faced a social revolution.

Such underlying reasons are obviously crucial to understanding how Athenian democracy arose, but unfortunately they are interpretations based on conjecture. In later history, democracy frequently emerged from a crisis of political leadership. It is frustrating that at the birth of the world's first recorded democracy we do not have any hard information about the circumstances that brought it about. Indeed much of the evidence that we do have on the development of Athenian democracy is historically unreliable. The earliest sources for almost all the political reforms in Athens date from after the late fifth century, two centuries after Solon; the major surviving descriptive work, Aristotle's *Constitution of Athens*, was written around 350 BC. These later texts are not merely likely to show the inaccuracies of passing time, but assumptions and deliberate distortions have probably been included for contemporary political purposes. What follows here, therefore, is a qualified approximation of the development of democracy in Athens. [4]

Although Solon's measures, adopted from around 580 BC, were largely economic their effects were highly political. Debts incurred under the system of land rents were abolished and all the land that had been taken from tenant farmers was returned. A ban on exports of foods – except olive oil, which Athens produced in surplus – was brought in, and weights and measures were standardised with those of Corinth, the principal trading city of the region. In addition, skilled workers from elsewhere were encouraged to settle in Attica.

Solon divided the citizens of Athens into four property classes – probably a formal recognition of the existing situation – and gave members of the top three classes a chance to participate in the government of the polis. Members of the highest class (the *pentacosiomedimni*), now including those with wealth as well as the nobility, were qualified to be archons, to be chosen by lot. The Areopagus, comprised of former archons, was made the guardian of the constitution and laws. The next two classes – the *hippeis* (with property bringing in 300 measures) and the *zeugitae* (200 measures)

– qualified to be members of the assembly or *boule*, now formally called the Council of 400. This body was to be made up of a hundred members from each of the four ancient tribes, or *phylae*, of Athens; they also qualified for various administrative posts. Citizens of the lowest order, the *thetes*, had the right to sit in the citizens' assembly – the *ekklesia* which we have seen working on a hillside in Athens – though the powers of this body were not originally as great as they would become later. *Thetes* over the age of thirty could sit as jurors in the special courts (*dikasteria*), a position that enabled them to restrain the power of the wealthy. (Those Athenian residents below the *thetes* – women, foreigners and slaves – did not qualify as citizens.) These four institutions – the high council, the council of 400, the citizens' assembly, and the jury courts – were to be the cornerstones of Athenian democracy in the fifth and fourth centuries BC; by participating in them the citizens of Athens governed their polis.

Solon left Athens immediately after his reforms were adopted, in order, according to Herodotus, to 'avoid the necessity of repealing any of the laws he had made';[5] Aristotle tells us that he got tired of criticism from all sides. The wide sharing of power that Solon had intended lasted only for a couple of decades until, in 546 BC, authority was seized by a single ruler named Peisistratus. Nevertheless, to Athenians Solon became a semi-mythic figure: the founder of their freedoms and of their method of government.

The events that ushered in the golden age of Athenian democracy are mired in family feuds and political double-dealing. The tyrannical Hippias, son of Peisistratus, was removed from power in 510 BC by an alliance of the powerful Alkmaeonid family and the rulers of neighbouring Sparta. The leader of this family was Cleisthenes, who retained control in the face of rebellions from other noble families by turning for help to the lower orders – Attica's farmers, fishers, craftsmen and traders. We don't know the motives for his revival of democracy: he may have been keen to reward his power base among the ordinary citizens of Athens; he may, when forced into exile, have seen democratic styles of

government elsewhere and decided to emulate them; or it may be that Cleisthenes was just one player in a wider movement for political reform.

Whatever the exact events, Cleisthenes has a strong claim to be the founder of Athenian democracy. He drew up reforms of the city's political institutions that gave substantial power to the citizens, both individually and collectively, and had the political influence to push them through. Cleisthenes understood that to restore the Athenians' ancient rights as free citizens, Solon's constitution would not be enough; further reforms were needed.

Firstly, and most radically, Cleisthenes abolished the four ancient tribes of Athens. These dated back to the times when the polis was a disparate collection of settlements, and reflected loyalties based on kinship networks and location; it is likely that the territory of Athens had originally been roughly divided into four spheres of influence. Cleisthenes saw these tribes as a major source of power, through systems of patronage and deference, for the leading families. In their place he brought in ten new tribes, organised so that the membership of each equally represented districts, or *demes*, on the coast, in the countryside and in the city. This not only dissolved the old power bases, but brought people from different parts of the polis into contact with each other, reinforcing a sense of communal identity. This political redistribution lasted, with minor alterations, for 700 years. We need to remember that the *phylae* were vertical divisions of society, containing members from every class, while the classes themselves – the *pentacosiomedimni*, *hippeis*, *zeugitae* and *thetes* – were horizontal divisions based on wealth.

Solon's Council of 400 was now transformed into the Council of 500, with fifty members from each tribe selected annually by lot, in a system that ensured that each *deme* was represented, and that every citizen served on the council in rotation. The *demes* themselves became self-governing for civil matters and membership became a badge of pride, with each citizen asked to add the name of his *deme* to his given name in place of his inherited name. The *ekklesia* too was given more powers and met more regularly. Public officials, who held their positions for a year – the *strategoi* were the

sole exception and could remain in post indefinitely – were assessed at the end of their term by members of the council, with punishments meted out for those who had not served the polis well.

Citizens were not allowed to serve on the Council of 500 for two consecutive years, and were restricted to two terms in total; finding enough councilmen was therefore a continual problem. We should remember too that the *demes* had to be administered, so citizens were engaged in an onerous amount of civic duties. While the excitement of a reformed political system would probably have motivated citizens at the beginning, how was their involvement sustained over time? Why were Athenian citizens prepared to give such a big portion of their lives to the government of their polis? One reason must have been that politics was the place where citizens could feel both valued and equal to each other. Moreover, the polis was not a separate entity: the political sphere – the meetings, the debates, the votes – was the place where citizens protected their way of life, and where their common identity was found and celebrated.

There was also a strong military element in the administration of the polis. Athens had to have an effective fighting force and each tribe was required to supply a hoplite regiment, a force of well-armoured heavy infantry, with their own equipment. From 501 BC a board of ten *strategoi* was elected annually, though each general could always stand for re-election. The commitment to the defence of the polis and the ethos of military service doubtless contributed to the citizens' sense of political involvement.

Cleisthenes is a fascinating figure for anyone interested in the practice of politics. His reforms show the eternal paradox of democracy – that the mechanics of the democratic system must periodically change in order to preserve its essential qualities. In order to restore the customary ways of sharing power, Cleisthenes was prepared to be utterly radical. The four tribes of Athens had been the social bedrock of society for as long as anyone could remember, but Cleisthenes believed they were a barrier to the distribution of authority; as long as the four tribes existed the great

families could control the polis from behind the scenes. Sweeping them away was perhaps the most extraordinary event in the political history of Athens – social engineering on a grand scale that could only have been brought about by someone who was welcomed as a liberator.

Cleisthenes introduced his reforms around 507 BC and during the next thirty years Athens underwent a series of critical events. The city was on the verge of being destroyed yet, in a remarkably short time, emerged as the wealthiest and most powerful state in a region that had become a crossroads of the Eurasian world. In 490 BC a huge Persian fleet carrying around 25,000 foot soldiers and 800 cavalry landed at Marathon on the coast of Attica. Greek cities on the Ionian coast and islands had already fallen to the Persians. The Athenian assembly met and decided that they should confront the invaders rather than stay behind the city's walls and sit out a siege. An army of around 10,000 Athenians set out to Marathon where they camped in a location overlooking a narrow section of the road to Athens. After a few hours of stalemate, elements of the Persian army began to reboard their ships, presumably to find a better place to launch an attack. Of the ten *strategoi*, five wanted to attack the Persians before they escaped, while the other five advocated a withdrawal to Athens. The leading general or *polemarch*, Callimachus, had the casting vote: as a result the Athenians attacked and inflicted a crushing defeat on the Persian army. They knew that their surprise victory was brought about both by the ten *strategoi* and by the bravery of the citizen army; it was, in short, not just a victory for Athens, but for democracy.

Ten years later the Persian fleet returned led by the emperor Xerxes. This time, in a bold strategy that required the co-operation of the whole population, the Athenian people abandoned the city and found refuge on the nearby island of Salamis. Athens was taken and burned, but the Athenian fleet then lured the Persian navy into the straits of Salamis, where it was destroyed. The triumphant Athenians returned and began to rebuild their city.

The victories at Marathon and Salamis convinced Athenian citizens that their democratic method of government gave their polis special strength. The victory at Salamis also showed the importance of sea power – and while the army was substantially manned by hoplites from the middle two classes (*hippeis* and *zeugitae*), the navy consisted of oarsmen drawn from the *thetes*, the lowest class of citizen. After Salamis the power and self-confidence of the *thetes* began to alter the nature of Athenian democracy.

By the 460s BC a major political divide began to emerge in Athens. While conservatives supported the continuing power of the Areopagus, radical democrats saw it as an obstacle to democracy. In 461 BC Cimon, the leader of the conservative faction, led a force of hoplites to help the rulers of Sparta to suppress a rebellion among their own people, a controversial expedition opposed by the radical faction. While Cimon was away the radicals struck. Led by Ephialtes, they pushed a measure through the people's assembly that transferred the powers of the Areopagus to the Council of 500 and the jury courts, leaving the council of nobles with the single right to try homicide cases. With 4,000 hoplites away, the measures were passed by a majority of *thetes*. When Cimon returned from Sparta and tried to get them reversed, he was ostracised.

Historians have called the reforms of 461 BC a revolution – a seizure of authority by the people and a transformation from a system where the wealthy still wielded power to a system based on equality.[6] Whatever we want to call them, the changes certainly demonstrated the fluidity of Athenian politics. Cleisthenes had devised a structure based on fairness, but any structure is vulnerable to exploitation and it seems likely that many citizens objected to the way the Aeropagus used its power. Thus the mechanisms of democracy had to be changed.

In 460 BC Ephialtes was murdered, possibly by political rivals, leaving his acolyte Pericles as the leading force in the radical democracy camp. Pericles would dominate the golden age of Athens and Athenian politics for the next thirty years, shaping domestic and foreign policy. Pericles was not a head of state or even the leader of

a party: he was a citizen in a radical democracy who used his position as *strategos* – a post he held from 443 BC to his death in 429 BC – his personal leverage, wealth and political skills to influence his fellow citizens at a time when the polis became the primary power of the Hellenic world.

From 460 to 430 BC Athens followed an expansionary foreign policy, using revenue from its silver mines and taxes on its allies to build up a navy that dominated the Aegean – a vital seaway in the burgeoning trade between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Its allies in the Delian League – formed after the defeat of Persia at Salamis – became, in effect, client states in what has been called a sophisticated protection racket. The term 'league' is deceptive since Athens, in much the same way that Persia had tried, forced almost every city-state in the Aegean to become its ally and pay tribute; the league has more accurately been called the Athenian Empire. Its trading network aimed to bring prosperity to all its members, but any who tried to break the dominance of Athens or refused to pay taxes for 'protection' were severely punished.

The prosperity of the mid fifth century BC provided the funds for great public projects. In 459 BC the Athenians built two walls linking the city with the port of Piraeus, creating a single defendable space with access to the sea. The 'long' walls each extended for seven kilometres, giving a total circumference of twenty-six kilometres. The construction of the Parthenon on the Acropolis, the traditional site for Athenian temples, was begun in 447 BC, followed by a series of other buildings, each showing extraordinary innovation in architecture, sculpture and painting. Athens was by then the centre of the Greek world with poets, musicians, dramatists and artists of all kinds flocking to the city for work and inspiration. The regular festivals and processions were spectacular affairs with every form of entertainment from bawdy comedy and song to the tragedies of Euripides and Sophocles.

As a democracy, Athens was open to internal criticism. The dramatist Aristophanes, for one, liked to remind its citizens of the dangers of demagoguery. In his play *The Knights*, the character

Demosthenes tells of how Paphlagon, 'a low-down lying swine', had learned how to handle Demos, the People: 'He took him in hand, like a worn-out shoe, And oiled him and soaked him and softened him up.'[7] Aristophanes also provides the only existing view of Athenian democracy from the perspective of the common citizen. At the beginning of *The Archanians* – first performed at the Lenaea festival in 425 BC – Dicaeopolis complains: 'there's a regular meeting of the assembly fixed for sunrise and here's the Pnyx deserted, while the people chatter in the Agora and run up and down dodging the vermilion rope . . . So now I've come absolutely prepared to shout, interrupt, abuse the speakers, if anyone speaks about anything but peace.'[8] Yet while early in the fifth century BC writers like Aeschylus in his play *The Suppliants* (463 BC) promoted the democratic way of life, later dramatists began to focus on the problematic relationship between the polis and the individual: in Sophocles' *Antigone* (442 BC), for example, the heroine breaks the city's laws in an act of personal moral courage.

Democracy assumes that the voice and opinions of the ordinary citizen deserve to be heard; we might believe this to be a continual assumption in human history, but it is exceptional. During the fifth century BC, Athenians showed a growing interest in the understanding of humanity. Sculptors and painters – we have tragically lost almost every painting from this time – began to depict people in highly realistic rather than stylised ways, as objects worthy of study. While previously stories of the gods and heroes had satisfied Greek audiences, the invention of theatre came out of the need to show individuals struggling with the complexities of their own lives. The writing of history too began as an exploration of why people act as they do, while Western philosophy originated in Athens from the need to address questions left unanswered by other forms of cultural expression, such as how to live the good life, how to act justly and how to balance the demands of freedom and order.

The end of Athens' dominance of the Greek world came with the Peloponnesian War, which began in 431 BC and lasted, with a seven-

year interval, to 404 BC. The war tore the Hellenic world apart. At different times during the conflict the Athenian assembly showed itself capable of savagery (ordering the massacre of the people of Mytilene in 428 BC) and mercy (rescinding the same order); recklessness (ordering the fleet on a disastrous mission to Sicily in 415 BC) and dereliction of responsibility (the execution of six Athenian generals after the loss of ships and men in a storm at Arginusae in 406 BC).

The war is known about in more detail than any other in the ancient world because of the account written by the Athenian Thucydides, one of the earliest surviving examples of historical writing. Its most famous passage is a speech by Pericles, known as the Oration over the Athenian War Dead. It is a passionate celebration of a free society: 'Our constitution does not copy the laws of neighbouring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favours the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy.' After defining Athens as a democracy, Pericles extolled the virtues of an equal society: 'If we look to the laws, they afford equal justice to all in their private differences . . . 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.'[9] Pericles celebrated the openness of his city, which welcomed foreigners to observe its way of life, and forged a connection between democracy, fairness, justice, openness and freedom that chimes with current Western ideals. Though this was a piece of propaganda in the midst of war, it would be the last public celebration of democracy for 2,000 years.

Despite Pericles' glowing words, there is little doubt that war and the pursuit of glory had a damaging effect on Athenian democracy. It allowed the *strategoi* to maintain control over the city's policies without much recourse to democratic procedures, and to persuade the assembly of the necessity of malign decisions in the pursuit of victory. In one notorious example Athenians negotiated with the

city of Melos in 415 BC in an attempt to persuade them to give up their neutrality. When the leaders of Melos refused, the city was captured, its men massacred and its women and children sold into slavery. A group of citizens were then sent from Athens to repopulate Melos – and run it as a democracy.

After the defeat of Athens in 404 BC, the city underwent a short period of brutal rule by the so-called Thirty Tyrants who were supported by its enemy Sparta. Yet when democratic leaders who had been forced into exile mounted a rebellion in 403 BC, Sparta changed sides and supported the restoration of democracy. While the power of Athens declined in the fourth century, democratic processes nevertheless continued to control the institutions of government, the legal system, public finances and foreign policy. The most notable evidence of their endurance comes from the surviving speeches and writings of the lawyer and statesman Demosthenes (384–22 BC), which earned him the reputation of being one of the great orators of the ancient world. His defence of democracy still rings true in the modern world: 'There is one safeguard known generally to the wise, which is an advantage and security to all, but especially to democracies as against despots – suspicion.'[10] Democracy continued in Athens until 323 BC when the polis was subsumed into the vast empire created by the Macedonian king, Philip, and his son Alexander.

Earlier in this chapter we asked how and why democracy arose and was sustained in this particular time and place. The answer to 'How?' lies in the history I have tried to elucidate; the answer to 'Why?' risks obscuring the achievement of Athens by glib explanations. It seems that though other ancient Greek and Mediterranean cities probably had elements of democracy, Athens was a historical fluke. A particular set of circumstances occurred in one place and at one time: a diffuse territory; a divided oligarchy; a relatively powerful class of small farmer-soldiers; a power vacuum; a culture of self-dependence and power sharing; silver mines as a source of prosperity; outside threats that brought the people together; a culture shared with other cities that allowed the

immigration of talented people from across the Greek world – the list goes on, but can never provide a definitive recipe for a democratic society. We can only marvel at the historical fact of Athenian democracy and the miraculous preservation of documents and artefacts that tell its story.[11]

As well as providing a prime example of a functioning democracy, ancient Greece gave birth to the theory of politics. Previously societies had operated through complex relations of kinship and deference, and through the allowance and restraint of authority using embedded sets of customs and rituals. Democracy in Athens gave birth to a new kind of politics in which the conflicts in society were both brought out into the open – and debated in the council and the assembly – and contained within those forums. This was such a breathtaking innovation in human affairs that it took decades for Greek writers to begin to comprehend its significance. Political theory, in other words, lagged behind practice. It is important for us to understand what Greek thinkers wrote about democracy, because their pronouncements would provide a lasting legacy. Yet we might be surprised to learn that the democracy which seems such a marvel to us was not viewed that way by contemporaries with the most profound influence.

The central question posed by Greek thinkers was: how can a society achieve both freedom and order? If, for example, everyone was free to report for military service only when they wanted, how could the city reliably defend itself; if people could choose not to educate their children, how would the future society function; if citizens could vote how they liked, how could anyone guarantee that the decisions would be good for society?

The response to these questions came in two quite different forms. The most influential of all Greek writers, Plato and Aristotle, approached the problem through rational enquiry and observation. Plato was born to a noble Athenian family who were implicated in the Rule of the Thirty at the end of the fifth century BC, and was a follower of Socrates, who was sentenced to death by a democratic

jury court in 399 BC. While the work of Socrates was never written down, Plato composed an extraordinary series of works with his teacher as the central figure; these dialogues would form the foundations of Western philosophy. Plato's pupil Aristotle arrived in Athens around 366 BC to study at the academy set up by his mentor before founding the Lyceum.

Plato sought to isolate abstract concepts, such as justice and goodness, before imagining a society where these ideals could flourish. His political theory resolved any possible conflict between the needs of the polis and the needs of the individual – between order and freedom – by closing the distance between them. The individual was expected to become part of a highly structured system that prescribed not only government, but also the bringing up of children, religion, culture and every aspect of life. If the polis and the individual are as one, internal conflict and the messy business of politics disappear. In Plato's perfect society, described in *The Republic*, all difficulties are solved by an all-encompassing system of just government devised and run by rational men with everyone living by a strict set of rules.[12]

Aristotle, on the other hand, looked at the different forms of government in the ancient world, categorising and analysing them. He was impressed by democracy's claims to give every citizen a voice and to restrain the power of tyrants. But his rational approach led him back to the question of how giving power to the majority could guarantee that the outcome would be good for society. Aristotle's answer was to restrict citizenship to those who could be deemed to be virtuous. They comprised those with a good education, since knowledge helped to instil virtue, and a certain amount of wealth – Aristotle had argued elsewhere that succeeding in the world was a sign of virtue. This small section of society would then govern in the name of all and, being wise and virtuous, would make decisions that were good for society. While acknowledging democracy's claim that it brings liberty and equality, Aristotle described it as the rule of the poor; this led to him being cited later by those who opposed democracy as the rule of the ignorant masses.