



The Greek polis and the invention of democracy

*A Politico-cultural Transformation
and Its Interpretations*

Edited by Johann P. Arnason,
Kurt A. Raaflaub, and Peter Wagner

The Greek Polis and the Invention of Democracy

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

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Series Editor's Preface

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

The purpose of this series is to pursue important social, political, religious, economic, and intellectual issues through a wide range of ancient or early societies, while occasionally covering an even broader diachronic scope. By engaging in comparative studies of the ancient world on a truly global scale, this series hopes to throw light not only on common patterns and marked differences, but also to illustrate the remarkable variety of responses humankind has developed to meet common challenges. Focusing as it does on periods that are far removed from our own time, and in which modern identities are less immediately engaged, the series contributes to enhancing our understanding and appreciation of differences among cultures of various traditions and backgrounds. Not least, it thus illuminates the continuing relevance of the study of the ancient world in helping us to cope with problems of our own multicultural world.

In the present case, “comparative history” is understood differently. Here an ancient phenomenon, the invention of democracy in fifth-century BC Athens, is placed not only in its broad social and cultural context but also in that of the re-emergence of democracy in the modern world and the role it played in the political and intellectual traditions that shaped modern democracy, and in the debates about democracy in modern social, political, and philosophical thought.

Earlier volumes in the series are *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub, 2007); *Household and Family Religion in Antiquity* (eds. John Bodel and Saul Olyan, 2008); *Epic and History* (eds. David Konstan and Kurt Raaflaub, 2010); *Geography and Ethnography: Perceptions of the World in Premodern Societies* (eds. Kurt Raaflaub and Richard Talbert, 2010); *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (eds. Johann P. Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub, 2011); *Highways, Byways, and Road Systems in the Pre-modern World* (eds. Susan E. Alcock, John Bodel, and Richard J. A. Talbert, 2012). Other volumes are in preparation: *The Gift in Antiquity* (ed. Michael Satlow), and *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World* (ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub).

Kurt A. Raaflaub

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Introduction

JOHANN P. ARNASON, KURT A. RAAFLAUB,
AND PETER WAGNER

In one way or another, diagnoses of our times tend to center on the question of democracy. The principles of democratic rule and human rights are widely evoked in public debate and in international and domestic politics as if they were both unequivocal and uncontested. Political scientists speak – albeit less confidently than twenty years ago – of “waves of democratization” as if they were a natural and naturally recurring phenomenon. Over the past forty years democratic breakthroughs have happened in Southern Europe, Latin America, parts of East Asia, Eastern Europe, and South Africa. On the other hand, reasons for doubt are all too visible around the world – from the rising Chinese superpower to the beleaguered European Union. In short, democracy is on the agenda as never before, but as a challenging and problematic project rather than a triumphant finale to history. Those who take its ultimate victory for granted are indulging in prophecy.

This ambiguous situation is the background to contemporary reflections on the history of democracy. Those who saw it as an irresistible force were by the same token inclined to derive it from a long and linear pattern of political evolution. The first clear-cut breakthrough to democracy occurred in Ancient Greece. Even if we accept that the debate on precursors and proto-forms of democracy in the Ancient Near East is still open (e.g., Fleming 2004), no convincing case has been made against the claim that the innovations of the democratic *polis* went far beyond anything previously known. This is where practices of collective self-determination were very

consciously developed and where a new term was coined to label these innovations: *dēmokratia*. True, the era of the democratic *polis* was relatively short, and the term fell out of use again for a long time. The rise of modern democracy revived interest in ancient precursors, not always along the same lines: evolutionist views, exemplified by the notion of ancient Greece as a “seedbed society” (Parsons 1971), made the connection in terms of developmental logic, but those who stress the historical contingency and vulnerability of democracy can – as will be seen in some contributions to this volume – also draw on analyses of the Greek experience. The two approaches seem to agree on a basic point: democracy has become the key concept, principle, and problem around which political practices are organized.

The editors and contributors to this volume agree on the centrality of democracy for understanding current politics as well as the significance of the ancient Greek experience for world history. However, they also maintain that there are many more questions that need to be asked about the Greek experience itself and about its relation to current democracy. Most fundamentally, these questions are as follows. When later observers consider ancient Greek democracy a “success story” in human history, they tend to overlook that democratic practices were highly contested at the time. It is easier to find critics of democracy than supporters, even if recent scholarship has shown that some of the critics – most notably Plato – had stronger links to the democratic universe of discourse than traditional readings have suggested. Thus, first, there is a need to investigate in detail the practices of democracy in the *polis* and the ways in which they were interpreted by those who participated in or commented upon them at the time. Such investigation, second, will also throw more light on the similarities and differences between ancient Greek democracy and our own. True, in recent decades numerous studies have made important contributions to answering those questions. But by elaborating an image of ancient democratic society through detailed studies of various aspects of life in ancient Greece, rather than merely an account of political ideas and institutions, and by focusing specifically on the interactive relationship between democracy and society as well as culture – that is, on the ways in which democracy changed society and culture and these changes in turn affected the idea and practice of democracy – this volume permits us to gain a clearer picture not only of ancient democracy but also of the specifics of modern democracy, of democracy in the current societal context. Third, the democratic trajectory – from beginnings to decline and absorption into a resurgent monarchic order – must be examined in the long-term context of political transformations in the Greek city-states, from the archaic to the classical period. In one way or another, the ancient Greeks have been credited with particular achievements in the political sphere, and it is not self-evident that this is all about democracy; nor has the claim that a developmental logic of the *polis* led to democracy gone uncontested. This question becomes more complex when considered in light of the larger Greek world, with its broad – albeit insufficiently known – spectrum of political forms. The Athenian experience of democracy, however momentous and creative, was not the only case of its kind. Yet the less known but clearly less significant democratic episodes in other *poleis* (Robinson

1997, 2011) were only a small part of the picture. This book is not designed to deal with the whole range of “alternatives to Athens” (Brock and Hodkinson 2003), but growing awareness of the diversity within this category should at least be acknowledged. For one thing, Sparta is now increasingly seen as a part of the broader Greek picture, and therefore as a revealing focus of comparison with other cases, rather than a unique and anomalous exception (Hodkinson 2009: chs.11–13).

The review of contemporary interpretations of ancient democracy in this volume will thus be accompanied by re-interpretations of the historical experience in the light of modern democracy. We will emphasize that ancient Greek democracy inaugurated a novel constellation of political problems some of which are clearly recognizable for us today. But they also gave specific answers to these problems many of which can no longer be given today. To make this distinction is crucial for understanding in which way we are, or are not, linked to the past. And a clearer grasp of both sides to the question, the ancestral heritage and the historical novelty of modern democracy, will help to clarify whether or in what sense the claim that “there is no alternative” – notoriously made on behalf of a neo-liberal vision that has now faded – can be adopted for democracy.

This work at retrieval of experiences and interpretations proceeds in four steps. In a first step, which also defines the overall framework of the book, we will re-assess the significance of the Greek experience from the angles of historical-comparative sociology and the history of political thought. For some time, during the 1980s and the 1990s, as the combined effect of developments in the humanities known as micro-history, linguistic turn and postcolonial studies, it had become difficult to ask the question of our relation to antiquity. Micro-history had embarked on the study of small-scale interactions based on documents in local archives selected over short periods. As a consequence, longer-term processes and spatially more widely extended relations had been lost out of sight. Worse, it had become methodologically inappropriate to try to study them, and in some sense their very existence had been questioned. The linguistic turn happened in a wide range of forms, but one of the consequences of the new emphasis on language use was to multiply the meanings of any given term by situating it in its specific context of communication with other contemporary authors. As Quentin Skinner (1969: 8) famously maintained, there are no “perennial problems” in the history of political thought that any particular concept, such as “liberty” but also “democracy,” can be seen as addressing across time. Finally, postcolonial studies suspected that any privileged interest in ancient Greece would tend to reproduce or reinforce a Eurocentric perspective on world-history, while it was precisely such a bias that needed to be challenged.

As will become clear from their contributions to this book, the editors have – to a varying degree – drawn lessons from these developments. Micro-history had turned against the inclination of prior historiography easily to reason in terms of epochs and large-scale institutions without asking about the precise interactions and connections that hold phenomena of long duration and wide extension together. The linguistic turn was a highly necessary reaction against the common

assumption of determination by structures and interests without asking about the meaning that was given to historical occurrences by the speaking and writing of human beings that lived through them. And history-writing had been dominated by a European, or more generally Western, perspective that too often looked at other societies in terms of what they lacked in comparison to Europe or the West.

However, the correction of unjustified assumptions or forms of intellectual domination does not make key questions go away. Even after the micro-historical, the linguistic and the postcolonial turn, the question why we globally refer to our political practices by a term coined in Greece almost 2,500 years ago remains valid and, arguably, significant. And even though we no longer start out from the assumption that democracy as we know it was invented in Greece at that historical moment, we would still like to understand whether there have been moments in history in which essential components of our concept of politics were realized, why this was possible, and how it affected society, politics, and culture – moments of extraordinary collective creativity that changed, whether temporarily or lastingly, the terms in which certain issues were debated and handled. In other words, we consider our work as having taken on board the intellectual turns of the 1980s and 1990s, or at least the genuine concerns behind them, and having emerged with a widened conceptual and methodological consciousness to address questions that existed before those turns but can now be approached in a different way.

Christian Meier's recent work on the Greek "culture of freedom" (2011) shows how classical questions can be linked to new perspectives that serve to clarify the exceptional character of Greek culture. The most decisive departure from established patterns was a new relationship between culture and freedom, fundamentally different from the traditions that had developed around more or less sacral monarchies or – much less frequently – entrenched aristocracies, such as the Roman. Following Meier, several aspects of the Greek culture of freedom may be distinguished, and they were all important for the course of Greek history and for later uses and understandings of the Greek legacy. Decentered and unstable power structures needed a complementary cultural warrant which also imposed its own logic (this autonomy of culture was already foreshadowed by the authority of epic poetry). Further shifts of the power balance between elites and communities led to a proliferation of different regimes; these historical experiences were reflected in a plurality of cultural genres, easier to maintain in the absence of monarchic or otherwise durably concentrated power, and in an increasingly articulate reflection on alternative forms of political life.

The Greek culture of freedom calls for comparative and long-term historical perspectives. In this light, Johann P. Arnason takes on the question of the significance of the "political revolution" in ancient Greece and discusses it in the context of recent shifts in the debate on the Axial Age. As a first step, the regional settings of changes occurring in this period must be taken into account. The Greek breakthrough took place in close connection with cultural transfers from Near Eastern civilizations, but this twofold transformation of an outer periphery was very different from the more contained changes that occurred within the core

region and inside the orbit of its power centers. The contrast between Axial orientations in ancient Greece and ancient Israel is to be seen in this geopolitical light. It seems clear that the first major step towards a Greek *Sonderweg*, departing from Near Eastern precedents, was an innovative form of political life; and this view fits in with a more general tendency to question the assumptions that intellectual or religious mutations are always the most decisive aspects of Axial transformations. The Greek case is discussed with reference to Christian Meier's thesis on the "emergence of the political" as a uniquely Greek achievement. Taken in the most literal sense, this turns out to be an excessive claim, but the basic insight behind it can be defended in more moderate terms. We can speak of a political domain in pre-Axial civilizations; in archaic and classical Greece, it was transformed in fundamental ways, but this was not the only example of its kind (restructuring of and reflections on the political sphere are also central to Chinese culture during the same period). For a better grasp of the Greek path, we need a closer analysis of the complex interrelations that enter into Meier's conception of the political field; a Schmittian over-emphasis on the distinction between friend and foe must be avoided, and so must the equation of the political with democracy. The main point is the understanding of the political domain as a polycentric field of tensions, open to different patternings in diverse civilizational settings.

While Arnason reasons in terms of historical-comparative sociology, Peter Wagner addresses a very similar question in terms of the history of political thought. He underlines how the view that the modern understanding of democracy gradually and over very long temporal distances evolved from the ancient one has been abandoned over the past few decades. Now there seems to be a consensus in intellectual historiography, inaugurated in parallel by Michael Foucault, Reinhart Koselleck, and Quentin Skinner and their associates, that our political language underwent a major transformation between 1770 and 1830 in the course of which all key concepts changed their meaning, often radically. Somewhat surprisingly, though, this finding has sparked only little interest in analyzing the reasons why earlier meanings could no longer be retained and how practices and institutions that referred to political concepts were transformed in the light of the altered meaning of their supporting concepts. Wagner explores these issues with a view, less to give full answers, but at least to phrase in new terms the difference between ancient and current democracy.

After these explorations of the long-term significance of the Greek experience, the stage is set for detailed analyses of the embeddedness of *polis* democracy in the practices of *polis* society. The second section of this volume addresses this issue through detailed analyses of genres of expression and interpretation. It is well known that comedy, tragedy, historiography, rhetoric, and (political) philosophy are among the genres that, in large part, usually are thought to have been invented in Greece, similar to democracy, or, at least, to have taken specific form in the context of the Greek city states and societies. The former claim can possibly be sustained for tragedy, historiography, and philosophy, whereas the more modest latter claim is certainly true for comedy and rhetoric as well. Surprisingly, though,

it is here probably for the first time that the way in which these genres of expression were not only used, but partly formed in the first place to address the key problems of *polis* democracy, is being systematically explored across the whole range of these genres. (In the context of democracy's connection with empire such questions were explored in Boedeker and Raaflaub 1998; see also Meier 1990 and 1993; Sakellariou 1996.)

The idea that Greek tragedy is – in some fundamental sense – a political art is not new, but it has not translated into more substantive agreement on its character and contents. Egon Flaig's chapter takes a major step beyond earlier treatments of this issue. Tragedy has commonly been seen as a product and a self-reflective institution of Athenian democracy. The flowering of tragedy as a poetic genre took place during the heyday of radical democracy in Athens; the democratic regime developed very effective ways to integrate the production and performance of tragedy into the collective life of the polis; and conversely, it has not been hard to find in the extant tragedies evidence of reflection on aims pursued and problems posed by democratic practices. Farther-reaching and controversial claims argue that tragedy could only have developed in a democratic *polis*, and tragic themes can be understood as expressions of democratic ideology or – in more flexible versions – as rooted in the problematic of democratic thought. Flaig rejects these constructions of causal links and uniform contents as unfounded; more importantly, he shows that central concerns of tragic discourse relate to the problems of a political sphere that emerged well before the democratic turn and constituted a more general feature of Greek civilization. He does not claim that “the political” was a Greek invention or creation; but the unprecedented autonomy of the political sphere, already evident in archaic times, was based on institutional developments and organizational innovations that set the Greek case apart from earlier and contemporary cultures. Collective will formation was institutionalized to an otherwise unknown degree. At the same time, this did decidedly not become an obstacle to open conflict, the collective life of the *polis* was uniquely open to controversy, and the clash of opinions gave rise to alternative visions of political order. On the other hand, the use of the majority principle enabled the Greeks to dispense with unanimity and thus enhance their capacity for collective action. This new pattern of the political sphere generated new problems, among which the tension between adversarial deliberation and accelerated decision-making was one of the most obvious. This is, as Flaig shows, a prominent theme in Sophoclean tragedy, where “dangers stemming from the impulse of acting all too quickly” are – among other things – associated with the deceptively sovereign “swiftness of mind” seen in Oedipus's solving of riddles, and contrasted with the more communal deliberation on the meaning of oracles. But the tragic message is not that acting in common and with good advice guarantees success. The fundamental insight that “who acts will suffer” excludes any facile solution to the human predicament.

Lucio Bertelli takes up the question of comedy as an outlet for public criticism in democratic Athens. This issue is of course related to the more general problem of dissent during the fifth century; it has proved difficult to clarify the status and

the sources of articulate opposition. When it comes to specific genres and media, the question is in part about Athenian drama in general, but Bertelli focuses on comedy (on tragedy, see Egon Flaig's preceding chapter). Nevertheless, some of his comments relate to the broader genre, not least the comments on assumptions that have obstructed debate. Contrary to widespread views, "democratic ideology is not [a] solid block..., but rather a diverse yet coherent mixture of tendencies and tastes"; it is also a mistake to reduce "criticism in comedy to a univocal model." Such preconceptions have not helped to identify a meaningful relationship between comedy and democracy, and many scholars have therefore opted for the "carnival-ritualistic" theory, which can still portray comedy as a counterculture, but without significant implications or practical effects on the political level. This approach tends to retain the notion of an univocal model while abandoning the attempt to identify it with a political message. This is the starting-point for Bertelli's criticism: as he sees it, awareness of political issues and aggressive – albeit variously transposed – intervention in political debates are constitutive features of comedy, but the choice of targets and the "means of aggression" change over time and across the thematic range. Bertelli's reading of Aristophanes illustrates these points. And that justifies the comparison with Socrates, anticipated by Leo Strauss but here proposed on different grounds. For Bertelli, Socrates addressed the man in the street and wanted to make individual citizens "virtuous and intellectually capable"; Aristophanes spoke to the citizenry as a whole, and to him "it was enough to make them aware of the mechanics of political power and to teach them how to defend themselves from it."

The rise of Greek historiography is one of the cultural innovations widely perceived as at least akin to the democratic spirit. Jonas Grethlein's chapter considers this question from a new angle and raises doubts about the direct connections that have hitherto seemed plausible. For Grethlein, it is crucial that Greek uses and understandings of the past – articulations of cultural memory – had already found expression in "epics, elegy, tragedy, and oratory," and that historiography emerged in a reflected relationship to these pre-existing genres. More precisely, the works of Herodotus and Thucydides, which we have to take as starting-points (speculations about Herodotus's forerunners are inconclusive), demarcate their critical inquiry into the past from earlier modes of commemoration (and Thucydides adds an effort to distinguish his approach to history from that of Herodotus), but they also preserve some basic features of an older view of history that was first spelt out in the Homeric epics. A strong concern with the fragility and uncertainty of human existence in history goes hand in hand with a non-developmental view. The suggestion is not that the notion of development was absent from Greek thought, but neither the epics nor Herodotus and Thucydides imposed it on history. Other modes of memory are too limited in scope to make comparison on the same level possible; as Grethlein argues, it can nevertheless be shown that a critical reference to oratory was of major importance for the emerging genre of historiography. Oratory was "the primary genre besides poetry in which the Greeks encountered their past"; in the form of funeral orations, it became an

integral part of democratic institutions, and the exemplary use of the past was a standard device of political rhetoric. As Grethlein sees it, Thucydides' critical attitude to oratory is evident in his reflections on method (now more adequately understood than in earlier scholarship) and in the presentation of particular cases, most famously Pericles' funeral oration. The importance of the latter as a key to the self-understanding of democratic Athens at its most articulate is not in dispute, but Grethlein's reading places a new emphasis on the contrasts between representation and practice. Both this outstanding example and the more general critique of rhetoric indicate a distance from democracy, and a closer look at Herodotus suggests the same conclusions, even if the critical stance is much less pronounced. On a more fundamental level, Grethlein's interpretation stresses the limits to political readings of Greek historiography: if it emerges as a response to and a move beyond the models created by earlier genres, it is by the same token not reducible to direct intellectual effects of fifth-century transformations. But the final conclusion is not that the new horizons opened up by Herodotus and Thucydides have nothing to do with democracy. Despite the critical attitude of the authors and the cultural logic of the genre, a certain affinity with the spirit of democratic politics is apparent in both cases.

A closer look at the operative mechanisms and resources of Athenian democracy helps to clarify its relationship to social and cultural conditions. The role of rhetoric, a key factor in the functioning of democratic politics, should be seen in this perspective. Harvey Yunis shows how the uses and ramifications of rhetoric interacted with a broader set of trends. The perfection of rhetoric as a skill and the elaboration of a discipline dealing with this skill belong in the context of a more general cultural movement: the "consciousness of ability" (*Könnensbewusstsein*) which Christian Meier (1990: ch.8) identifies as the closest approximation to an idea of progress in the ancient world. A growing reflexive awareness of human capacities and their perfectibility was one of the main currents of fifth-century culture. With reference to the sociological tradition, it seems appropriate to speak of civilizing processes. In that regard, rhetoric plays a double role: as an important part of an evolving larger complex and – in virtue of its influence on discourse and writing – as a medium of reflexivity across the spectrum. Within its own domain, the reflexive turn began with the separation between form and message, which Yunis singles out as a basic operative distinction; it enables the choice of different forms to present the same message to varying audiences. Further development gave rise to techniques and traditions as well as criteria of expertise, and thus to growing professionalization. Rhetoric served the competitive pursuit of power, but it also fostered a diversity of views while maintaining "the supremacy and decision-making prerogatives of the demos." In a broader sense, reflexive uses of rhetoric made it the "chief mode of public literary expression," and this new role found classic expression in texts as different as Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and the speeches included in Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War. The tradition that evolved out of these beginnings was, as Yunis notes, to dominate public communication until the end of antiquity.

The role of law in Athenian democracy is a relatively neglected topic, at least in comparison to political institutions and imperial ambitions, and so are the distinctive features of Athenian law. This very lack of detailed coverage has perhaps made it easier for some scholars to suggest far-reaching revisions of the mainstream view, be it in the sense that the rule of law was more fundamental than popular power or on the more cautious note that fourth-century democracy evolved in such a direction. Adriaan Lanni analyzes the distinctive legal culture and legal practices of democratic Athens; her argument results in a strong case against linking the Athenian order to the rule of law; but this is not to suggest that legal procedures were unimportant for the functioning of Athenian society, or that the Athenian case is uninteresting for the comparative history of law. As Lanni sees it, “the Athenian courts were arguably more successful at maintaining order and promoting political stability than Rome, the city commonly credited with ‘inventing’ law.” To understand how the courts – the key legal institution – came to play this crucial role, the whole ideological, political, and social context must be taken into account. But there is no evidence of democratic theorizing on law, and it is therefore difficult to grasp how the Athenians perceived and interpreted their legal system. Yet the very absence of legal reflection seems to fit into an overall picture that can be put together from various parts of the record. From a modern perspective, “pervasive amateurism” appears as a defining trait of the Athenian approach to law. A diffuse conception of legal authority, a pronounced distrust of legal expertise, and unsystematic patterns of legal argument formed a framework that was obviously not conducive to theoretical or practical rationalization. This constellation corresponded to a general characteristic of Athenian legal norms: they were, by modern standards, “shockingly vague” and did not lend themselves to precise definitions of crimes or penalties. But the very indeterminacy of formal rules enabled the courts to balance them against other kinds of evidence and combine them with extra-statutory norms and conventions. It would be misleading to describe this fusion of multiple references as a way of maximizing social control. Not only had the democratizing process led to a de-centering of power and thus – to a significant extent – undermined the traditional patterns of control; the overall transformation of Athenian society had also, as Lanni notes, created a situation where there was “no consensus on a hierarchy of norms.”

Interpretations of Greek political thought have in recent years moved beyond traditional views. More attention has been given to the emergence and role of political thought prior to the formation of political philosophy in the exemplary Platonic–Aristotelian sense. Ryan Balot approaches this field on the basis of the Athenian experience. It has often been noted that Athenian history, from Solon’s reforms through the unusually statesmanlike tyranny of Peisistratus and the subsequent Cleisthenic reform to the radical democracy of the fifth century, represents a very specific concatenation of changes (sketched also by Raaflaub in this volume). Solon’s political and literary legacy is the point where a history of political thought can link up with this background. Balot’s view of the trajectory from Solon to Aristotle is that changing conceptions of politics can neither be

understood as results of a self-contained analysis of issues and principles, nor – in the case of philosophy after the Socratic turn – as a unilateral response to the democratic regime and its failed imperial ambitions. Rather, “political thinking and political practice were always intertwined in a relationship of dialectical tension and ambiguity.” Since democracy raised both political and intellectual life to higher levels of intensity, the tension between thought and practice was most pronounced in classical Athens. Political thinkers reflected on the latent presuppositions of institutions in place, revealed the internal contradictions of ideals invoked and acknowledged by the regime, and combined themes of political culture – in the key cases democratic ones – in ways that challenged the established order. At its most articulate, their problematization of ideologies and practices resulted in models of a different order, one of which (Plato’s *Republic*) became the most controversial foundational text of the Western philosophical tradition.

In this context, it is difficult to draw a clear dividing line between democratic and anti-democratic ideas. And the ambiguity can be traced back to earlier beginnings. Hardly any historian would now defend the image of Solon as the founder of Athenian democracy, but the democratic potential of his reforms was to prove important for later developments. Balot’s analysis suggests that this was not least due to Solon’s emphatic and poetically amplified appeal to the entire community of citizens. On the other hand, Balot is skeptical about the sources sometimes used to reconstruct fifth-century democratic thought. It seems more important to grasp the underlying connections between democracy and those who denounced its failings. Plato’s Socrates – of the historical person we have too little independent knowledge to compare him with this literary reincarnation – is “an exemplary democratic citizen.” His new kind of inquiry “helps to make sense of democratic ideals and practices in a way that democracy itself could not do.” More specifically, there are at least three aspects of the democratic cultural-political complex that can be identified as sources of the Socratic project, within which they were transfigured and recombined in ways that lend themselves to further variation: the emphasis on effective accountability of officials, the scrutiny of civic conduct in legal settings, and the idea of virtue as an ultimate priority of political life.

Elizabeth Meyer revisits a familiar theme, the exceptional importance of inscriptions on stone in Athens, and develops a thesis that has significant implications for other questions discussed in this book. As Meyer argues, the widely accepted view that links the “epigraphic habit” to the needs and values of a democratic regime is open to criticism. Both the assumption of a functional rationale and the hermeneutic reductionism that sees inscriptions only as texts are demonstrably misleading and modernizing simplifications. Inscribing on stone is an act of memorializing and monumentalizing; in that capacity, epigraphic practices unfold in the threefold context of cultural orientations, political institutions, and urban landscape. In the first regard, the main point to be noted is that epigraphy is embedded in the religious universe as well as the honor-centered culture of the polis; both aspects were particularly pronounced and markedly interconnected in Athens. The growth of the epigraphic habit reflects the belief that “both gods and

citizens would... be interested and honoured by what some members of the Athenian polis could achieve, and (we may add) by the deeds of the community as a whole. One of the paradoxes of Athenian democracy was that its progress strengthened both the competitive and the communitarian aspects of the political ethos. But there was a more specific and historically conditioned connection between religion and politics. The restoration of democracy after the oligarchic coups at the end of the fifth century was accompanied by a new emphasis on its virtues as “the only fair and orderly way to run a state,” and therefore pleasing to the gods. This shift in the self-understanding of the *polis* led to a major expansion of epigraphic practice. At the same time, and in close conjunction, the agora became more important as an epigraphic site. The combination of cultural, political, and spatial changes accounts for modifications of the epigraphic habit. To sum up, Meyer’s analysis throws new light on two major issues in current debates: the notion of *polis* religion, more specifically the religious dimension of political life, and the difference between fifth- and fourth-century democracy. The epigraphic approach serves to underline the fact that the later version of democratic rule was more sacralized than its predecessor.

Whereas the second section of this volume analyzes the modes of expression that were elaborated and used in Greece to interpret and react to the experience of democracy, the third section widens the perspective and considers the rise of democracy as an aspect of a larger social transformation. As a form of *self*-governing, democracy has always been more than a specialized set of functional institutions. In Claude Lefort’s terms (2001) it can be described as a “mise en forme de la société,” as a way of giving form to society, because the deep involvement of the citizens in governing entails the reshaping of their relations to the community and to each other.

Athenian democracy was, as a whole tradition of scholarship has emphasized (not always with the same things in mind), the culminating outcome of trends and transformations that had enhanced the role of politics in the Greek city-state societies. But as Sara Forsdyke notes at the beginning of her chapter, the impact of democratic changes on the whole social environment seems to have been a major consideration for both defenders and adversaries of democracy. The autonomous political sphere should not be mistaken for a self-contained world without social implications (Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of the *polis* and its human significance has given some currency to that view). The social ramifications of democratic government range from its redistributive effects on economic life to the diffusion of democratic attitudes beyond their original domain and constituency. With regard to the former aspect, Forsdyke notes the important point that democratic Athens saw “no riots of the poor against the rich over land distribution or debts,” but obligations imposed on the richer part of the population had an undeniably redistributive impact.

As for the overall picture of democracy in social action, Forsdyke’s main points correspond to an important conceptual distinction in political theory: the tripartite division (proposed by Claude Lefort) between “mise en forme”, “mise en sens,”

and “mise en scène” of power. In this case, the forms are the key political institutions of democracy. The involvement in assemblies, councils, and courts could not but affect the communal life of the Athenians. This factor can be considered from different angles: the state made extensive demands on citizens, but the way in which these demands were met ensured high levels of participation. Moreover, the functioning of democratic institutions across the territory of a very large city-state required intensive contacts within and between local communities. The configurations of meaning are the interpretations, ideals, and expectations attached to democratic forms of political life. This set of cultural orientations is most powerfully expressed in the funeral oration attributed to Pericles, and although recent scholarship has relativized the message on account of the structurally biased genre (performances of that kind served to mask the internal divisions of the city), that should not cast doubt on the presence of democratic ideals as part of the Athenian world. With regard to the impact on communal life, several aspects stand out. The emphasis on democratic “aggregation of knowledge from a diverse citizenry” gave new dignity to everyday non-expert opinion; the obligations associated with citizenship were wide-ranging, and so were their social effects, including the above-mentioned redistributive ones. Another important but controversial issue is the influence of democratic ideas on the private sphere. Forsdyke’s view is that it was significant, and that the question of a democratic “trickle-down” effect on the situation of groups excluded from citizenship should be considered in this context. All this adds up to a very important point about Athenian democracy: it was a paradigm case of autonomous politics, but it must also be understood as a total social phenomenon, in the sense that the Durkheimian school made familiar to sociologists and some historians.

Oversimplified contrasts between Athenian and modern democracy have been associated with different ideological models and historical perspectives. Direct self-rule by citizens figures as the opposite of representative government, and collective sovereignty with inadequate checks and balances becomes a counterpole to rights-based constitutionalism (see also Wagner, ch.2). Those who want to maximize the distance between ancients and moderns sometimes back up their case by classifying the *polis* as a stateless community, with the consequence that its democratic version does not belong in the company of modern democratic states. When the aim is to unmask the pretension of Athenian democracy, rather than to exclude it from the history of state formation, critics tend to denounce the unrestrained power of a privileged minority exploiting a non-citizen population as well as imperial dependencies. It has been a key concern of recent scholarship to move beyond these changing but invariably simplifying images. To that end, it is important to clarify how the democratic regime worked in the given historical setting, and how this *modus operandi* evolved over time.

Claude Mossé’s contribution approaches these questions with particular reference to the interaction of principles and realities. This distinction should neither be mistaken for a dichotomy of ideology and practice nor understood in the sense of an incompletely realized project. The point is, rather, that the very

process of translating principles into realities also gives rise to problems, limits, and ramifications that become integral parts of democratic life. Mossé has no doubt that “equality of public speech,” *isēgoria*, was both a principle and a reality. But on the latter level, it inevitably meant debate between antagonistic opinions. Debate calls for skills, skills require training, and training presupposes resources, at least when it involves professionals. Together with other advantages deriving from wealth, or at least from comfortable circumstances, this enabled the conversion of economic power into political influence. But there were limits to this trend, and the historical evidence certainly does not reveal an economic elite ruling through democratic forms. The exceptionally autonomous political sphere gave rise to a distinctively political elite, defined by high levels of involvement in civic affairs and only a partial overlap with other elites. As Mossé notes, this differentiating process became more pronounced in the fourth century. It was, however, mitigated by democratic correctives, most notably through selection by lot. If Mossé’s conclusions seem close to Finley’s claim that Athenian democracy succeeded in combining political leadership with popular participation, they also suggest that balancing different factors and requirements on both sides was an important part of the story. In any case, closer examination of the record reminds us that the equation of participatory and direct democracy is misleading.

Interpretations of Athenian democracy have until recently not been very concerned with religion. Classical scholars have often taken the minimalist view, exemplified by Momigliano’s remarks, that connections between religion and democracy are doubtful and in any case marginal to the main pattern of institutional and ideological development. Robin Osborne’s chapter links up with new approaches to the question and makes a powerful case for integrating religion into a proper historical picture of Athenian democracy. A closer look at interconnections across the socio-cultural field will cast doubt on the over-polarized notions of autonomy and heteronomy (as used, most forcefully, by Castoriadis). As Osborne notes, it was “in relation to the gods, and not simply in relation to other men, that individuals came to acquire and envisage their own capacities for autonomy.” On the collective level of democratic decision-making, “the gods constitute an interest group not represented in the assembly”; although no one can claim to know their views, they must be respected. To make sense of these fundamental and at first sight paradoxical points, we must reconsider the whole frame of reference. The inclination to minimize links between democracy and religion was based on specific assumptions about both sides and their place in the history of the *polis*. A reexamination of these premises can take off from the concept of *polis* religion, increasingly favored in recent scholarship, but its meaning – beyond the general indication of a link between religious and political forms of life – is still a matter of debate.

Osborne notes and accepts the shift that has occurred with the introduction of beliefs into the study of ancient religion. If it is agreed that we can analyze Greek polytheism as a set of beliefs (already articulated in broad outline in the Homeric epics), the next step is to spell out the implications of these beliefs for the patterns of social power. There is no “template for human politics,” no prescribed model of

order, and no institutionalized claim to exclusive or at least privileged mediation between religion and politics. But there are certain representations of power, government, and persuasion, writ large in the world of gods and likely to influence the practical conduct of politics. Hierarchy is “temporary and fragile,” power is divided, albeit unequally, between “rival gods with different views and values”; persuasion is an essential part of their interaction, but beyond its limits, “what counts is power.” To the extent that this picture of the divine realm could affect the political field, it was more conducive to ongoing dispute and redesigning than to any stable model of legitimate rule. The loosely and ambiguously structured religious realm reinforced the autonomy of the political sphere, and that included the prerogative of *polis* authorities to intervene in the organization of religious life. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the distinctive features of cultic practices, long emphasized at the expense of beliefs but not to be neglected because of the latter’s rediscovery. Cult acts revolved around basic patterns, among which sacrifice was the most crucial, and followed stable ritual rules; but they were not subordinated to strong doctrinal or hierarchical frameworks, nor did they – for the most part – demand high levels of religious expertise. On the other hand, “cult acts presuppose and create community”; given the characteristics of beliefs and practices, this meant both that a mutual adaptation of religious and political communities was an ongoing process, and that new cult communities could be created with a view to political goals. Both aspects were important for the religious culture of Athenian democracy.

Warfare and its impact on social as well as political life is one of the subjects most markedly reassessed in recent work on ancient Greek history. Earlier notions of a quasi-permanent state of war between the *poleis* have been criticized and attempts to stabilize peaceful relations are now taken more seriously. By the same token, military determinism – strongly represented in earlier interpretations of the archaic and classical periods – has lost ground; the key case in point is the revised account of the hoplite revolution, now generally seen as a complex process where social and political factors interacted with military ones. But this downsizing of military determinants has not weakened interest in warfare as an aspect of the Greek historical experience. It is no longer seen as an omnipresent and uniformly decisive force, but this relativizing move itself has cleared the way for a more concrete and context-sensitive reading of the record. This kind of analysis – a historical phenomenology of the polis at war – is undertaken in Lawrence Tritle’s chapter on Athenian democracy and its wars. The period under consideration – from victory against the Persian empire to defeat by the Macedonian kingdom en route to empire – was characterized by a high frequency as well as a wide variety of military conflicts, with varying implications for the self-understanding of the Athenian community and the meaning that it could attribute to its warlike activities. But a survey of war as an aspect of historical experience must also take note of the impact on social structures and dynamics. Tritle underlines the all-round mobilizing effect of the Persian wars, which “shaped the Athenian community into the next century”; however, the heightened demand for human and non-human resources easily led

to imperial *hubris* and overstretch. The ensuing conflict with Sparta exposed the Athenian community to massive blows. Casualties were enormous, the vicissitudes of war tempted the demos and its leaders into excesses and adventures, and the need to maximize material resources aggravated the “collisions of rich and poor.” When the war ended in defeat, the cumulative impact of all these disasters destroyed the democratic order, but only for a short interval: the more positive connection between war and democracy was reasserted by the “Athenians of humble origin” who mobilized against the Thirty Tyrants.

The fourth and final section of this volume is devoted to an exploration of key conceptual underpinnings of the democratic Greek self-understanding, their implications for socio-cultural life and their transformations between the ancient period and the present. The interconnections between political life, democratic change, and philosophical reflection are reconsidered here from a broader and longer-term perspective.

Fifth-century democracy is now recognized as the most innovative version of the *polis*; but the historical paths that led to this outcome are a matter of ongoing scholarly debate. For a more specific take on these discussions, it is useful to link the question of democratizing processes to transformations of the political sphere as such. The democratic *polis* in general, and Athens in particular, was not only a new phase in the trajectory of a social formation that had evolved from archaic beginnings; it was also a redefinition of the political domain, its boundaries, and its relative weight within this formation. Kurt Raaflaub analyzes the whole transformative process as a “perfecting of the political creature.” This is not meant to suggest a teleological constitution of the *polis*. The “perfecting” in question has to do with historical forms and degrees of citizenship and self-government: participation in political life, division of power between magistrates and institutions, procedures of self-limitation, and political reflection. The result of these changes – concomitant advances of democracy and innovations in the political domain – was an unprecedented and perhaps never equaled primacy of politics and political identity in communal life. Raaflaub acknowledges the critique of Athenocentrism in recent scholarship, but rejects the attempts to do away with the very idea of Athenian exceptionalism. His narrative portrays democracy (together with its impact on the form and substance of politics) as an outcome of early and general trends inherent in the *polis* as a form of social life, and he allows for significant – sometimes rapid and violent – democratizing changes in cities other than Athens. But there was no predetermined long transition to democracy. Other lines of development were possible, their specific features and results depended on “contingencies and unforeseen constellations,” and the relatively stable patterns included regimes very different from the democratic type.

As Raaflaub sees it, the fifth-century Athenian breakthrough was unique in the ancient world; not that it was the only case of far-reaching democratic reforms, but its systematic character and its particular historical context, as well as its ability to survive defeats and take corrective measures set it apart from other examples. Because of this very exceptionalism, documented by sources far superior to those

available for any other *polis*, the Athenian experience is the most suitable starting-point for a retrospect on the whole Greek record from archaic to classical times. With that long-term historical perspective in mind, Raaflaub distinguishes necessary conditions for democracy from sufficient ones. The analysis of the former must begin with signs of “increasing egalitarianism and significant popular power in archaic Greece”; but this major concession to critics of Athenocentrism is counterbalanced by a stress on the particularities of the Athenian record. There was a remarkable sequence of events, projects, and personalities that paved the way for democratic rule on an exceptionally large scale and with unusually ambitious aims, even if none of the landmarks in question can be labeled as a beginning of democracy. As Raaflaub notes, “Solon’s achievement cannot be exaggerated”; and in very different ways, Peisistratus and Cleisthenes represent crucial stages later in the process. In Raaflaub’s account of the road to democracy, Cleisthenes figures as a protagonist of egalitarian integration, rather than a revolutionary; the radical democratic turn is equated with Ephialtes’ reforms in the mid-fifth century. The regime that grew out of them was from the outset shaped by “close interaction with naval policies and the empire,” and “foreign policy, empire, and war played a predominant role in the agendas of all democratic institutions.” At the same time, the political sphere “assumed an independent, predominant, virtually absolute role in the community.” Yet this was not the end of the story. The explosive combination of popular rule, political mobilization, and imperial ambitions proved unsustainable; but the democratic response to the disaster that followed was part of the perfecting process discussed by Raaflaub, and certainly not its least interesting phase.

The question of how the *polis* became possible is also a key question for Tracy Strong, who approaches it via a re-reading of Nietzsche in terms of cultural-intellectual pre-conditions expressed in Greek philosophy, tragedy, and political thought. Strong emphasizes agency, contingency, agonism, and plurality as specificities of the political in the Greek *polis*, and in particular in democracy, thus not only taking up Nietzsche but echoing Hannah Arendt’s interpretation. These concerns add up to an argument against tyranny that does not only refer to political but also to epistemic matters, offering thus another way of interpreting the tension between the philosophical search for truth and the political commitment to democracy, as discussed by Balot earlier in this volume.

Similarly addressing squarely the relation between ancient and modern concepts, Nathalie Karagiannis and Peter Wagner discuss the time-honored question of the distinction between ancient and modern liberty in the new light of both recent historical scholarship and recent debate about liberty in modern polities. They underline that a concept of personal freedom was not absent in ancient Athens, unlike what much current political theory tends to suppose for reasons of emphasizing the radical novelty of the modern. Certainly, it was balanced or counter-acted by a concept of collective freedom that placed high demands on the citizens, as discussed by Sarah Forsdyke and Claude Mossé, and probably could not be sustained as such under current conditions. Constant and his followers had some points when contrasting ancient and modern liberty. However, the weakness (or even absence,

in some versions of current theorizing) of a social and political embedding of individual freedom today creates problems for the sustainability of modern polities that are not necessarily smaller than the ones the democratic *polis* faced.

Even though the institutional setting changed, this volume can be regarded as the last volume in a series of efforts to renew a historical-comparative sociology of civilizational change. This effort was started many years ago and involved at various stages the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (SCAS) in Uppsala; the Max-Weber-Kolleg in Erfurt; the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem; and the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence. Three preceding volumes are most closely connected to the current one: *Axial Civilizations and World History*, edited by Johann P. Arnason, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Björn Wittrock (Leiden 2005); *Eurasian Transformations, Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries: Crystallizations, Divergences, Renaissances*, edited by Johann P. Arnason and Björn Wittrock (Leiden 2004), and *The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Johann P. Arnason and Kurt A. Raaflaub (Malden MA and Oxford 2011).

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