the greek polis and the invention of democracy
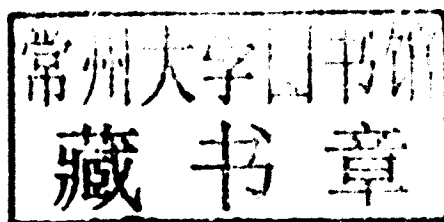
A Politico-cultural Transformation and Its Interpretations

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

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The Greek Polis and the Invention of Democracy

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

Series Editor: Kurt Raaflaub

Published

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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Contents

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 occured 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 (restructuration 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