

"History, in general, only informs us what bad government is."
--Thomas Jefferson, Letters of Thomas Jefferson

A Cautionary Tale
David Iverson 11/2020

The history of democracy in ancient Greece is a cautionary tale at best. While it is astounding that Greece decided on democracy over a thousand years before everyone else, it is nonetheless a prime example of the failings of majority rule; that is, that the rights of the minority are always secondary to the will of the more powerful or the more popular. It is true that this perspective comes with some of the trappings of presentism. But the treatment of slaves, non-citizens and those with unpopular opinions cannot be ignored. To do so would be to become, as Greek historian Peter Karavites describes it, "dazzled by the striking accomplishments of the Greeks, [and we will] have often tended to forgive them their political excesses and to disregard Greek political foibles. [Scholars] often approach Greek political history with an aura of awe and not one of criticism. The accomplishment of Greek democracy did in fact lead to the dominance of Athens most likely because of the close relationship between and participation in government by the average citizen; but, despite all that Greece accomplished, it remains tainted by slavery, the subjugation of women and a disdain for the voices of the minority.

Participation in Athens bares no resemblance to what we might consider it today. Citizens in ancient Athens, were directly involved in passing laws, setting budgets, and declaring war. To be a citizen meant to fight for the state and, because war was the norm, to be prepared to die for it. (Goldhill 41) In other words, citizens had a hand in every aspect of their government. It was the epitome of direct democracy. As Pericles declared: "We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics minds his own business; we say he has no business here at all." (Goldhill 41) Because Athenian citizens were directly and fully vested in their government, it became a relatively simple matter to mount an army to defend the city-state. Citizens gained prominence for acts in war. In his dissertation, Karavites points out several Athenians whose prominence in the Assembly was greatly elevated because of participation in the battle of Marathon. Cleisthenes, the creator of the practice of ostracism figures prominently in his writings for his acts of war. In fact, Cleisthenes gained a hero-type stature.

That Athens became a democracy at all is astounding. Indeed, it would take well over one-thousand years before countries in the rest of Europe would take a similar step. To this day, a few of them still have monarchies though greatly diminished from the absolute monarchies like that of Louis XIV. The idea that people could rule themselves really wouldn't come again until the American Revolution. And, even then, our founders created a republic that differs greatly from Athenian democracy. In a short amount of time Athenians had rejected rule by a single person or group and swung to the other extreme of

majority rule. Herein lies the dark under belly of Athens and of democracy in general.

Slavery was not only accepted, it was codified in law and rooted in the definition of the word citizen. A citizen was a person who was male, Greek, Greek speaking and a resident of Athens. It did not, at least originally, include merchants or people who had moved to Athens. While some emancipated slaves were given political rights as Kyrtatas points out, this was not the norm nor were Athenians readily willing to give them. Importantly, Perry notes that slavery in Athens was not restricted by race; rather, it was usually a matter of political conquest. Also, in some cases slavery in ancient Greece was less brutal and less restrictive than in other parts of the world. Goldhill, while extolling the virtues of direct democracy glosses over the fact that slavery existed in Athens. He devotes two sentences to discussing slavery. Though, he does note that slaves could give testimony obtained through brutal torture. Whatever the treatment of slaves, however wondrous Athenian democracy was, the fact is that to the vast majority of Athenians slavery was completely acceptable. "The Greeks regarded slavery as a necessary precondition for civilized life; for some to be free and prosperous, they believed, others had to be enslaved." (Perry 61)

Women were not citizens either. Athenian women were another group denied legal or political rights "[they] were barred from holding public office and generally could not appear in court without a male representative. They could not act in plays, and, when attending the theater, they sat to the rear, away from the men." (Perry 61) Participation in the assembly was not a right afforded to women. To be fair though, Plato, in departing from his teacher Aristotle did argue for the expanding of the rights of women. However, at the height of Athenian democracy, women were flatly not included. Many writers, too numerous to list, would argue that the strength of any democracy rests on the treatment of minorities. While this is somewhat of a modernist viewpoint, a society that extols the greatness of its democracy while at the same time subjugating entire populations is a mere contradiction at best.

Finally, Athenian democracy fell victim to sophistry in connection with its own creation of ostracism. "The sophists claimed that they could teach political arete" the skill to formulate the right laws and policies for cities and the art of eloquence and persuasion needed for success in public life. (Perry 76) They were relativists believing that there were no absolute truths, "that man is the measure of all things." This becomes particularly useful when the entire government runs by will of the majority. As the sophists were gifted orators, they were able to persuade large groups in the assembly to action; and persuade it to dubious results. This usually ended with failed military campaigns and the expulsion of unpopular viewpoints. Perikles is reported to have claimed, the system was called a democracy because it served the interests not of the few but of the majority. (Kyrtatas 51) With the help of the sophistry,

Athenians were able to move public opinion in the assembly in favor of actions that favored individual interests. And when confronted with opposition, Athenians turned to a dormant political weapon, ostracism, and, as usual, they made excessive and abusive use of it. Ostracism was originally invented to protect the constitution from would-be violators. Now it was used by the stronger to eliminate the weaker. It was thus turned against excellence while leaving mediocrity to reign supreme."(Karavites 110) One need only look at the death of Socrates for evidence of this.

Clearly a society that subjugates minorities and women and stifles opposition opinion is not one that demands admiration. Rather, it is one that should be looked at with great skepticism. Direct democracy, as revolutionary an idea as it was, led to disastrous results and can be blamed for the eventual failure of ancient Greece. Clearly, it is for these reasons that our founders chose a republic and not a democracy; and ancient Athens can be viewed as cautionary for events of the future.

Karavites, Peter. Problems in Athenian Democracy 510-480 B.C.: Exiles, a Case of Political Irrationality. Doctoral dissertation, Loyola University. P 1, 110. 1971.