Democracy Celebrated and Debated

The two exhibitions *The Birth of Democracy* and *The Greek Miracle* were two public forms of engagement with Athenian democracy and the reforms of Kleisthenes in 1992/93. There were also a number of academic conferences, lecture series and related publications, some of which have been briefly mentioned in the context of the two exhibitions. A number of publications relating to Athenian Democracy and its reception also appeared in the early 1990s, and these were supplemented by interest in the more popular historical press.

Conferences marking the ‘anniversary’ and related publications

The first conference on the anniversary of democracy was *The Cradle of Democracy: Athens Then and Now* hosted by The Alexander S. Onassis Center for Hellenic Studies at New York University on 21-22 November 1992. The next conference directly related to the 2,500th anniversary of Kleisthenes’ reforms in Athens was held in Greece a few weeks later. The international conference *The Archaeology of Democracy* took place at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens in Athens 4-6 December 1992. The conference was held to illustrate:

[... the interplay between archaeology and history and address broadly such questions as, “Did the political organisation of the Athenian city-state in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. affect its physical remains”, “What aspects of the archaeological record are peculiarly democratic”, and “To what extent were the form and content of late archaic and classical art conditioned by the constitution”.

This conference was the first in a series of events, which included The Birth of Democracy exhibition, held by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens to celebrate the democratic reforms of Kleisthenes as part of the ‘Democracy 2,500’ project. The American school was considered the appropriate organiser as ‘the American governmental system was inspired by the Greek democratic ideal’. Papers given at the conference were later published as *The Archaeology of Athens and Attica under Democracy. Proceedings of an International Conference Celebrating 2,500 years of Democracy* (Athens: 1996) edited by W.D.E. Coulson, O. Palagia, T.L. Shear, H.A. Shapiro, and F.J. Frost. Three of these editors contributed essays to the exhibition catalogues of both *The Greek Miracle* (Olga Palagia) and *The Birth of Democracy* (William D.E. Coulson, H.A. Shapiro), illustrating an intellectual connection between the conference and the exhibitions. The conference proceedings included an influential paper on the Parthenon frieze by Robin Osbourne, ‘Democracy and Imperialism in the

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Panathenaic procession: the Parthenon frieze in its context. J. Mck. Camp, who presented ‘Before Democracy: Alkmaionidai and Peisistratidai’, was also co-curator of The Birth of Democracy exhibition and was Director of the American excavations on the Agora in Athens.3

The Greek Miracle held a symposium itself and information about this could be sought from the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC. The National Archives, where The Birth of Democracy was exhibited, hosted the opening of a major conference Dēmokratia. Commemorating the 2,500th Anniversary of the Birth of Democracy in Spring 1993. This conference was also part of the ‘Democracy 2,500’ project co-ordinated by Josiah Ober and Charles Hedrick and took place at Georgetown University in Washington DC. The conference was linked to the earlier conference in Athens on archaeology and material remains from democratic Athens, but this time brought together ancient historians and modern political theorists to speak about issues such as citizenship, freedom, equality, law and education.4 Academics from within different disciplines with a range of perspectives participated and their papers were published in Dēmokratia: A conversation on democracy, ancient and modern in 1996.5 The resulting book was a ‘conversation’ as the papers were revised in the light of lively debates at the conference and then on the circulation of drafts among participants. The content of Dēmokratia: A conversation on democracy, ancient and modern and is considered in more detail in analysis of the exhibitions The Birth of Democracy and The Greek Miracle.

A lecture series on Athenian Democracy took place at the University of California at Santa Cruz between 21 June and 30 July. A year long lecture series also took place as part of the Greek Studies programme at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. The lectures presented were later published as The Good Idea: Democracy and Ancient Greece. Essays in Celebration of the 2,500th Anniversary of its Birth in Athens edited by John Koumoulides under the auspices of the Speros Basil Vryonis Center for the Study of Hellenism in 1995. The lecture series was designed to:

[... ] trace the course of democracy from its ancient origins to its modern manifestations, discuss its significance for our own times and understand and appreciate the many contributions of Greece to Western Civilisation.6

The lectures included Colin Refrew on the transformations in Bronze Age and Dark Age Greece, Oswyn Murray on the concept of liberty or eleutheria in ancient Greece, Robert Browning on ‘How Democratic was Ancient Athens?’, Robin Lane Fox on the background to the reforms of Kleisthenes and Anthony Kenny on Aristotle. A lecture by David Hunt considered democracy in the modern period, while Eli Sagan brought out the ethnic, social and religious connotations of citizenship in ancient Greece and Vassos

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Karageorghis delivered a lecture on ‘The Role of Cyprus’. The published volume was supplemented by a short essay on art in fifth century Athens by John Boardman and Leslie Lipson on ‘Democracy: The First Twenty-Five Centuries’. Lipson’s chapter looked at the three major revolutions in the modern world that brought about democratic change (the English Civil War, the American Revolution and the French Revolution).

Some of the same scholars who participated in *Dēmokratia: A conversation on democracy, ancient and modern* later took part in *Democracy 2500? Questions and Challenges*, which was held at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington DC in September 1993. This conference was jointly organised by Ian Morris and Karl A. Raaflaub and appeared to be a reaction to *The Birth of Democracy* exhibition and other celebratory commemorations. The group involved in *Democracy 2500?* met again in December 1993 to refine their points and exchange ideas, as a result the collection of papers is ‘more argumentative than what classicists usually publish’. Morris and Raaflaub had themselves presented at the conference linked to *The Birth of Democracy* and Josiah Ober and Barry S. Strauss who both spoke at the earlier conference, also took part in *Democracy 2500?*. Taken together, *Dēmokratia* and *Democracy 2500?* contain full debates around democracy in Athens and America and are good indications of contemporary academic work on democracy ancient and modern.

In Britain a conference entitled *The History and Archaeology of Athenian Democracy* was held at Christ Church College, Oxford on 27-31 July 1993 and had twenty-six speakers and seventy-five participants. The conference was a double celebration of both the reforms of Kleisthenes in 507/8 BCE and the sixty-fifth birthday of the ancient Greek historian David Lewis. Robin Osbourne and Simon Hornblower subsequently edited a volume of conference papers, called *Ritual, Finance, Politics Democratic Accounts presented to David Lewis*, which was published in 1994. Again this conference involved many of the same scholars. For example, the conference volume included a paper by Mogens Herman Hansen (‘The 2,500th Anniversary of Cleisthenes’ Reforms and the Tradition of Athenian Democracy’), who had also spoken at *The Birth of Democracy* conference in Washington DC. The German scholar Eberhard Ruschenbusch (‘Europe and Democracy’) gave the only lecture that was specifically on the European tradition and reception of democracy from all the conferences and lecture series considered here. Ruschenbusch considered the rise of representative democracy in the nineteenth century and the fight against totalitarian states in the twentieth century. These two essays and those by Nigel Spivey on Greek vase painting, Simon Goldhill on theatre and Charles Hedrick on documentary writing caused Paul Cartledge, in his review for the *Times Higher Education*, to comment:

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In short, although this is a volume aimed chiefly at specialist scholars in the first instance, its ramifications and implications extend far beyond the sheltered groves of academe.¹⁰

Both *The Greek Miracle* and *The Birth of Democracy* exhibitions held a public lecture series, tours and schools programmes and information about these is probably stored in the appropriate museum archives. It would useful to find out more about these programmes to more fully understand the public engagement programmes of the exhibition and to see if any more of the scholars that took part in the academic conferences also played a part in a more popular interpretation of Athenian democracy.

**Publications**

The conference journals were usually published a year or more after the conferences were held, but a number of scholarly publications on Athenian democracy and democracy ancient and modern, many of which were also aimed at the ‘general interest’ reader, were published in the run up to the anniversary. M. I. Finley’s *Democracy: Ancient and Modern* was republished in 1985, having been first published in 1973. Although this republication was not linked to the anniversary, Finley’s aim of making an historical inquiry into the role and meaning of democracy past and present, as well as the fact that it was drawn from a lecture series given at New Brunswick and Newark, had great influence on later publications. J. K. Davies’ *Democracy and Classical Greece*, which was first published in 1977, had a revised second edition published in April 1993 and, like Finley’s book, is aimed at a non-academic reader as much as the scholarly world. Davis’ book traces the ‘Athenian Revolution’ in democracy, the rise of Athenian imperialism and its effect on the rest of Greece. In so doing, Davis uses a range of documentary material, from historical texts such as Thucydides to drama as well as material culture such as vase paintings and excavated house plans. Davies also continues into the late fourth century to consider Athenian democracy after the Peloponnesian War and the history of Greek colonists and Ionian Greeks.

As co-director of Project Democracy 2,500, Josiah Ober played a strong role in the anniversary events and his contributions to various conferences from the time are recorded in the relevant conference volumes. Mogens Herman Hansen contributed to conferences, including *The Birth of Democracy* and *The History and Archaeology of Athenian Democracy*, but also published a significant article on modern democracy ‘The tradition of Athenian Democracy A.D. 1750 – 1990’ in *Greece and Rome*.¹¹ Hansen argues that Athenian democracy became prominent in the mid-nineteenth century and of central importance to modern political systems only in the twentieth century. However the main publication on democracy ancient and modern in the run up to the anniversary was *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993*, which was edited by John

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Dunn (professor of political theory at the University of Oxford) and published in 1992. *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993* begins with the reforms of Kleisthenes in 508/7 BCE and, journeys through the city republics of medieval Italy, the Levellers of seventeenth-century England and various revolutions, to finish with an essay by Dunn himself. Dunn’s ‘Conclusion’ considers the role of democracy in the formation of the modern nation state, the function of representative democracy, its relation to capitalist economics and the demand for equal rights as citizens by women and ethnic minorities.12

The 1993 September issue of the journal *PS: Political Science and Politics* published several articles on democracy ancient and modern in a commemorative edition. These included J. Euben’s ‘Democracy: Ancient and Modern’, B. Groman ‘Lessons of Athenian Democracy: Editor’s Introduction’, Josiah Ober’s ‘Public Speech and the Power of the People in Democratic Athens’, S. Wolin’s ‘Democracy: Electoral and Athenian’ and Arlene Saxonhouse’s ‘Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists’.13 In the next year a volume specifically on American and Athenian democracy was edited by two of the contributors to *PS*, J. Euben and Josiah Ober with J. Wallach, entitled *Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of American Democracy*. In 1994 Jennifer Talbot Roberts, a contributing essayist in *Dēmokratia: A conversation on democracy, ancient and modern*, published *Athens on Trial. The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought. Athens on Trial* explored the critics of democracy ancient and modern and, like Hansen, argued that the ideal of democracy only gradually became important in the mid-nineteenth century as well as exploring the ramifications of the reception of ancient democracy for those traditionally disenfranchised from voting, such as women and slaves. Arlene Saxonhouse published a fuller version of her essay for *PS* as a book in 1996. In *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists*, Saxonhouse attempts to ‘shake off the encrustations of scholarships that have relied on the romanticized visions of Athenian democracy in order to probe the core of the ancients’ interpretations of democracy’.14 The academic conferences and journals spawned by the anniversary of democracy in 1992 and 1993 enhanced and generated scholarship on ancient democracy and its modern reception.

The anniversary also generated articles in more popular historical magazines and publications. Robin Osbourne contributed an article ‘The Birth of Democracy?’ which briefly considered the debate around and impact of Kleisthenes’ reforms in 508/7 BCE to *Omnibus* (the magazine of the Classical Association) in the issue of 23 January 1992. Nigel Spivey considered ideology and art in ‘Art and Democracy’ for the arts magazine *Apollo* in July 1993. The main coverage, however, was in the popular history magazine *History Today*, which appeared to take account of year 0 and commemorated the anniversary in 1993-94 rather than 1992-93, generally ran two articles in each edition of

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the magazine from January to August 1994. Many of the academics already mentioned contributed to History Today and it is worth listing the articles as it gives an idea of the breadth of topics considered and the connections between academic and more popular publications.

History Today in January 1994 had a bust of Pericles on the cover and its opening article in its Democracy series was ‘Kleisthenes and the Icons of Democracy’ by Mogens Hansen, which looked at the events in the sixth century that led to the reforms of Kleisthenes and the rehabilitation of democracy in the nineteenth century. This article was followed by one on Demosthenes and oratory in fourth-century Athens in ‘What Democracy Meant to the Athenians’ by Josiah Ober. In February 1994 History Today published ‘The City and the Democratic Ideal’ by Francis Hartog, which looked at urban living and political theory, and ‘The Athenian Democracy and Its Slaves’ by Dimitris Kyrtatas. In March 1994 articles on ‘Women and Politics in Democratic Athens’ by Susan Cole and ‘Democracy in Rome’ by John North were published. The April issue saw two articles on the reception of ancient Athenian democracy in Britain and America in Paul Cartledge’s (who was also consultant editor for the series) ‘Ancient Greeks and Modern Britons’ and Barry Strauss’ ‘American Democracy Through Ancient Greek Eyes’ respectively. Robin Jeffrey considered the development of democracy in India and other countries in a post-colonial context in ‘Democracy in South Asia’ and Ellen Meiksens Wood analysed the relationship between liberal democracy and capitalism in the 1990s in ‘A Tale of Two Democracies’ in the May issue. The July edition of History Today contained Edith Hall’s essay on communication, propaganda and democracy ‘Splitting Images. Communication in Classical Athens’, as well as Edward Ranson ‘A “Snarling Roughhouse” – The Democratic Constitution of 1924’ and Bill Wallace on ‘The Democratic Development of the former Soviet Union’. The series finished in August 1994 with Lesley Beaumont on ‘Child’s Play in Ancient Athens’ and Benjamin Barber on ‘Theory and Practice: Democracy and the Philosophers’. This series in History Today covered a range of issues in democracy ancient and modern and considered the practice of democracy in a more global context than the debates at academic conferences.

In 1994 Athenian Political Thought and the Reconstruction of Athenian Democracy, edited by J. Peter Euben, John Wallach and Josiah Ober, was published and can be read

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as an answer to some of the criticisms made by Cartledge (and others) of the tenuous coverage of those excluded from the democratic process in The Birth of Democracy exhibition. The last three essays, on the ‘melting pot’ of Athens and metics, women and slaves, address issues of exclusion. It is also a polemic tone arguing for the importance and relevance of Athenian democracy in contemporary America, both in its domestic political practice and its international position. As we have seen, the editors of this volume had already published articles and played a part in the project ‘Democracy 2,500’, which The Birth of Democracy exhibition had been a part of. Articles in the Athenian Political Thought included people who had already taken part in the various conferences and publications around Athenian democracy in 1992 to 1993, such as Barry S. Strauss on the diverse nature of Athenian society and those excluded from democracy or Kurt A. Raaflaub on the links between empire and democracy in Athenian democracy.21 Peppered throughout with references to contemporary events and interpretation of democracy, from Sheldon S. Wolin’s description of ‘Desert Storm’ as ‘postmodern democracy’s “Persian War”’ to (on the following page) Margaret Thatcher’s speech celebrating the anniversary of the 1688 ‘Glorious Revolution’, the volume self-consciously engages with contemporary political practice and wide ranging issues.22 Euben, Wallach and Ober argue for the utility of Athenian political practice and philosophical theory for political education in contemporary America, particularly in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War and the dominance of liberal democracy globally.23 They recognise that Athenian democracy is a ‘politically contested idea as well as a historically defined entity’ and that contemporary political debates influence the construction of the classical past, citing the controversy over Martin Bernal’s arguments in Black Athena as an example. Arguing that the question of political identity in the US has a particular urgency in 1994, due to the rise of ‘identity politics’, the renewed debate about citizenship ushered in by Clinton’s presidency and the end of the cold war, they argue that answers to this question can be assisted by reflection on the debates and actions of Athenians 2,500 years ago:

Thinking about and with the democratic polis, along with its ancient and modern critics, will not ipso facto supply us with solutions to contemporary dilemmas. But it may help us to re-educate ourselves as citizens who recognise a responsibility to perform and reconstitute a democratic culture. As citizens of a participatory, self-critical, revisable democratic culture, we might have a better chance of finding our way through the troublesome times in which we live.24

Many of the contributors to the academic conferences held in 1992 and 1993 also contributed to more popular reading of democracy ancient and modern during the years around the anniversary. Publications of monographs as well as conference papers have enhanced academic and more general knowledge about Athenian democracy and its reception in the modern world. Interestingly, however, of all the publications considered here only History Today looked at ‘democracy’ in a more broad international context and considered recent developments in the former Soviet Union and South Asia, as well as Britain and America. The reflections on the reception of democracy in publications and conferences were almost entirely focused on America and the American political system, with some references to the English Civil War and the French Revolution. Even Britain and other European examples rarely figured in this engagement with ancient democracy and its function. There are several reasons for this. America is the first modern nation state to have a democratic constitution enshrined in law at its formation and to continually follow that constitution for two hundred years. Most of these publications are by American academics and were published in the US. At the time America was adapting to being the only remaining global superpower after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War while new democracies were being installed in Europe. John A. Koumoulides commented in the introduction to The Good Idea:

The anniversary of the birth of democracy comes at a crucial point in time. In the closing decade of the twentieth century, against a background of earth-shaking events in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and plans for European unity, after decades of conflict, the ancient word demokratia is invoked again and again as the ideal solution to all the complex problems of our complex modern world. Indeed, the 2,500th anniversary of democracy offers us a unique opportunity to throw open the question of the importance and relevance of democracy to today’s world and to our lives.25

Koumoulides here does comment on Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, but as examples of the new importance of democracy rather than on their engagement with Athenian democracy. The American centric thinking is obvious when placed in the historical and cultural context of the time. Yet, fifteen years later, there are profound gaps in the consideration of the practice of democracy in the modern world. There is no mention, for example, of South Africa and the fall of the Apartheid system, which is surprising given that the events in that country were developing very quickly in the early 1990s and culminated in the first fully democratic election in May 1994. There was also no consideration of India and references were made to China only in the context of the 1989 demonstrations on Tiananmen Square. Neither was there any mention of the Middle East or theocracies. This focus on the western world, whether consciously or not, shares its vision with Fukuyama’s ‘The End of History?’, though even he considered South East Asia in more detail.

Bibliography


